Summary

Richie was sitting in a chair in front of a dressing table, looking into the lit-up mirror while he sipped a glass of amber bourbon. He looked up when Eddie walked in and then there were no words; neither of them had thought this far ahead. Eddie stood awkwardly in the open door, feeling very much like he was still waiting for the big prank to be revealed, for there to be machinations behind all of this that he couldn’t understand.

“Hey, Trashmouth,” he said, eventually.

“Hey, Eds,” Richie said.

“You know I always hated being called that,” Eddie said.

“No, not when it’s me.”

When Eddie goes to see a stand-up comic, he's not expecting to suddenly remember that they were childhood best friends.

When Richie starts hanging out with an old friend from school, he's not expecting to remember what it is to be in love.

An AU about an affair, trauma, the consequences of your actions, and surviving.

Notes

the biggest shout out to Ezra for not only giving me the idea for this fic but ALSO giving
me their blessing to write it AND THEN being my champion and cheering me on the whole time AND ON TOP OF THAT also beta-ing it. you are literally the greatest in the universe dude.

dude.

this fic is based (obviously) on the 2017/2019 movies but takes a lot of concepts from the books as well as having a lot of my own headcanons to round out gaps in time.

the title comes from the Orville Peck song Hope to Die
Beverly left first and the summer went with her, leaving them all behind to start a new school year without her red hair a bright light in the halls. The Losers Club was cut down to six, five on school days when Mike was on the other side of Derry. It felt even more like it was just the six of them a few months into the year when the letters from Beverly started to dry up, the memory of her evaporating like water on hot sand as the scars on their hands healed and grew ever fainter.

Ben went to the architecture camp. Mike broke one of his bike’s wheels and nearly busted his leg crashing it in the Barrens. Bill won a writing contest at the library and blushed furious scarlet when all the Losers showed up to congratulate him. Stan got a part in the school play. Eddie’s cast was removed, and his skin was paler underneath; Richie pinned him down and wrote LOVER on his bare arm in red sharpie. They both got detention for fighting in the hallway and passed notes the whole time they were in there, scrawling your mom jokes and trying to make the other one laugh. They both laughed and got another detention for their troubles.

Ben had a growth spurt and ended up taller than Eddie. Mike got a new dog. Bill was rejected when he asked Sally Perry to the school dance. Stan visited his family in Vermont over winter break and nearly died of boredom. Eddie and Richie snuck into the cinema to see **Halloween 5: The Revenge of Michael Myers** and nearly got caught, running out the fire exit as the sixteen-year-old usher yelled at them. It wasn’t until they were three blocks away, barrelling down an alleyway they’d taken a hundred times did they stop, falling over themselves to figure out whose fault it was; Richie’s for thinking of it, Eddie for being too loud.

The year ticked over to 1990, another summer approaching, and Eddie stared out the window and daydreamed about what they’d do when they had all the time in the world to themselves and their days a little less filled with terror, and Richie saw new fears growing large on the horizon, and knew his friends could not solve them this time.

Ben went to Disneyland. Mike had his fourteenth birthday party at the arcade. Bill’s family packed him up and moved him to DC, desperate to escape the empty room in their house. Stan was the first one to get his own computer. Eddie and Richie went to the clubhouse alone and lay in the hammock, a tangle of limbs as it strained to fit them both, rocking gently in the silence of the empty room. The clubhouse had a coldness to it when it was empty, the dark, earthy walls never absorbing much of the sun. Richie could feel the goosebumps on Eddie’s skin in the spaces where their legs crossed over.

“What do you think Washington’s like?” Eddie asked.

“I dunno. Boring, probably,” Richie said. His mental impression of Washington was just the White House, and a series of smaller White Houses for smaller politicians. Just that, and museums, a city made out of big stone buildings and filled with statues.

Eddie was quiet, his eyebrows low over his dark, serious eyes. He was staring right at Richie, intense to the point where Richie almost wanted to look away but couldn’t. His eyes stayed fixed on Eddie’s, huge and dark. The skin of Eddie’s leg on his was warm in the cool air of the underground. The light coming through the trap door entrance was perpetually cloudy with dust, and it left a reddish haze on Richie’s glasses. Through the filter, there was a faint rosy aura around Eddie as he lay, swaying gently in the sunlight. It made him look soft somehow, even though over the years he’d been starting to lose that childhood softness, turn thinner and taller. In the light of the trap door he was the same as Richie had always known him.
“Do you think we’ll all be ok? Without Bill?” Eddie said, suddenly.

“Yeah, of course,” Richie said. He sounded confident, almost dismissive, but it didn’t make up for the ache that he felt in his chest when he thought about the growing rifts in their group. They would survive without Bill, or without Beverly, but that didn’t stop it from being frightening. They were all better when they were together, stronger and braver and capable of incredible things. He didn’t know how much he could do on his own.

Eddie didn’t look convinced, uncharacteristically quiet instead of trying to talk his way out of everything. There was no easy answer for this, nothing either of them could think of. For that one summer their friendships had been the thing the entire world revolved around; nothing could have been as important as the burden that weighed on the seven of them. But as much as they knew that, there was no way to tell the adults what mattered.

“I know Bill was your best friend,” Richie said.

Eddie cut him off. “You’re my best friend.”

Richie didn’t say anything for that second, staring at Eddie with some surprise, eyes owlishly huge behind his glasses.

“Bill’s my best friend too. You all are,” Eddie continued, “but you’re the best one.”

Richie’s heart was pounding. He almost didn’t understand why – although it was more like he didn’t want to understand why – but he couldn’t feel the cold anymore, just the warmth of Eddie near him and the static on his body. As if the touch of their skin was electric.

“God, Eddie, if you want to touch dicks you just had to ask,” Richie said.

Eddie’s expression turned disgusted and Richie didn’t really know why he’d said it. It had killed the moment, though, and maybe that was really what he had wanted; to stop feeling like that.


“Me too. I’d do anything to get out of this place.” Richie sighed heavily, his breath disturbing the dust in the air. “My family will never leave, though. I’m probably going to die here.”

Ben took them go-karting on his fifteenth. Mike snuck them his grandfather’s beers and threw up in Ben’s backyard. Stan had a turbulent two-week relationship with Jessica Hopper that ended in tears. Richie kissed Andrew Bryson for truth or dare and laughed the hardest. Eddie and his mom went to live with her sister on the other end of the state.

The first summer without Eddie rained more than any summer Richie had ever seen.

Ben’s mom got a new job in New Hampshire and took him away with her. Mike was the first one to get his driver’s license. Stan had a house party on his sixteenth and someone broke a window. Richie flunked three classes that year and got told he had to straighten up his act.

Mike worked as a lifeguard that summer. Stan’s parents moved him to Vermont. Richie got his own car.

Mike couldn’t leave. Richie went to college.

Richie lasted two semesters in college then sold his shitty little car for a plane ticket to LA. He never went back.
The world did not fall apart as they drifted away. Time just passed, and then it was all gone. The sun moved low and the light through the trapdoor died down until it was too dark to see; the secrets deep beneath the earth stayed there.
“Do you know this guy?”

Eddie held up his phone to show Myra the advertisement that had come up on his Facebook timeline. She squinted at it, thinking deeply as she sipped her orange juice, and then shrugged.

“I think so. He’s been on TV. He had that show where he’d talk to people on the street. Ask them stupid questions. ‘The Fun Never Stops’ or something. I didn’t like it.”

Eddie stared at the picture. There was something unnervingly familiar about the man in the photo; it was prickling in the back of his mind as if there was a series of small spiders running up and down there, teasing out strands of barely existent memory. The man was tall, with wild hair and huge, thick glasses. In the photo he was looking exasperated, staring at his own tour dates. There was a set to his face that made it look like he did not smile easily or often.

Myra watched him, lips pursed, and brow furrowed as she tried to work out why her husband was staring so intently at his phone.

“You got all strange when we saw him on TV too,” Myra said.

“I did?” Eddie frowned at her. “I don’t remember that.”

She just sighed and flicked to the next page of the newspaper. What exactly about this irritated her he didn’t know, but he let it go as one of life’s many mysteries. He was more concerned with trying to work out why this comedian was leaving him with such an unsettled feeling. It was as if there was something buried deep in the image; that he could tilt the screen just right and see another picture underneath, one that would show him the truth.

The realisation struck him very suddenly, pieces turning in his head and clicking into place; although blind, he had managed to find the edges of the puzzle and eventually push them together.

“I think I went to school with this guy,” Eddie said, suddenly. “Richie Tozier…”

There was more there. He knew there was more; he was standing on a sheet of ice and when he looked, he could see the darkness and the depth of the water underneath. But he wouldn’t be able to truly find out how deep it ran unless he jumped in.

Myra had acknowledged his statement with a noise of mild interest, without following it up, more invested in reading whatever article she was looking at than what seemed to be small talk. Eddie couldn’t tear his eyes away from the poster. Richie Tozier, with his sceptical expression and his mouth quirked just right to spit out some new quip, some comment about his dick or Eddie’s mother… How did Eddie know that?

“You wanna go see some stand-up?” He said.
“No, I don’t think he’s funny,” Myra said. “He’s rude.”

She stopped flicking through the paper and looked at Eddie, her face lined with deep disapproval.

“You’re not thinking of going, are you?”

The theatre was surprisingly full. Obviously, Richie was successful, Eddie didn’t know why there was anything shocking about the show being sold out, but there was still something amazing about someone from his hometown doing so good. His hometown… Eddie hadn’t thought about that place since he’d left and his memories of it were nothing but vague, foggy impressions. That was just what it was like for most people, he assumed, and had never really questioned it. The way he was being forced to actually think about it now was only making him feel more uneasy.

He shuffled to his seat, awkwardly apologising as he brushed past all the already seated people to get to the middle of the row. He was relatively near the front and had to lean back in his seat to look up at the stage properly. He felt somewhat in the shadow of the stage, dwarfed by its size. It was way too much for just one guy to come out and tell jokes to a single microphone, but who was Eddie to judge. He didn’t need a huge SUV to just get back and forth to work, but he still had one in the parking lot outside.

In the time before the show started, he sat in his seat and worried. Not about anything, but more of an intense, general anxiety. Myra had been annoyed about him out driving in the dark, and she’d been annoyed about him seeing a show by himself, even though she didn’t want to come. Her ultimatum had been he didn’t go at all, but he had managed not to give in to her this time and came out anyway. While forced himself to stop glancing at the advert, the picture weighed heavily on his mind for the last few days. He had kept thinking about it, as though if he didn’t keep reminding himself, he would forget it entirely all over again. For some reason, he didn’t want that.

Eventually there was a huge cheer and out Richie Tozier walked, striding across the stage, waving to the elated audience. He walked up to the microphone and grabbed it off the stand with the ease of someone who was completely comfortable when he was performing; never happier than when all eyes were on him and everyone was ready and willing to laugh at his jokes. Up on the stage, with all the lights and attention focused solely on Richie, Eddie found it impossible to tear his eyes away from him. The man was mostly ordinary looking, though his clothes were expensive, but there was something that made him magnetic to Eddie.

“So, I told my girlfriend I was coming to New York on tour,” Richie began. “And she says ‘Oh, I hate New York, everyone’s so rude there.’”

The audience laughed, but Eddie didn’t. He leaned back in his seat with his fingernails digging into the armrests of the chair feeling for all the world like he was staring down a truck that was barrelling towards him at a hundred miles an hour. How had he forgotten this — no, more like, how could he remember this now?

“The thing is,” Richie continued on stage, “is that we live in LA. And I don’t know if any of you have ever been to LA, but if you aren’t at least a seven out of ten, like, on the attractiveness scale? You might as well be a second-class citizen. And that’s all well and good for my girlfriend, who’s gorgeous, but me? There’s bars in LA where I’ve walked in and the bouncer’s just said, ‘Get out. This isn’t for you.’”

The laughter around Eddie felt like it was a million miles away. Everything about the way Richie
talked to the way he walked around the stage felt unbelievably, achingly familiar, and yet Eddie was still clawing through his memories as if trying to string together fragments of a dream. Maybe this was a dream. He closed his eyes for a second, trying to ground himself.

“New York, though, no one gives a fuck. New York’s the ugly man’s city. You can see a supermodel and a guy with a face uglier than Eddie’s Mom and you…”

Eddie froze, struck by the sensation of his throat closing up that so typically preceded one of his asthma attacks. He blinked and looked back at the stage.

Richie was looking right at him. There was a ripple of confusion in the audience, a couple of nervous titters as they waited to see if Richie was going to follow that up with the rest of the joke or if he had really just given up halfway through a nonsensical sentence, but Richie couldn’t tear his eyes away from Eddie, staring at him with a slack jaw, his confused eyes cartoonishly huge behind his coke-bottle glasses. It had to have been hard to see the audience from the stage, to stare into the dark shapes in front of you and recognise who you were seeing, but the pull that brought their eyes together was stronger.

It was maybe five seconds, but Eddie didn’t feel like he breathed in that entire time, and neither did Richie. When Richie finally did, the microphone caught the edge of his exhale and amplified it; a soft sigh that sounded, to his ear, like Eddie.

“Sorry, I was hypnotised by your tie,” Richie said, his voice shaky before he managed to find his footing again, indicating a man in the audience a row behind Eddie, who was wearing an enormous tie with a pattern on it that looked like someone had left it to moulder in a storage container full of toxic paint. “Does shopping exclusively at Clowns-R-Us work for you, sir? Is that your wife beside you, or is she the ringmaster of the circus you work for?”

The audience was back on Richie’s side, bellowing with laughter, but there was something deeply unsettled in his face. He tried to smile, but there was a worry in his eyes, which darted back to Eddie frequently as he kept talking. Every now and again his careful sardonic expression would slip, and that confusion would come back, his face in those moments wan and almost fearful.

Eddie felt the same. All through the show he sat, much of the words flowing through him unheard as memories that he didn’t even realise he’d forgotten popped back up like balloons escaping their tethers.

When it was all done and Richie took his final bow and walked off-stage, Eddie stayed in his seat, paralysed by indecision. What was the right thing to do? Just leave? Join the group of optimistic autograph hunters crowded by the back door? He had dug his fingernails into the pleather of the armrests so tightly there were little crescents stamped into the material.

He jumped when someone spoke to him suddenly and turned to see a short man with a black suit and incredibly neat hair leaning over the seat to talk to him.

“Hello?” The man said, looking a little confused by Eddie’s shocked expression. “Yeah, I’m Rich’s manager. He asked if you want to come see him backstage.”

“Oh,” Eddie said, as if it was the most natural thing in the universe. “Yeah.”

The manager led Eddie through a side door and into the back of the theatre, some onlookers watching and quietly questioning who he was. The long corridors behind the stage were crowded with assistants and stagehands moving around, but Eddie barely noticed any of them; they could as well have been featureless ghosts. He just followed the manager through the winding way to Richie’s dressing room, seeing nothing but the door in front of him. The manager let him in, and
Eddie stumbled forwards, unsure of what he was going to say.

Richie was sitting in a chair in front of a dressing table, looking into the lit-up mirror while he sipped a glass of amber bourbon. He looked up when Eddie walked in and then there were no words; neither of them had thought this far ahead. Eddie stood awkwardly in the open door, feeling very much like he was still waiting for the big prank to be revealed, for there to be machinations behind all of this that he couldn’t understand.

“Hey, Trashmouth,” he said, eventually.

“Hey, Eds,” Richie said.

“You know I always hated being called that,” Eddie said.

“Not when it’s me.”

Richie’s mouth quirked into an almost smile and unbelievably, Eddie found himself smiling back. He walked uneasily further inside the dressing room, sitting down in an empty armchair as if his whole body was an incredibly heavy backpack he couldn’t wait to shuck off. Richie swivelled around in his chair to face him, propping his elbows on his knees. Looking at him, Eddie found himself surprised by how tall Richie had gotten. He didn’t know what right he really had to be surprised by the looks of a guy he hadn’t seen in twenty-five years, but he still felt taken aback. Although, he supposed he always had been the little one of the group…

The group. The Losers.

“That’s a big assumption from a guy I didn’t remember existed until last week,” Eddie said.

Richie snorted with laughter.

“Ok, I’m glad you said it first, because when I saw you in that audience, I didn’t have a fucking clue who you were. I was just like…”

“‘Why the hell does that guy look so familiar?’” Eddie said.

“Yeah. It was so fucking weird, if you’d asked me before I walked on stage who Eddie Kaspbrak was, I wouldn’t have had an answer. But now it’s like…”

Richie raised his eyebrows, trying to find the words to describe how it felt. He didn’t need to, though. Eddie knew. They both just nodded, the mutual understanding that they both got it a silent comfort. Richie drained the rest of his glass.

“Do you wanna go get a drink?” He said.

“Yes,” Eddie said. “Please.”
just like an amnesiac/trying to get my senses back

Chapter Notes

chapter title is Laughing with a Mouth of Blood by St Vincent

When Richie first walked out on stage, he had been thinking about one thing and one thing only: how bad he wanted to get right back off. He had no issue with stage fright, but he had a bigger issue with getting fucking bored on tour. There was a gruelling monotony to seeing city after city from the inside of a bus and a few dozen hotel rooms; as much as Richie craved the laughter and applause from every show, going back to the empty hotel was invariably a downer. It paradoxically made him want to work both more and less; working on the TV show, when he’d been working long days and travelling to shoot, all while never getting the instant feedback he did when he was live, had been the roughest period of his career. There was nothing as demoralising as working for twelve hours trying to get the material you needed only for the producer to shake his head and say it wouldn’t work. As lonely as touring could be, that first buzz of laughter from a set never stopped being something he hungered for.

He was barely five minutes into the show when his eyes drifted down to the audience and, through the deep contrast between the brightness of the stage and the darkness of the seats, he saw a face he recognised. It hit him sharply, and he found himself stumbling over the words as he tried not to interrupt his flow. The stranger in the audience stared back at him with huge, dark, perpetually worried eyes and somewhere in the back of Richie’s mind he could hear it; a voice sharp with exasperation, trying to corral all of them into behaving. The kid, buried in the annals of his memory, was constantly arguing with them all about what was smart, what was safe, and maybe it was annoying, but it wasn’t his fault. It all came from…

“Eddie’s mom,” Richie said, out loud to a room full of a thousand people who had never heard of Edward Kaspbrak and didn’t understand what the hell he was talking about. But Richie stared into the audience and at the face of his childhood best friend, and felt the memories crash down on him with the weight of a cave-in.

The bar he chose was nice. It was all clean and polished, and relatively expensive, but the music was low enough that you could have an actual conversation and the clientele was mostly concerned with talking about how fucked up it was that fucking Ryan was getting all the credit for the big merger. Richie ordered drinks and then wove through the tables back to the booth in the corner that Eddie had picked out. It was out of the way, tucked up at the back of the bar. Eddie was staring out of the window until Richie came back, chewing on his lip with the anxiety of someone waiting for bad news.

He took the beer Richie handed him as he sat down.

“How long has it been?” Eddie asked.

Richie sighed heavily, shrugging.

“Best part of thirty years,” he said. “You… Left. When you were fifteen?”

“Yeah? Yeah… That was when we moved so far north, we were practically in fuckin’ Canada.”
Mom thought… I don’t know, the air was better, or something.”
“Your mom was always crazy.”
“You’re telling me. You didn’t have to live with her.”
“No, it was strictly a friends-with-benefits thing between me and her.”

Eddie gave him a look that was both extremely annoyed and achingly familiar.

“Fuck you. You really haven’t changed at all? In thirty years?” Eddie said, witheringly. “Haven’t grown up? I guess not, since you’re still spending all your time making stupid jokes. It’s lucky that you managed to find a way to get paid for it.”

“If you’re good at something, never do it for free,” Richie said. “Actually, that’s why I’m here. You owe me like fifteen thousand bucks for all the free material I did back in Derry.”

“Can I try paying you to shut up, instead? Jesus.” Eddie shook his head. “Derry…”

Until he had said it, Richie didn’t know if he would have been able to recall the name of his hometown with a gun to his head. He had spent the last twenty years saying he was from LA, since he’d been living there for long enough. That wasn’t really the truth, but he wasn’t lying so much as saying the only thing he could recall.

“Did you ever go back there?” Richie said.

“Derry? Fuck no. It was awful.” Eddie seemed to be surprised by the force with which he said it, considering he could barely recall what Derry had looked like, blinking with surprise.

“It was awful. All I remember that last summer is just… Being scared, all the goddamn time. I don’t even know why, but every time I try to think about it…”

It was a very vulnerable thing to admit and saying it with a straight face wasn’t easy; Richie was relieved when Eddie nodded with immediate understanding and sympathy.

“Bill’s brother had just died,” Eddie said, voice wandering as he tried to remember. “I think that probably freaked us out more than we realised.”

It sounded like a reasonable explanation, so Richie nodded, but he knew it was less than half of the truth. There was more. There was the fact he’d never stopped being afraid, his entire life. The therapist he’d seen very briefly, before they’d politely asked him not to come back if he wasn’t going to take it seriously, had said he mostly likely had an anxiety disorder. They’d also said the word PTSD, something about fear and anxiety and trauma, which had sounded enormous and terrifying by itself, and which Richie had adamantly denied because thinking about it gave him anxiety. Whatever, he took Klonopin now. He was normal.

Thinking about Derry placed a heavy burden of fear on his shoulders. It hadn’t really hit him until now, when he could remember how miserable the town had actually been, that he still lived like he’d never left Derry; he lived in LA, in one of the biggest and most diverse cities in America, but he might as well have never left that town. He didn’t remember Derry, but he knew it. Even when he’d been twenty years and thousands of miles away, unable to recall a single detail of his childhood, he had known Derry. It had been imprinted on him, not as a memory but as instinct.

It was all Derry, he understood with grim acceptance. The fear that hung over his entire adult life. There were bits and pieces of fear and worry throughout anyone’s life, of course, but it was Derry
that sat at the centre of Richie’s like a huge, ugly spider, linking together everything in a web he couldn’t brush off no matter how hard he tried…

But the truth was that he hadn’t been trying at all. And maybe that was the most insidious part of it; that this had brought him to the point where he had thought he didn’t need to try and escape. That it was better to lie in it, wrapped up in the strands of fear and horror that bound him tight and forced him to stay in the shape he had been told he must be, rather than what he wanted.

“Bill… Bill Denbrough… Fuck, that’s right. You know he’s an author now?” Richie said.

“Yeah! Yeah, I saw that movie last year. The Black Rapids?” Eddie said.

“Me and him both Derry boys done good, I guess. What about you, Eduardo? You famous for anything?”

“No, thank fuck. I’m a risk analyst.”

“Ok, I’m sorry I asked. I didn’t realise ‘fun’ hadn’t reached New York city yet.”

“Fuck you, dude. Some of us have to have real jobs.”

“Real jobs? You’re just doing the same shit as you did as a kid. Standing around saying ‘oh no guys! It’s too dangerous!’”

“I do not sound like that.”

“You sound exactly like that. ‘Aah, guys! Be careful! That water looks a little dirty, you don’t want to get streptocracklekewhateverthefuck’!”

“Fuck you.”

“Fuck you!”

“I’m getting another round. Make sure not to get your head too jammed up your own ass.”

Richie laughed and Eddie’s permanently annoyed expression slipped, the hard line of his mouth quirking into a smile just a little. He looked different when he smiled; maybe Richie just wasn’t used to it, but he looked softer. Less tired.

When he returned with the beers, he sat down in front of Richie again and lingered before he handed over the bottle, fingers worrying at the label.

“Y’know, other people would talk about their childhoods, but I never thought about mine,” Eddie said. “I’d talk about being a teenager, or college. Like that was all there ever was.”

Richie stared at him, at those huge, dark eyes. The light, positioned a little behind Eddie, created a glow around the very ends of his hair. Like an aura.

“But I thought that everyone felt like that,” Eddie said.

“Like what?” Richie said. He felt like he knew what Eddie was going to say, but the anticipation of what he might hear gripped him so strongly it was almost painful. His body tensed tight enough that he could feel his heart beating as a constant, sharp pang in his chest, thumping on the solid wall of his muscles like it was trying to get out.

“Like there was something missing,” Eddie said, “but they didn’t know what.”
The anticipation burst and it was as though Richie had been given a cold shock of water. He exhaled in a long sigh. What he felt was less like relief and more like grief.

“Yeah. I know what you mean.”

His mind wandered for a moment and he dared to ask himself what would have happened if the two of them hadn’t been taken apart when they did. Would things be different, if he’d had to go through his teenage years with Eddie always next to him, only ever a quick bike ride away? If when he’d been seventeen and at the limit of how much of the weight of his secret he could bear, would the fact that his best friend was only ever a stone’s throw away broken him? He’d felt broken the second he’d seen Eddie again; like a stuck record, constantly skipping over the same notes in a song, never able to move forwards. Always jumping back to the same part.

Eddie…

Richie finally reached out to take the beer bottle from Eddie, their fingers overlapping for a moment. Eddie didn’t pull away; his eyes fixed on Richie’s for the long second before Richie drew back, taking the bottle with him.

“So, what have you been up to the last few years? You have a girlfriend back home?” Eddie said, breaking up the silence as Richie wandered through the shit flowing through his mind.

Eddie’s eyes were searching, filled with curiosity, and Richie thought for a moment that he might know. How he could know Richie couldn’t guess; people just seemed to understand sometimes, as if there was a fucking aura around him that spelled it out if you were tuned in right. It haunted him since he was a child, before he’d even known it was there himself.

“No, she’s made up. I’m flying solo. I do live in LA, though, that’s true. I moved out there to work on this… Terrible old sketch show, after I dropped out of college. But I don’t really write much anymore. I prefer stand-up.”

“Man, when you were a kid, all you did was brag about girls. Never saw any of them, though.”

“Oh my God, Eddie, I can’t believe your acute vision has pierced through the shield of lies that I made when I was twelve. Now you’re going to see the horrible truth.”

“Let me guess, you’re in love with my Mom?”

“Ah, you got me.”

They both laughed; Richie probably laughed a little too hard. It really was the funniest thing in the world to right then, because it was three steps away from the truth. All those fucking years of walking through life with a human-shaped hole punched right through him, and he hadn’t known there actually was someone who fitted. Maybe it would have been better if he never had. He could have lived forever without knowing there was an answer to his question; knowing now reminded him of being a child, of waiting through the last day of school. How every second of that day felt longer and more difficult than the whole last year rolled into one. Only now he didn’t know if he was going to ever come out.

It should have been easy to say something, given the circumstances. To finally open his mouth and say the words he’d been thinking since before he knew it was even a possibility. But he didn’t, and he couldn’t. It was as simple as that; once again, Richie Trashmouth Tozier couldn’t let go of a bad joke.

“What about you? You came to the show on your own.”
“Well, I, uh… I bought the tickets really last minute, so I couldn’t get more than one. You’re pretty popular.”

Richie could sense the half-lie, the way Eddie had skipped over something, but he didn’t want to push. If Eddie didn’t talk about anyone else, then there was just no one else for Richie to worry about. He knew very suddenly that he did not want there to be anyone else; the feeling coalesced inside him with a stickiness and weight that felt like guilt.

“Let’s get another round,” Richie said. “You know, I’m in New York for a few days. We should meet up again.”

“Yes,” Eddie agreed. “To both.”
They drank so much that Eddie had to get the subway home and deal with Myra’s indignant rant about how unsafe it was to be out drinking alone when he stumbled into their room long past midnight. She was probably right to be annoyed, so he told himself he wouldn’t drink as much when he set out to meet Richie a couple of nights later at a restaurant in the East Village. He told Myra it was for work and specifically listed a few coworkers he knew she hated so she wouldn’t want to come. If he was asked directly he wouldn’t have an answer for why he didn’t want her to come so badly, other than he wanted to spend time with an old friend, but that was only because he was ignoring the pressing feeling in the back of his mind that he did not want to acknowledge. He took his wedding ring off before he went into the restaurant.

Apparently someone – presumably Richie’s manager – had phoned the restaurant ahead of time and told them he was coming, because the two of them were ushered to a more private table with its own bouquet of flowers on it, the hostess telling him that she loved his show in what sounded like genuine appreciation. Richie signed a napkin and Eddie sat and watched with a mixture of wonder and amusement. He himself looked a little bit embarrassed when he sat down opposite Eddie, scratching the back of his neck.

“Comes with the territory,” he said, eventually.

“Mr Humble, as always. Surprised you haven’t arranged a crew of paparazzi to follow us around.”

“I thought about it, but it turns out that there’s actually not a photographer in New York who wants to take a photo of you. Didn’t matter how much I offered them; soon as I said your name they just…”

He mimed trying not to throw up.

“Oh, very funny.”

“Look, it’s not my fault. Some people are just naturally more photogenic.”

“And that’s you, is it?”

The waiter who came over looked a little put-off by their arguing, but they managed to break away from the squabbling long enough to actually order food and drinks. Eddie was going to order a soda but found himself doubting Richie’s request for a bourbon. One wouldn’t hurt. He also made sure to give a full list of allergies, which had Richie boggling at him like he’d spontaneously started reciting one of Shakespeare’s sonnets.

“What was that?” Richie said. “Do you live off pure unfiltered air, Kaspbrak?”

“It’s not funny, I have to be serious about this.”
“Yeah, I heard, if you ever even look at a cashew nut you’ll drop dead. Dude, has anyone ever told you that you’re a hypochondriac?”

“I’m surprised you can even pronounce that.”

“That’s a yes, then. Have you ever had these allergies actually tested?”

“I know my own body, asshole.”

“Yeah, you’re the only person who does. Has a woman ever touched you since your Mom stopped changing your diapers?”

The obvious answer would be that he was married, and Richie was not. It almost felt like Richie was daring him to say something, to hear about Myra, but Eddie didn’t want to tell him. He didn’t want him to be absorbed into the mundanity and tedium of his daily life. Maybe because it made him actually, really happy, when so often he walked around dissatisfied with life. Maybe it was perversive to be feeling nothing but unbridled joy while the two of them hurled insults, but he couldn’t remember the last time he’d had such a good time. He needed to stop questioning himself so much.

He also felt like he had an idea of why Richie did not talk about a girlfriend, or anyone he was dating. Why stories about people he’d been with in LA were often vague and undescriptive, why he had claimed last night, in the midst of their sixth or seventh round, that he had never had a long-term relationship. Eddie thought he knew, but he didn’t want to say before Richie did. To do so would have felt like it was breaching some unspoken trust between them.

So instead he just said:

“Unlike you, because you’re absolutely dripping with groupies.”

“How many people have asked for your autograph today?” Riche smirked.

“There goes Mr Modesty again.”

“Look, if you want to really feel like a loser, we can have a dick measuring contest.”

“I wouldn’t want to embarrass you.”

“You’d probably argue with the ruler anyway. Sore loser. You used to make up the rules about hocking loogies to try and fuckin’ win that.”

“I wouldn’t have had to if you didn’t keep cheating!”

Every time Richie laughed felt like a victory. Their food arrived and they both ordered more drinks. Two couldn’t hurt.

When the food was done, they were still at the table, laughing themselves sick. The dessert Eddie had ordered to have an excuse to stay later had melted into a puddle as he focused more on talking than eating. The waiter came to clean away the empty glasses that were rapidly piling up.

“No, no, the most fucked up thing was when you were like, doing fucking surgery on Ben because that psycho bully had tried to murder him,” Richie said.

“God, that’s right! And Beverly shoplifted all that shit for us.”

“No, we shoplifted it, she just distracted the pharmacist.”
“Why the fuck were we allowed to roam around wild like that anyway? If I had kids, I wouldn’t let them do half the shit we did.”

“You weren’t allowed to do the shit we did. If we told your Mom any of that she’d have us sent to Guantanamo. Remember when you broke your arm?”

“Yeah, fuck. And you reset it! I was screaming at you not to, but you did anyway. I think you just wanted to hurt me. God, why the fuck were we playing in some empty house? Were we stupid?”

“Eds, I would never hurt you.”

“No, you wouldn’t.”

Richie had been joking, but the laughter faded into a sincere, worried smile after Eddie said that. His eyes on Eddie were remarkably bright and soft; there was a longing in there that couldn’t be ignored even now, through the haze of alcohol.

“I missed you, idiot,” Eddie said, his voice oddly gentle.

“Yeah, I missed me too.”

“Yeah? Who have you been since the gang broke up?”

“I don’t know,” Richie said, his voice wavering a little. “I don’t write my own material.”

When they left, they argued about who should pay, both pinning the blame for drinking the most on the other. They split it 50/50 and kept arguing as they walked out, Richie’s hand on Eddie’s shoulder as they headed out into the parking lot. It was easy to argue, to keep up the constant back-and-forth. Richie filled him with aggression and defensiveness in equal measure, but gleefully so. He wanted to be seen, and he wanted to be seen by Richie.

Out front of the restaurant, still arguing, Eddie gave Richie a half-gentle shove, placing his hands square on his chest and pushing him away. Richie responded by winding an arm around Eddie and tugging him to knuckle his head roughly. Eddie struggled out of his grip, shoving him again only for Richie to grab him by the wrist and tug him over again with a frustrating amount of ease.

“What are you doing?” Eddie said, a little playfully.

“Did you mean what you said the other day?” Richie said. He was smiling, but the smile didn’t reach his words.

“What did I say?”

“Like there was something missing,” Richie said.

“Oh. Yeah. But you… You get it, though”

“Yeah.”

There was a long silence as they stood on the sidewalk, looking around anxiously at everything that wasn’t each other. The alcohol and rich food were making Eddie feel a little sick now, but his head was remarkably clear. Clear, but stuck on the same idea, not able to skip forward and pass by it when his mind was latching onto it so tightly, stuck in the grooves of the record.

He had missed Richie so badly without even remembering there was someone to remember. Every moment he spent arguing and shooting the shit with Richie he knew it more intensely; nothing felt
this good and came this naturally when it wasn’t right, when it wasn’t the way things were supposed to be. They had been apart for over twice as long as they had known each other, and yet this still felt more correct than all the time they hadn’t been together.

There had been that moment the first time they had met, the first day of first grade, where Eddie had been crying after his mother had dropped him off. Bill had been the first person to try to approach him, but Richie had been the only one who had gotten him to stop crying; it had been in that moment that something had formed, though none of them could see the size and expanse of it from their childish standpoint. It was too vast to consider when you’d only lived five years of life that there could be more than the horror of being left alone at a new school, and that the kindness of some boys you’d just met might stay with you for a long time.

Eddie realised he’d been staring at Richie. Richie was staring back. It had started to rain, and fat globs of water were dripping off the front of Richie’s glasses, but he hadn’t noticed. Eddie could barely feel the water dribbling down the back of his jacket; it was a million miles away from him as the light of the neon sign hanging over the restaurant caught in Richie’s glasses and bathed him in pink and gold.

He wondered if he would taste the rain if he kissed it off Richie’s lips.

“You uh, you ever think about tips? How are you supposed to always be able to work out 20%, right? I mean what did people do… Before you had calculators on your phone…” Richie was talking, but it was about nothing, mouth just making words to fill the silence. “Sure, 20% is easy to calculate, but it’s like, who wants to do math after they just ate a whole meal? Right, bro? Like, I’ve just drank half a bottle of wine, and I’m high on pasta, and you want me to…”

“Shut up, Richie,” Eddie said.

“I’m just saying, y’know, the uh, the restaurant industry is really built off the back of confusing the customer into giving them all their money. That’s why they tax tips, probably, y’know? This goes all the way to the top.”

“Richie, shut up.”

“Or maybe it’s the other way around, maybe they want to trick us into giving the waitresses less so that we don’t think about how underpaid they are. When you think about it, they…”

Richie was going to continue, but Eddie cleared the space between them and was pulling him into a kiss, hand reaching up around the back of his neck to hold him closer. Richie cupped a hand around his cheek, kissing him back immediately and without hesitation; it was as if he had been preparing for this moment for a long, long time, and the act of doing it now was merely taking his life off pause and living for the first time.

Eddie pushed into the kiss, gripping Richie tight to him. He liked how he had to crane his head back to kiss Richie, how it felt to reach across his broad shoulders to put a hand on his arm; there was something exciting about it, the thrill of having someone so much bigger than him following his every touch with eager reciprocation. Richie almost melted against him, like he needed Eddie to hold himself upright, his entire body going weak as the kiss became the only thing supporting them both in the world.

It felt like they were there for a long time before the door of the restaurant clicked open and they both leapt apart like they’d been stung. Luckily whoever came out wasn’t paying attention, too busy turning around to talk to their family to look at some random men loitering outside the parking lot. Richie and Eddie looked at each other with stunned expressions, as if they had just
been possessed by something they didn’t fully understand and were now trying to work out what had happened.

“I… I’m sorry,” Richie said.

“No, don’t be,” Eddie said. “Don’t be sorry.”

Richie’s eyes were filled with tears and Eddie had no idea what he could say; people kept filing out of the restaurant past them, robbing them of any sense of privacy and putting them at risk of being a sidewalk attraction. More than that, the look on Richie’s face alluded to a sense of pain that was too much for Eddie to handle. It was not something that he could fix with a joke or a nice sentiment. They were both stranded in the moment and with the weight of what it meant bearing down upon them, and Eddie could sense his knees about to buckle under it if he had to think about it much more.

“I have to go home,” Eddie said.

“Yeah. Uh, yeah.”

“I’ll call you.”

“Really?” Richie sounded hopeful in a way so earnest that it stung.

“Yes. Really. I promise.”

He meant it.

At home, Myra slammed around dishes passive-aggressively and Eddie said he had a migraine and went to bed. She blamed it on him drinking too much, and he didn’t try to argue with her.
Richie didn’t know if he believed Eddie would actually call or not. It wasn’t that he didn’t trust Eddie, it was more that he felt like he was rapidly losing control of his life and he had absolutely no idea what was going to happen next at any point in time. He was standing in a deli staring at food that he didn’t want or need, and he couldn’t really remember why he had come in the first place. Absolutely nothing looked particularly appetising to him.

When his phone rang, he nearly dropped it in his desperation to pull it out of the pocket, the glass screen slipping through his fingers and flipping through his hands as he tried to wrangle it under control. Feeling this nervous was fucking stupid. It was just Eddie. Just his best friend Eddie. His best friend who he’d kissed. Not just kissed; one of the best kisses of his fucking life. A movie kiss in the rain, the pink light of the restaurant shrouding them in a warm aura, with Eddie’s hands on him. The kind of kiss you think about for the rest of your life.

Answering the phone, he felt nervous. He didn’t know what Eddie was going to say; they lived on opposite ends of the country, had full lives as adults. And he knew, of course he knew, that Eddie was hiding something from him.

“Hi,” he said, a little breathless. He walked out of the deli because he couldn’t remember why he’d walked in there in the first place, standing on the sidewalk of the nice neighbourhood near his hotel and staring up at the cloudy sky.

“Hi, bro,” Eddie said. He sounded oddly optimistic. “How much longer are you in New York?”

“I leave tomorrow. Going to Chicago. Got a couple of shows there,” Richie said.

“Well, we need to meet up before then. I don’t want you to just go.”

“Yeah. Where are you now?”

“Work. Some of us work for a living. You should ask the people who write your jokes what that’s like.”

“I don’t pay them to talk.”

“You can pay people to shut up? What will twenty dollars get me?”

“A blowjob.” Oh GOD why did he say that. “Look, do you want to meet me at my hotel? We can figure out where to go from there.”

It was a risky move, but Eddie considered it.

“Yeah, ok. I’ll take half a day.”

“Look at you, big man, deciding he can leave work whenever he wants.”
“Yeah, well, if you’d ever done a day of honest work, you’d understand the privileges that you get from working your way up the ladder.”

Richie couldn’t decide if he was a genius or he regretted his suggestion the moment he’d made it. He felt even more conflicted when Eddie actually showed up at his door, standing in a tidy black suit and wearing an expression that was somewhere between amusement and anxiety attack. It looked like he hadn’t decided that he wasn’t going to just cut and run, but he ended up walking into the room without saying anything.

“Jesus, this room is huge,” he said.

“Well, my manager insists,” Richie said.

“Oh, it must be so mortifying for you.”

“Look, when I first moved to LA, I was living in a cockroach infested basement. I can handle staying in something that’s a little less ostentatious.” Richie walked over to the minifridge and pulled two beers out. “Y’know, I just… Don’t want to.”

“It’s a little early to be drinking, isn’t it?”

The question was delivered in a slightly amused tone, but it still made Richie wince. It was very easy to drink around Eddie; it was very easy for Richie to drink in general. It was comedian culture to always be ready to get blasted and to do so night after night. He knew he had a much better handle on it than many of the people he’d met over the years, but it was easy to forget what most people considered normal. He put the beers back, a little sheepishly.

“Sorry, I just… Uh… It probably isn’t a good idea to get drunk again.” Eddie had picked up on Richie’s discomfort, watching him fretfully.

“No, yeah, of course. You just want to stop everyone from having any fun.”

Eddie rolled his eyes and sat down on the edge of Richie’s bed. Richie stayed standing, first crossing and then uncrossing his arms before leaning on the wall uncomfortably.

The conversation had ground to a sudden halt. It was unbearable how awkward everything had suddenly become, and it didn’t help that Richie’s heart was pounding in his chest again like someone on the inside wanted to get out. He stared at Eddie with his mouth drawn into a tight, uncomfortable smile, trying to search for something to say. Eddie didn’t look any happier, his interlaced hands sitting on his knee, glancing up at Richie and then away again, occasionally opening his mouth as if he was about to speak and then saying nothing. The moment dragged on for a long, agonising minute until Richie decided he was sick of it.

“Alright, come on,” he said. “We can’t keep wandering around the elephant in the room here.”

“I think we were doing ok at it.”

“No, we’re doing terrible at it. Are we going to talk about how you kissed me?”

“What do you want me to say?” Eddie said.

“I don’t know, like, what the fuck, man? You just wanted to kiss me?”

“I don’t have anything to explain, I wanted to kiss you! You liked it!” Eddie threw his hands up in the air incredulously.
“Yeah, I did! So did you!”

“Well, good!”

“Yeah!”

“Ok, then,” Eddie said. “So, that’s sorted.”

There was more still brewing inside Richie. He wanted to scream how long have you wanted to kiss me at the top of his lungs, to demand an answer and find out if it was as long as he’d wanted Eddie, if the spaces inside them where someone was missing were compatible. It sounded impossible that Eddie could want him as badly as he wanted Eddie, but then again, it sounded impossible that they could have kissed like that last night. Richie didn’t know what the status quo was anymore, and somehow that was even more scary than the idea nothing would ever happen between them at all. All of a sudden there was something to lose.

“What do you want to do now?” Richie said.

“That’s kind of a heavy question, Rich, we only kissed once, I…” Eddie said. “Do we have to decide right now? I don’t regret it, but it’s only been one kiss, I don’t know if I…”

“No, I meant if you wanted to get lunch, or…”

Eddie shot him a filthy look, those funny sad eyebrows of his low and angry. The furious expression made him cuter, in Richie’s humble opinion.

“You don’t regret it?” He said.

“No. I really don’t,” Eddie said.

“Could I kiss you again?”

“No if I kiss you first.”

“What? You don’t have to be so fucking aggro, dude—”

Richie was still laughing when Eddie met him halfway and they kissed again, for the second time, a little slower and more cautious than their first, impulsive kiss. For the second time, Richie found himself sinking into it, head tilted low and fingers balled in the shirt under Eddie’s jacket. He could feel the warmth of Eddie’s skin through the thin cotton, pushed his hand in tighter to feel him more.

Maybe he had dreamed about things being this way when he was younger; he couldn’t really say, when all his memories of his childhood were locked away in some distant part of him that he couldn’t reach. But what he may have wanted did not matter, because this was the best he could dream of right now.

Eddie pulled away for a second, the space between them flushed hot with their breath, before he kissed Richie on the lips again softly, quickly, chasing after him for just one more shot, like he was scared he’d forget without repetition. Richie kept his head bent low towards him, foreheads touching, eyes closed. When he let his eyes flutter open a moment, Eddie’s were right there staring back at him and the intensity of those brown eyes was almost too much for him to bear. Eddie’s hands were tight on his shoulders and the back of his neck, just like last time, and he wondered if Eddie liked those things about him in particular, the way Richie liked his dark, serious eyes and small, neat waist. There was something thrilling about the idea of there being anything Eddie liked
about him that was specific to him; Richie couldn’t explain it, but the desire to be desired blossomed in him like a fed fire.

“Let’s just stay here for a bit,” Eddie said, breath warm on Richie’s neck. Richie thought about that mouth working down his throat.

“That sounds good,” Richie said in one rush, his voice lost as he pushed in to kiss Eddie again, lips soft on the edge of hard teeth.

“We could just get room service,” Eddie said, in between short, hungry kisses.

“Yeah, sure, it’s only my credit card.”

“I’m not a cheap date, Tozier.”

God, this was too easy. There had to be a catch. A car had to drive through his hotel window right now, or something. A bomb had to level the building. His manager had to run right in with a last-minute change of plans. There was just no way he could really be standing here, kissing Eddie Kaspbrak, in a nice room with a big, warm bed and absolutely nothing he needed to do all afternoon.

“Why is this so nice?” Eddie said.

“Probably because I’m incredibly good at kissing,” Richie said. *I learned it from your Mom* popped up in his head but if there was ever a time not to ruin the moment it was right the fuck now. He would never forgive himself if he was the reason this fell apart.

“I guess you must be, I always thought kissing was kind of gross, but you…”

“Wait, w…” was about as far as Richie got into unpacking that, because Eddie tugged him over to the bed and gently guided him to sit down, and after that there wasn’t anything much he was thinking anymore; other than how much he liked it when Eddie was standing over him between his spread knees, cupping his face in two soft hands so they could kiss so sweetly that it almost pained him that it could ever end. Put a spear through him; he could die happy.

He put his hands under Eddie’s jacket and eased it off, letting it fall to the floor in a heap. Eddie began slowly thumbing open the top few buttons of Richie’s shirt, the cloth sliding open easily over his chest as he moved his arms up to untuck Eddie’s shirt, to pull apart the neat corporate man image just a tiny bit.

Eddie slipped a hand inside Richie’s shirt and let it rest over his heart.

“God,” Eddie said, “your heart is beating so fast.”

“I’m just so nervous,” Richie said.

“Really?”

“Well, I promised Papa I wouldn’t have sex before marriage, and I just don’t know what I will do if he were to catch us.”

Eddie groaned angrily and pushed him over, lying him flat on the bed before he propped a knee on the mattress next to him to lean over him, arms planted on either side of his head. Richie reached up to start undoing his tie.
“You can make jokes,” Eddie said. “But I can still feel how hard your heart is going. You can’t fake that.”

“Something else is going to get hard if you keep looking at me like that.”

Stupid. Stupid joke.

“Shut up,” Eddie said.

“Make me.”

It was deliberate bait and Eddie smiled as he kissed him, just like he’d been hoping. It was a long kiss, Eddie’s hands creeping lower down his front as he undid his shirt. Richie pulled Eddie’s tie off and started going at his shirt, the thin cotton almost semi-translucent, the pink of his skin just suggested through the cloth. With his shirt hanging open and his hair a mess, he looked startlingly different from the tense, neurotic disaster he usually was and also incredibly attractive. Richie wound Eddie’s tie between two hands, pulling the material taut. He looped it behind Eddie’s head, coaxing him down a little further.

“Listen,” Richie whispered, “this might come as a surprise, but I want you to fuck me.”

“Yeah, dude, I can feel your boner against my leg.”

Richie didn’t say it, but he was quietly relieved. There had been a huge chance for Eddie to decided against this and back out of it, but the idea hadn’t seemed to have crossed his mind. Instead of quitting and running he was undoing the front of Richie’s pants, sliding a hand inside to feel his half-hard dick. Richie groaned intentionally, moving a hand up to run fingers through Eddie’s hair while he kissed his throat. Eddie buried his face in Richie’s shoulder, breathing hot against the crook of his neck.

“Wait, wait,” Eddie said.

He pulled back, standing up for a moment, so he could strip off the rest of his clothes. Richie did the same, sitting up so he could shed everything he was wearing. Eddie was lithe under his clothes; skinny, but with the build of someone who tried to do something. Running maybe, or swimming. Tennis. Something he could talk about in boring conversations with boring people in his boring office.

Richie wondered, not for the first time, if Eddie was actually happy.

“Hey, look at that,” Richie said.

“Look at what?”

“I did win the dick-measuring contest after all.”

Eddie gave him one of his looks. “Shut up. Get on the bed before I change my mind.”

“Oh, ordering me around now? Alright.”

Richie followed his instructions, lying on the centre of the bed instead of perching on the edge, and soon Eddie joined him, kneeling over him again. He caught both of Richie’s wrists in his hands and held them over his head, pinning him down as he kissed his neck and throat. Richie’s legs fell open a little wider, let Eddie lean in closer. Their cocks brushed together every time either of them moved, the friction of it just light enough to be maddening. Desperate for more, Richie bent his
legs, hooking one around Eddie. He arched his back a little, grinding into him more fervently as Eddie drove him insane by dragging lips slow over his jaw.

“You like me telling you what to do?” Eddie asked, low and soft.

“You always are, so I guess so,” Richie said, a little breathlessly.

“Tell me how hard you want me to fuck you.”

“Dude, why are you talking like that?”

“Like what?”

“Like you’re trying to be all bad and sexy.”

“What? Because we’re going to have sex.”

“You don’t have to fucking…” Richie wrested a hand free to lower it to Eddie’s head, weaving fingers through his hair. “You don’t have to put on some stupid act.”

“It wasn’t supposed to be stupid.”

“I just want you, man.”

Eddie sighed hard, aggravated in the way he always got about jokes he didn’t think were funny in the way that Richie thought was hilarious. He kept stroking a hand through Eddie’s hair, soft and dark.

“You always make me feel so…” Eddie trailed off.

What Richie made him feel exactly he didn’t get to find out, because the words were lost as the two of them fell back into each other, wrapped up in the heat of the embrace and of their mouths working together. Richie bucked up into Eddie, his legs spread wide, all of him open and wanting, his fingernails digging into Eddie’s back.

“What?” Richie said.

“Condoms, man. Lube. Stuff.”

“Oh, right. Fuck. Yeah, yeah.”

With the free will and independent strength of someone trying to pull themselves out of quicksand, Richie rolled out from under Eddie and stumbled towards the en suite. It took a moment of frantic rifling through his bag that felt like the longest time he’d ever been standing naked in a bathroom in the cold for his entire life before he found condoms and lube at the bottom of his travelling bag and mentally blessed himself for having the foresight to throw them in there when he’d packed for the tour at the beginning of the month, out of the idle thought that he might get laid at some point.

He turned back into the bedroom, where Eddie was now lying on his back on the bed, picking at his thumbnail absentely. His eyes flicked to Richie the second he ran back into the room, lighting up and easing the perpetually worried expression he was cursed with. Eddie had such sad eyes; it made every time he smiled all the sweeter.

Richie knelt over Eddie, unrolling a condom over his cock, watching the way Eddie bit his lip
when Richie’s hands moved over him. It was a little beautiful, actually, the involuntary gasps and motions that came from losing yourself in the moment. It was beautiful to be a part of it.

“I like seeing you like this,” Eddie said, opening the cap on the lube and spreading it on his fingers.

The anticipation in Richie’s chest was almost painful, excitement stirred with fear and desire making him feel like he was on the edge. Holding off on rambling, spitting out stupid joke after joke was harder than he liked to admit. It would be so easy to fuck all this up entirely, but he just— he couldn’t risk it. Losing Eddie again. He couldn’t let it happen.

“Yeah?” Richie breathed. He moved in closer, let Eddie slide a hand between his legs and push a finger inside him. Richie exhaled unevenly, eyes fluttering closed.

“Yeah. You’re shaking really bad.”

“Sorry.”

Richie whimpered as Eddie pushed another finger inside him. He could feel himself shaking as he gripped onto Eddie’s shoulder, bracing himself over him. He wasn’t tense, but the moment was doing something to him, something where he was painfully aware of just how vulnerable he really was. It took so much trust to be with someone like this and he was more aware of it now than he ever had been with one-night stands or the short, doomed relationships he’d had in the past.

“Don’t be,” Eddie said.

Richie took the lube, and then took Eddie’s cock in his hand to spread it over him. When it was slick, hard in his hand and beading with precum, Richie repositioned, sliding it inside himself. His breath hitched as he felt it push in, panting in short bursts of breath as Eddie bucked up deeper inside him, his cock fitting so right and easy like they were made for this. Richie curled his fingers tighter, bowing his head so low that their faces were almost touching.

He rocked his hips up and then down, moving slowly as he adjusted to how it felt. He took his time, breathing slow and steady, watching Eddie’s face through half-closed eyes. Eddie’s eyes were glued to him, lips parted and hands gripping Richie’s thighs until they left little pink finger marks.

“I feel like you’ve done this before,” Eddie said.

“Sorry Eds,” Richie breathed between jerks of his hips, “I was lying about the virgin thing to make you feel better.”

Eddie thrust up into him hard, making Richie groan loudly, rocking back against Eddie’s motions.

They moved as one, Richie leaning back as the momentum of their motions built so he could follow through every thrust with his whole body, fucking himself good and hard while Eddie held him tight and watched him constantly with huge, beauty-filled eyes. He gripped his own cock, palming it with a sweat-slicked hand as he rode Eddie until his back began to twinge painfully and he came to a slow stop.

“What’s wrong?” Eddie said.

“I’m nearly fucking forty, that’s the problem. Too bad we didn’t do this when we were twenty. I could ride cock like a fucking matador when I was twenty.”

“Matadors kill the bulls; you’re thinking of a rodeo clown.”
“I feel like a fucking clown right now, complaining about my back instead of getting ploughed. Let me lie down.”

Richie leaned forward, shivering when Eddie’s cock slowly pulled out before he rolled over, hitting the mattress on his back, lying spread-eagled across the sheets. Eddie leaned in to kiss him quickly before grabbing him by the waist and flipping him over onto his front. Eddie lay flush with his back; Richie could feel a heartbeat thundering against his back. For some reason not being the only one who was trapped in the halfway point between total bliss and fear felt good.

Although maybe not as good as when Eddie pushed back inside him, Richie arching his back to feel his cock deeper, fingers curling against the sheets. Eddie twisted his hip to drag Richie further into him, grinding hard against him and making him moan.

They fucked hard but slow; it teetered constantly on the edge of overwhelming, so much that Richie found himself focusing on the little details rather than the entirety of it. The feeling of Eddie’s hand burning hot on his back. The way the soft sheets felt against his face. Eddie’s bent elbow propping himself up. Fingers twisting in Richie’s hair, pulling just tight enough to make him gasp salaciously; tilting his head back to kiss Eddie messy and raw. Sweat on his lips. Rutting his cock against the bed. Stubble rasping the back of his neck as Eddie pushed his face in close to kiss him there. The almost inaudible words being panted in his ear like they were secret messages just for him. Looking up over his shoulder and seeing the sunlight reflecting off the sweat on Eddie’s brow and making him look golden against the white ceiling.

Any single part of it would have been enough; all at once it was the only thing that could exist in the world. Richie was cut off from the constant noise in his head; all there was was the moment when Eddie placed his hand over Richie’s, interlacing their fingers, bending his head to press his forehead to the back of Richie’s skull, his voice a soft whisper against his skin.

“God, I missed you.”

Eddie came with a gasp, as if it was a total surprise to him and not something that had been building up inside him like a furnace, holding onto Richie like he was scared they would lose each other. He was still for a moment afterwards, eyes closed, lying over Richie and just breathing, soft and uneven. Richie rolled over onto his back so they could kiss again, even though they were both exhausted. They were still clinging to the taste of each other as Eddie brought Richie to a finish with a caring hand. Staring up at him in the seconds before he came, his hands around Eddie’s shoulders, Richie felt something low in his chest that was so suddenly frightening that tears were welling up in the corners of his eyes when it was all over.

Eddie rolled off him, flopping on the bed and draping an arm over his eyes. Richie took a second to wipe the tears from his eyes, feeling absurd at the show of sudden emotion and grateful for the fact that Eddie didn’t seem to have noticed. This all felt too horrifyingly precarious to bring anything into it that would upset the equilibrium too violently, lest the entire thing be cast into the fucking pits of hell.

There was silence for a long while, waiting for their breath to return and their muscles to regain some strength. Richie pushed his hand into Eddie’s, and they laced their fingers together again, Eddie rubbing a thumb lazily over his knuckles. Eddie’s hands were soft, but there was a scar on his palm that rubbed smooth over Richie’s. When Richie looked over at him, he still had his arm draped over his eyes, the light shimmering on the hairs on his arms. The curtains waved a little in the breeze coming through the open window; cars outside honked distantly on the street below. As he became more aware of the world around him, Richie could feel himself calming, his heart slowing to a more regular pace. In the quiet, he wondered if this was how Eddie felt after he used...
his stupid inhaler. Just… At peace.

“I need a shower,” Eddie said.

“That good, huh?” Richie said.

“No, it was…” Eddie blinked, then laughed, wiping his eyes. “I don’t even know what the fuck to say.”

“That was the greatest fuck of my life’ is a good start.”

“Yeah. It really was.”

Richie stared at him to work out if he was joking, but Eddie didn’t look like he was; he was just staring distantly at the ceiling, an expression of mild amusement on his face. Richie leaned up on one elbow, ignoring the way his back complained. He didn’t really know what there was to say; it was impossible to guess what it was exactly Eddie was thinking, and he didn’t want to share, so the conversation felt like a series of minefields and pitfalls.

“Do you want to get room service?” Richie said instead.

They did get room service; they both took quick showers before the food arrived, Eddie standing around swaddled in Richie’s oversized hotel robe and looking self-conscious as Richie answered the door to the staff delivering the food. He didn’t go as far as to hide his face, but there was a definite sense that he didn’t want to be observed, standing almost in the doorway to the bathroom, watching the food be carried in with furrowed eyebrows. Neither of them commented on that, just ate their overpriced hotel pizza and flicked bits of mushroom at each other as if they were twelve again, bickering like everything was back to the way it had always been and like the way Eddie had looked at him when he’d came wouldn’t stick in Richie’s head for months.

They had an hour or so more together before Eddie started putting his clothes back on, shirt and suit obviously crumpled, wet hair drying in unequal spikes and tufts, tie hanging limp around his neck. Richie watched him with a kind of distant sadness, hoping that this was not going to be the last moment that he saw Eddie.

“I have to go,” Eddie said, as if he didn’t want to.

“You’re a big boy,” Richie said, “do whatever you want.”

“I have… To get home,” Eddie said.

The elephant in the room. In Richie’s mind she was waiting at the house filled with their wedding photos and Christmas cards for him to come home so they could have their nice meal of quinoa and arugula. She would be someone who fitted with Eddie’s image; someone tidy and health-obsessed and just as paranoid as he was. Richie tried not to form opinions on a person he had not and would hopefully never meet but, despite knowing it was unfair and also uncontrollable, he did hate her.

“Sure,” Richie said. “I have to leave tomorrow, anyway, so…”

“Oh, right, yeah. Yeah! You probably want me out of the way anyway.”

There wasn’t a word either of them was saying that wasn’t almost comically out of touch with the reality they were both experiencing. Richie wanted nothing more than to crawl into bed beside Eddie and fall asleep with Eddie’s arms around him, for them to wake up late tomorrow morning
and know they had nowhere to be and owed nothing to no one.

“I got a lot of tour left and you’re kind of not my style, so you better bounce, shortstack,” Richie said.

“You’re not funny.”

“Oh, really? Then why am I the one on tour, not you, Eduardo? Vamoose.”

Don’t go. Don’t go. Don’t go.

But Eddie did go, because of course he did. He stopped right before he walked out of the door and looked back at Richie with fear written all over his face, badly hidden under the forced smile.

“You’re not going to forget again, right?” Eddie said.

“No,” Richie said. “Next time I’m close, I’ll call you.”

Eddie smiled again and Richie felt an incredibly painful note of hope, but it wasn’t enough to stop him from leaving.
With one foot in the past, now, just how long can this last?

Chapter Notes

Chapter title is Head over Heels by Japanese Breakfast

When Eddie got home, he had another shower, washing away every trace of Richie’s scent, the unfamiliar smell of his shampoo and soap and the cologne that had clung like a dye pack hidden inside a bundle of cash. Eddie washed every trace of Richie away and changed his clothes for good measure, hiding the crumpled suit and sweaty shirt at the bottom of the laundry hamper, changing into his casual clothes before Myra got home. It wasn’t until the last moment that he realised he’d left his wedding ring in the inner pocket of his jacket and had to dive through the laundry to fish it out again, pulling the ring from the inside and putting it back on. There, every sign of the heist he’d just pulled was hidden, and now no one would ever know.

The motion of changing all his clothes depressed him, and he sat for a long time on the edge of the bed with the tie Richie had been playing with only moments before in his hands. Every sign of their encounter was gone; unless someone had secretly recorded it all, the sex would only live on in Eddie and Richie’s memories. Eddie thought about how if he forgot the way that Richie smelled, no one would ever be able to remind him. If he misremembered the way Richie had looked at him, eyes barely open and pink tongue just showing between parted lips, there would never be anyone who could correct him. Those snapshots, those little details, they were all on Eddie, and he had already lost so much already.

Myra came home and told him about her day and he half-listened, watching the planes in the distant sky, until she grew frustrated about his apathy and he intentionally picked a fight, knowing he was a huge piece of shit and feeling it in every spiteful word he spoke but unable to escape that any more than he was able to escape anything in his life.

He waited for Richie to call again. As if rehearsing lines, he thought about the encounters almost every day; not obsessively, but routinely, often when he was stuck in traffic or staring out of the window during a meeting he hated. He couldn’t let this thing fade out, get smothered by the mundanity of his life and leave him alone with nothing to cling to.

It was nearly a month in the end. Richie’s voice on the phone was casual, their conversation picking up from where it had left off only a few seconds ago. Hearing him again filled Eddie with relief, heart swelling at the sound of his voice, same as it always did.

“I’m in New York for like, the night,” Richie said, sounding bored with the entire concept of New York existing. “I’m supposed to be going to some… Party with some… Guy, but I’d rather drink bleach. You wanna meet up?”

“What guy? Like a work thing?” Eddie said, trying not to sound too impressed with the affairs of the celebrity lifestyle.

It was weird that Richie was famous. He’d been taken aback when a coworker had mentioned going to see Richie perform in New York, on a different night than Eddie had, and she had been legitimately impressed when Eddie had talked about knowing him. The conversation had ground to a halt when she’d asked about their childhood; Eddie had no way of making the distant, spotty
memories he had make sense to anyone else.

“Yeah some producer wants to meet me. Whatever. I’ll say hi and then bounce.” Richie was talking like it wasn’t a big deal at all, which was incomprehensible to Eddie. “Meet me there and then we’ll go wherever.”

“Okay,” Eddie said. There was no way he could say no. It was a forgone conclusion.

He told Myra he had a late meeting and drove out after work to a house in the Upper East Side that looked like it cost three of Eddie’s house, with a variety of expensive cars parked outside. He loitered nervously nearby, parked on the edge of the sidewalk, watching the outside of the house uncomfortably. By nature, Eddie was an anxious person and while he was also perhaps excessively confrontational, he had a deeply ingrained fear of getting in trouble. All of this felt like they were on the verge of falling into the biggest trouble of their lives. There was also the dual fear that he didn’t necessarily want to be seen; the chances of this getting back to his wife were so slim and yet it felt better not to risk it any more than he had to.

And he really did have to. He had no more choice about being here than he did about waking up in the morning or breathing when he came up for air from the bottom of the pool.

Richie emerged only a few minutes after the time he’d said he’d be there, talking to someone in the doorway as he tried to get away from the house. The way he was standing, constantly twisting away from the guy he was talking to and scanning across the road, his shoulders hunched and his elbows stiff at his sides made him look like he couldn’t be any more uncomfortable than he was right then. He eventually pulled away from them and dashed across the road to Eddie’s car, slamming into the passenger seat like he was trying to outrun a mad dog.

“That good, huh?” Eddie said.

“I can’t fucking stand any of those people,” Richie said, sounding a little spiteful. “‘Oh, Richard, tell us about how you think your comedy can reach non-traditional markets’. I don’t know, I just tell jokes.”

“Richard.”

“Edward.”

“Where are we going, funny man?”

Richie stretched out, putting a hand casually on Eddie’s shoulder. It was so immediately warm and comforting that Eddie found the tension in his chest unwinding instantly. It was just nice that Richie still wanted to touch him.

“I need a drink!” Richie commanded. “I need to be around someone who doesn’t spend all their day jerking it in their office to secretary porn when no one is looking. Oh, no offense, Eds.”

“Hilarious. People pay for this?”

“Yeah, you did. And you can get it for free, so you must really love it.”

Eddie drove out of the Upper East Side and took Richie to a bar that was completely unfamiliar to him and immediately obviously filled with tourist types. Richie gave him a weird look when Eddie suggested it, but Eddie knew that no one he knew would go anywhere near the place. Richie was basically a tourist anyway.
They sat at a booth in the back and got a round of beer. Eddie sat with an arm across the back and Richie sat just enough within his arm for it to be noticeable and deliberate.

“So, what was that meeting about anyway?” Eddie said.

Richie rolled his eyes. “They want to do another season of my show.”

“Oh, yeah, I can see why that success would be so hard for you. That sounds great, dude, why not do it?”

“I just…” Richie made a face for a moment, grimacing a little, before he shook it off. “I can’t take all the acclaim and praise. It’s too much stress answering all the fanmail.”

“Didn’t you say you started off writing on a show or something?”

“Yeah, and I’m not going to go back to that, for the same reason I’m not going to start doing stand-up to five alcoholics hanging out in a basement club on a Thursday again. I’m not trying to go backwards.”

Richie took a long drink and shook his head. “Whatever. How did you get into fucking, what, risk analysis? How do you just end up doing that?”

“Well, I majored in statistics, and I was working at an investment firm but-”

He stopped, looking over at Richie’s head lolling back against his arm, snoring deafeningly loud.

“Fuck you,” Eddie said. “Why even ask if you’re just gonna be a fucking dick?”

“God, cus it’s just so funny.” Richie mimed wiping tears away.

“You being a comedian is the worst thing that could have happened. You just get an endless stream of praise for your bullshit.”

“Yeah, that’s why it was the only thing I could do. There’s a reason I got fired from every service job I ever tried.”

“And that reason is because you kept jerking off in the McFlurry machine.”

“Yeah, but you have to do that, it’s in the recipe.”

The conversation never elevated itself above that level but two hours later they were still in Richie’s new hotel room, the stupid bickering cut off as they made out, Richie’s back up against the wall as Eddie pushed a knee between his legs for him to grind against, groaning hot and wet into each other’s mouths.

Richie sucked his cock, moaning every time Eddie’s fingers tugged his hair gently but firmly, swallowing every drop of precum and looking up at Eddie with hungry eyes. After, Eddie bent him over the bed and fucked him until they both came hard and shaking, muscles aching and sweat burning his eyes. They both sat on the hotel balcony afterwards so Richie could smoke, ignoring the slight chill in the air while Eddie talked about how much he liked seeing the leaves change in the fall, as if they would have a chance of getting to see this together; as if there was any opportunity where they could spend the time to see how the world changed around them instead of drifting aimlessly about as life dictated.

Then Eddie realised he was going to get home at 1 AM unless he left right away, so he did, and
woke Myra up by standing in the shower for so long his skin started to burn. After that he crawled into bed beside her and stared at the wall until his eyes ached from lack of sleep, all while he stayed stubbornly awake.

They wouldn’t meet up again for a couple of months; by the time they did, winter was setting in and the first snow was starting to appear in New York. Eddie walked through the slush from the subway to an apartment block Richie had told him about. The sky and the clouds were an absolutely uniform shade of white-grey, the same colour as the snow drifting down, turning the city into a fog of unclear shapes and abstract suggestions of buildings. It was like walking through a badly remembered dream of a city.

The apartment turned out to be a small but nice loft in a fairly expensive building that had a good view and a nice deli next door. Eddie asked whose it was.

“Mine, for now,” Richie said. “I’m shooting in New York for a couple of months, so I had to find somewhere to stay.”

“I thought you didn’t want to do the show,” Eddie said.

“What, and deprive the people of this face?” Richie said. “C’mon.”
we nearly drowned/for such a silly thing

Chapter Notes

chapter title is Old Friend by Mitski

Richie’s manager had been pissed after the party had been a bust; he’d called the next morning, waking Richie up from a bad alcohol-induced sleep into a worse hangover. Half hanging off the edge of the bed, enshrined in his sheets like he’d been trying to cocoon himself into something a little more palatable to his own senses, Richie slapped around the bed trying to find his phone and answered it with a bleary grunt of acknowledgement.

“Are you trying to kill me?” Was the shout down the phone.

“Jason?” Richie said, rubbing his eyes to try and make himself wake up a little, his head throbbing.

“Yeah, Rich. Why the fuck did you run out on the party? What happened to the talks about making a good impression?”

“Oh, Jesus. It just wasn’t my scene, ok? If anything, me being there was going to blow everything because Dreschler was going to take one look at me getting wasted on fruit punch and trying to hit on his wife and throw me out into the street.”

Jason sighed very long and hard, to the point where Richie thought he could feel it through the phone. He held it away from his ear for the duration, wincing painfully.

“Ok, well, even without your help, it’s fine. Dreschler still wants to produce the show.”

Richie murmured noncommittally and dragged himself out of bed, shambling across the room to stand on the balcony with a sheet wrapped around himself and smoke a cigarette.

“I don’t know if I want to do the show, Jason,” he said.

“Jesus, Rich, are you allergic to earning money? I know the shoot on the last show was hard, but look. This time it’s gonna be great. You’ll be in New York instead and--”

“New York?”

“Yeah, Dreschler wants you to work with his production company in New York.”

Richie took a drag on his cigarette and stared out over the cityscape.

“Ok,” he said.

A couple of months later and Richie was standing in his new freshly rented apartment with Eddie and showing him around the small space, knowing that they were going to be living only hours apart for the next few months. Neither of them said anything about it, but Richie felt a quiet thrill anyway, like two kids passing secret notes in class.

Eddie looked around the apartment, hands in his jacket pockets, nodding as if he was surveying the
building for his insurance firm.

“So now I gotta put up with you all the time?” Eddie said.

“You sound that grateful about it and I might go thinking you like me,” Richie said.

“Don’t want that.”

“Of course not.”

They got lunch for the first of many times in the deli down the street.

The next three months went like this:

Richie would film most weekdays, which was frustrating and hard and often not rewarding, but they’d signed a contract saying thirteen episodes of his stupid show so they had to film thirteen stupid fucking episodes, bouncing between stand up, man on the street interviews, and staged segments, and sometimes it was fun and often it was exhausting. The showrunner insisted on calling him Ricky, and Richie hated his guts so much he wouldn’t have minded seeing him get hit by a bus. By the end of every day he was tired and demoralised, desperate to get off the set and get out to a huge city that was alien to him but had one vital spot of life within it.

But at least once every week Richie and Eddie would see each other and that helped. It helped make the vast coldness of New York seem less inhospitable and unknown and more like somewhere you could live. It helped make Richie feel like there was someone who actually knew him, knew him more than the staff who scurried around in a blaze of constant activity and saw him as liability, prop, and star all at once. Being with Eddie -- whether it was sitting in a restaurant or walking around the city drinking coffee to try and stop their hands freezing off, or being held in his arms and getting fucked slow and sweet -- was the best and most sane Richie ever felt. It made everything feel like there was suddenly a point to what he was doing.

In two months, Eddie would never stay at Richie’s place overnight. He always vanished before it got too late, always with an expression like he was being frogmarched out of the apartment and into war. Neither of them ever talked about it, because it was there was nothing to discuss. Nothing that would have helped, or changed the situation. Their mutual tight-lipped silence was probably what made it so difficult to even imagine broaching the topic. It was like they had inadvertently made a vow of silence.

Sometimes Richie dreamed that he was waking up Eddie’s arms and the reality of it made him feel like he was going to go insane; there was that sensation again, of being so perilously close to something, closer than ever, that was harder to deal with than it being impossible. Three weeks into filming Richie thought, for the first time, that he couldn’t deal with this forever. And then he thought about how it wouldn’t be forever; it really would only be a few months, and that was even bleaker and more hopeless than his last thought.

He spent a lot of time in between work lying in bed and smoking, not doing anything but thinking about shit he didn’t want to think about and, for the first time in a while, trying to write some of his own material. The more of other people’s material he read the more he felt like he was just lying; and before he’d never had an issue with that, but he was starting to pay attention to how much he lied in his life and it was mounting up more than he necessarily liked. But in the end, everything he wrote had a vein of dark humour to it that he didn’t really find funny or recognise as being him either.

He kept thinking, also, about his childhood. He couldn’t remember that much but the image of his
childhood self was reoccurring in his brain far too often, a constant reminder of how far he’d come and how little he’d changed. One night he attempted to use Facebook to find the rest of the group, the ones that he and Eddie mutually only half recalled, but it didn’t work. Bill obviously only had a public fanpage and staring at the professional, glossy photograph evoked no real response in Richie other than a distant, uncomfortable memory. Nothing came up for Mike and no one he recognised appeared for Ben, and he realised he couldn’t remember Stan or Beverley’s last names. After a while, he gave up.

They were in a comedy club, watching a new comedian that Richie heard was good and wanted to check out, an explanation that Eddie had, oddly, been charmed by despite his open disdain for Richie’s comedy. The room was dimly lit, Richie and Eddie sitting out of sight at a table. For a little while, Richie leant his head back on Eddie’s shoulder as he took notes and let the quiet comfort of the night roll over them.

Eddie’s phone rang and he glanced at it before giving a panicked, apologetic smile and slipping out of Richie’s grip and out of the room. It would have been very easy to wait for Eddie to get back; history would suggest that he was never more than a few minutes, and then he would return, awkward and avoiding the subject, and they would be able to ease back into the normal conversation without too many hiccups. That was how things went.

Richie got up from the table too and followed Eddie out of the club and into a quiet corridor by the coat check. Eddie picked up on his footsteps and swiveled, phone to his ear, to look at him. His eyes were wide with startled fear, and he moved backwards, away from Richie, and closer to the exit. Richie leaned on the wall next to the door into the club and stared at him silently.

“Well, it’s not my decision where and when the meetings get to be held. I just have to go along and do my…” Eddie was saying, his face screwed up into a look of extreme discomfort.

“At your position you should be allowed to make these kinds of calls, Eddie,” a woman’s voice said over the line. “I don’t like you being out this much on your own. It’s not safe.”

“Jesus Christ,” Richie said.

“I really… I have to go now, I have to get back to work,” Eddie said. “Goodbye, I’ll talk to you later.”

“Aren’t you forgetting something?” The voice said.

“I love you, honey,” Eddie said, watching Richie’s face with an expression of almost exquisite terror. “Goodbye.”

He hung up and then shoved the phone back into his pocket like hiding that would hide all the evidence of everything that just happened. Richie raised his eyebrows and waited for Eddie to say something. Eddie opened and closed his mouth a few times, but the words never came and the silence was becoming too long and too uncomfortable for Richie to bear.

“I knew,” he said. “You’re not really that hot on hiding secrets, Eduardo. I’m surprised she hasn’t found out about me yet. Unless she has, and she doesn’t care. I mean, everyone needs hobbies, right?”

He could hear his own tone and it was losing all of its good humour like a punctured tire leaking air.

“You’re not a hobby, you’re a full time job,” Eddie said.
“Then why are you only doing part-time hours?” Richie said.

The silence was decidedly more frosty. Eddie was struggling, clearly, grasping at whatever it was he wanted to say, but Richie decided he didn’t want to hear it and turned, headed back into the club to catch the rest of the show. He wasn’t entirely sure if Eddie was going to follow him, made the move not considering how absolutely dogshit he would feel if this was the note they ended things on. He was already feeling the prickle of nervous sweat on the back of his neck when Eddie did arrive, a few minutes later, sliding into the seat beside him. Neither of them spoke or really looked at each other, just watched the end of the performance. Richie found it hard to laugh.

When the show the comedian on stage spotted Richie and came over, and he was forced into playing nice for a little while, encouraging her and trying to rack his brains for some kind of notes that sounded coherent and helpful while Eddie sat in uncomfortable silence, other than to politely say he thought it was funny. It was obvious to Richie that Eddie was stewing in his own thoughts; he was almost trembling, sitting there in the dark, not staring at Richie in a way that might be pointed or might have just been discomfort. By the time they left and got outside into the frosty night, there was no anger inside Richie.

“Do you wanna get a drink, or do you have to go?” Richie asked, as if nothing had happened. Eddie’s frantic energy was making him vibrate like an engine about to explode. Richie waited impatiently for him to finally speak.

“Are you mad at me?” Eddie said, sounding almost child-like in his confusion.

“No. Like I said, bro, I knew you were married a long time ago.”

Eddie gestured helplessly. He was stranded in the impassive tone Richie had adopted, unable to defend himself, or to really fight back, either. As Eddie’s voice got louder and more stressed, his encroaching migraine almost visible in how he talked, Richie’s voice got lower and more mumbled, his eyes averted from Eddie entirely. They were coming at the argument from two sides; the boy who never got listened to no matter how loud he shouted and the boy who couldn’t say what he meant.

“What do you want me to do, Eddie, get down on my knees and beg?” Richie said. “Cus I’m not gonna do that. You started fucking me knowing you were married so, obviously, it doesn’t bother you. Why would I waste my time?”

“Doesn’t bother me? Fuck you, Rich. If you knew I was married, then you knew what you were getting into as well. So, clearly it doesn’t bother you!”

“Yeah, well, guess I’m just a glutton for punishment.”

“What the fuck does… Why are you acting like this?”

“How am I supposed to act? I don’t get why you’re upset, man, you get to have everything you want! I suck your dick, we get dinner, and then you get to go home to your wife every night. What do you have to complain about?”

“You’re not being fair.”

“Eds, if I asked you right now, if you would leave your wife for me, would you do it?”

Eddie stared back, frustration making him tear up, but no quick, easy retort spilling out. They both knew the answer. Richie shrugged.
“That’s why I didn’t ask. See you, Eddie.”

Richie started to walk away, but Eddie called after him and he stopped after just a few steps away, standing on the edge of the curb.

“Can you tell me something?” He said. “Are you happy?”

Eddie looked at him like he’d just asked if the world was flat.

“What are you… I’m a grown-up, Richie, no one gets to be happy all the time,” Eddie said, like it was a self-evident truth of the universe.

“Yeah, I guess the fuck not. Call me if you change your mind.”

Richie did walk away, and Eddie didn’t yell after him this time.
There was an easy answer to the question of why Eddie married Myra; because he felt like he was supposed to. He would not phrase it in those terms himself, but he knew, more consciously than he would ever admit that he had married her for the same reason that he turned up for work every day: because he was scared of what it would mean if he did not.

Eddie was a scared person. And so was Myra; they existed in a mutual state of panicked anxiety and paranoia, waiting for the worst to happen. It manifested in shockingly similar ways in them; they had the same indignant outbursts of rage at people who encroached too far over the boundaries they had set up tight around them, like overactive guard dogs that only had one response to danger but saw danger everywhere. They fought constantly, with other people and each other.

They had been fighting on and off all day. Myra said she wanted a vacation, Eddie did not. They argued about where they could possibly go, if they did. Eddie got angry because he was scared of planes, even if he had never been on one. Myra thought he was being unreasonable. They argued about flight statistics they both only half remembered. They argued because Eddie thought Myra should be using the other credit card. They argued because they were guard dogs who knew something was wrong and couldn’t stop sounding off their warning calls without being able to admit what was wrong was each other.

The question was stuck in Eddie’s head like a seed stuck between two teeth. Obsessively he probed at it, angry because he was unable to get it out. The thing that horrified him the most was that there was no good, easy answer. It wasn’t that he hadn’t satisfied Richie with it -- Richie had accepted it as a simple truth -- it was that he hadn’t satisfied himself. It felt like something that was objectively true, but even saying that was awful.

He couldn’t summon up the strength to call Richie for a couple of days, picking up the phone several times a day but never managing to actually punch in the number. Looking back over their texts from the times they’d been apart over the last few months of their not-relationship was painful enough. Eddie had always intended to delete anything that was overly incriminating, out of fear of Myra going through his phone, which was a not infrequent event when she’d decided it was more convenient than finding her own, or she needed to check something, or one of many million reasons. It had never in the past been an issue. Eddie had never before had anything to hide, and now that he did, he couldn’t bring himself to actually go through what was necessary to hide them. Deleting all the texts from Richie that shone through with barely concealed affection would have been asking too much of him; he had so few symbols of their relationship, either as adults or as children. He didn’t want to lose what he did have.

The time Richie had left in New York was running out, and Eddie knew he had to make the call before time ran out completely. The question kept worrying at him and the lack of an answer was paralyzing. He was a deer in the headlights staring down at his oncoming future and he was about
to let it completely flatten him because he was too scared to leap out of the way.

It was the last fucking minute that he ended up picking up the phone, after a long day of fighting with Myra and knowing that the chances of Richie and Eddie meeting up were dwindling rapidly, and he was kicking himself about it. If he’d picked it up the day after, they’d have weeks more. But now there was barely a few days, because he’d thrown it all away.

Eddie made the phone call from the guest bathroom, sitting on the edge of the bath with the door locked and his voice hushed to try and reduce the chances of being heard. He wasn’t sure Richie was even going to answer when he made the call or if he’d just get ignored. Maybe he would have deserved that; it wasn’t like he couldn’t understand why Richie was mad at him, even if he would have really, really liked to be completely in the right and have nothing to answer for.

But Richie did answer, and hearing his voice again made Eddie scramble in his jacket for his inhaler, like his body was already trying to reject this conversation.

“Hey,” he said.

“Hey,” Richie said. “Thought you lost my number.”

Eddie put the pump in his mouth and took a hit. Richie sighed over the phone.

“C’mon, man,” Richie said.

“What do you want me to do, Richie? Just die?”

“You’re gonna die when you’re eighty-seven from a Tums overdose and we both know it. So, what’s up, man?”

The calm, distanced tone made it harder. It was easier to argue when they were both wound up and shooting insults back and forth. Now the tension made it impossible for Eddie to relax, and the longer they went with no one talking, the harder it was to say anything.

“You’re going back to LA soon, huh?” Eddie said.

“Yeah. Been packing everything up.”

“Do you… Do you want to go out and get one last drink, or…”

Richie exhaled softly and Eddie closed his eyes, thinking about the times Richie had breathed soft and warm on the crook of his neck while they lay so tangled together, they might have been the Gordian knot.

“Will Mrs Kaspbrak be joining us?” Richie said.

“That’s not fucking funny.”

“Because some stuff isn’t fucking funny, Richie!” Eddie knew he was being unreasonable on some level, but the pieces weren’t quite fitting together to let him admit it, and he couldn’t stop thinking about that face Myra made when they argued and she was trying not to cry, where she’d fan at her face and look up at the ceiling and the strain in her voice that always made him grind to a halt no matter how right he was, and he couldn’t stop thinking about his mother doing the same thing, and he couldn’t stop thinking about the performance of her outrage, and he was looking at himself in
the mirror and he could see he was starting to cry too.

“If anything, I should be the one who’s upset, and I think it’s hilarious. Why are you being so defensive?”

“Because you -- you don’t understand, okay? You’re not married. You don’t know what it’s like trying to make a marriage work. Sometimes you have problems.”

“And I’m a problem.”

“I didn’t say that, don’t put words in my mouth!”

“What am I, then?”

There was a knock on the bathroom door and Eddie jerked his head violently to the side, catching the edge of the shower curtain and splattering water all over himself. Myra’s plaintive voice came through the wood of the door, curious and concerned.

“Eddie darling, you’ve been in there for a long time. Are you ok?”

“I-I’m fine, honey,” Eddie said back, wincing his eyes shut.

“’I’m ok Mommy, I’m just going to play at Bill’s house’,” Richie said, mockingly.

“Fuck you,” Eddie hissed, his voice low so he wouldn’t be overheard. “You’re acting all high and mighty, like you don’t have any problems.”

“At least I’m not lying to my fuckin’ wife--”

“No, you’re lying to everyone else.”

“What did you say?”

“How many people know you’re gay?”

If a man was submerged in the silence that followed, he would have frozen solid faster than if he was dropped into the Arctic ocean. Eddie could feel every cell in his body experiencing an individual slow death as it was starved of oxygen. Myra knocked on the door again and asked if Eddie was talking to someone. She sounded more confused now, rattling the door handle experimentally but the lock was shut fast and it didn’t matter, because she was a hundred, thousand miles away from Eddie, who was adrift somewhere vast, cold and desolate.

“I’m sorry,” Eddie gasped, desperate not to drown in the silence they were both stranded in like escapees from the Titanic.

“Don’t be,” Richie said. “Now you’ve got one less problem.”

“Rich, no, please, I don’t want to forget all this again…”

“Yeah, well, I wish I fuckin’ could.”

The line went dead. Eddie pressed the phone against his forehead and seethed, his frustration making his entire body shake with hypothermic shock. He wished there was something he could say now, but even if he thought of the perfect words, there was no one to say them to. Myra rattled the door handle again and he was filled with the need to scream; that he needed some fucking peace and quiet, needed some space, but when he opened his mouth no sound came out. All he
could do was make a thin wheeze, his breath hitching around an imaginary obstacle, lungs not cooperating. When he closed his eyes he could see a long tunnel with one single eye of light, where he could hear the sound of water and for some reason he didn’t understand, this filled him fear.

“Why won’t you answer me?” Myra said.

“I’m fine!” He said. “I just need a fucking minute!”

“I don’t like it when you swear at me, Eddie. I’m just trying to help you.”

He put his head in his hands. He thought about calling Richie back; if he called Richie right now and apologised, maybe there was a chance. Eddie could see he was on the brink of being able to fix all of this; he had time to go to Richie’s apartment. All he had to do was explain to Myra that he was going out. His fingers flexed around the phone as he thought about it, tight on the glass and metal.

He thought about it. About speeding across the city and banging on Richie’s door until Richie opened up and then kissing him, kissing him and saying sorry and holding him. He would sleep in Richie’s bed that night and wake up with their arms intertwined and he would never leave. The warmth of that -- the feeling of the sheets under his cheek, the blankets wrapped around them, soft sound of the blinds rattling in the morning air, Richie’s eyes moving under the lids as he dreamed, safe in Eddie’s arms -- it felt more real than Eddie’s childhood memories.

Eddie stood up and opened the bathroom door, where Myra was standing, her hands clutching at each other in an extravagant show of distress. All he had to say was that he was leaving. Two words. He could explain later, and he knew it was unfair, knew it would make him look bad, but it would be that simple. It would be that simple to be free.

When Eddie had been eighteen he finished high school, graduated with honours, and got into his college of choice. The day he needed to leave for college, his mother, who had never accepted that he would leave eventually, had planted herself firmly in his way and told him he would not go.

“What’s going on?” Myra said.

Eddie wished he could say he hadn’t listened to his mother.

“Nothing,” he said. “I just had an argument on the phone with a guy I used to go to school with.”

Myra looked bewildered. He searched her eyes for some memory of the conversation they’d had months ago, when he’d first showed her the poster for Richie’s tour, but she showed no recollection.

“Don’t worry about it. I’m not going to see him again,” Eddie said. “He was always an asshole.”

Neither of them looked all that happy to hear that; Myra looked at him suspiciously, scrutinising his face for any sign of hidden intent, and Eddie couldn’t believe he was just saying the words as if it were really all that simple. It didn’t matter, really. No one would correct him on how the situation ‘really’ was; he was the only one who knew and once he forgot, it would all be gone again. Like the memories of his childhood, everything that had happened was just as fleeting and unimportant. He settled down in a chair in the living room and ignored the TV in favour of watching the sun sink low behind the New York skyline.
A few months later, as Eddie peeled his face off the airbag in his car, he listened as Mike Hanlon told him he needed to go back to Derry. Eddie agreed to go immediately; agreed because the scar on the palm of his hand was starting to itch and that uncomfortable prickling feeling at the back of his mind was telling him something was up and he needed to finally find out why, and he had to see everyone else again because they would all be there and then a few days after that Eddie Kaspbrak was dead.

Chapter End Notes

and here ends part one -- part two will follow hopefully within the next couple of weeks

check out my twitter @rorschachisgay if you want to keep up with me and the fic writing or my art/writing twitter @rantshemlock if you want to read movie reviews
“We have five more shows booked for you; you can’t just go!” Jason said, watching in increasingly frantic alarm as Richie slammed his suitcases into his car.

“Some shit is more important than stand-up,” Richie said, forcing the trunk shut.

“Fuck the stand-up! What about all the money we’re going to lose? Do you understand what goes into booking a show? Do you realise how many refunds we’re going to have to pay?” Jason was growing paler by the second, his eyes on the brink of bulging right out of his skull. “Half of these venues are never going to want to work with us again!”

“Jason, am I the manager? No. You’re the manager. So, fucking… Manage this!” Richie threw the driver’s door open and climbed behind the wheel. “I have to fucking go, man, I gotta get from Boston to Derry by tonight.”

“Derry? Where the fuck is Derry?”

“Maine!”

Richie slammed the door closed and turned the keys in the engine. Jason smacked his hand against the glass until Richie rolled the window down and Jason flailed helplessly, so outraged that he couldn’t string a sentence together that would fully capture the scale of atrocities being committed. Richie stared at him balefully.

“You are fucking me here, Rich. You are really, really fucking me here. And for what? Why the fuck is this important?” Jason said. “You can’t even goddamn tell me what’s happening!”

“Honestly, Jace, I don’t really remember,” Richie said.

“What?”

Too late; Jason had to jump away from Richie’s car as it took off out of the hotel parking lot and hit the road at about fifteen miles over the speed limit. He had one glance at the fading form of his manager in the rear-view mirror before he had to focus on the road and Jason was ripped out of his sight. It occurred to him that that could very well be the last time they ever saw each other; the idea sprung into his head fully formed without any apparent reasoning and when Richie tried to interrogate it, he couldn’t really explain. He couldn’t really explain why he’d thrown up either, or the crushing feeling of dread that weighed on him every time he thought about Derry. He’d thought he had known; he could remember sitting in the bar with Eddie almost half a year ago and having the image thrust on him then of a huge, ugly spider hanging over Derry and over himself. At the time, he’d thought he understood why he felt like that, but now he was second-guessing himself. There was always something else in his memory that he couldn’t recall that haunted him, that his mind had closed off presumably for his own good. He’d read about repressed memory. He knew why the mind did that kind of thing. Richie wasn’t sure if he wanted to find out why, but he also didn’t think he had any choice.

It was a long drive to Derry, heading into a landscape that looked steadily more and more familiar. Richie didn’t stop the whole way, just watched as the world around him was peeled away to unveil what lay beneath it all. It was like watching years and years of wallpaper and plaster get removed,
the stone underneath finally exposed to the harsh light of day. He felt raw, as if along with the world’s layers being stripped away layers of him were being stripped away with it, revealing the scared little boy that had packed up and left Derry thirty years ago.

By the time he was crossing the WELCOME TO DERRY! sign, night had fallen, and Richie felt like his body was frozen into the shape of his seat. The thought that this was just a fucking stupid thing to do had never strayed from his mind, but Mike’s voice urging him to come back burned brighter. The scar on his hand, something he had thought about exactly once in the last twenty-odd years, was burning on his palm as fresh as the first time he’d done it and it called him back home.

He was convinced that the town must have changed in the time he’d been away; it had been such a long time and the world was so different now that he was sure Derry would be almost unrecognisable by now. It had to be. Even a small town as trapped in its own history as his hometown had to change, had to adjust and grow.

As much as he wanted that, it wasn’t what Richie got. When he drove past his childhood home, the squat little two-story house with its white wood front and the big tree in the yard he’d fallen out of a dozen times, it looked like it did the day he’d walked out to go to college. The only real difference was that his father’s beige Chrysler with the mismatched rear door was no longer in the drive, long since gone to the scrapyard in the sky. Richie didn’t linger.

The rest of the town was no better. Every street was decorated with memory; the old movie theatre they’d all loved, Mr Williamson’s store on the corner was somehow still operating, Derry High peeked out from a long way down the road like an omen of ill portent on the horizon. The longer he drove, the more he could see that he knew; and he knew it in the way only a person who had grown up in that town could know it. Any stranger could make a guess that he’d crossed the kissing bridge a hundred times; only Richie could point out the letters he’d carved into it, years and years ago.

Remembering that made his body tense up painfully. Jesus Christ. He’d been thirteen when he’d done that, less than half his age now. Thirty fucking years and he hadn’t changed. He hadn’t changed at all.

Richie still felt sick when he pulled into the parking lot of the Chinese restaurant but when he looked over and saw a woman who could only be Beverly – Beverly Marsh with her cigarettes and her generosity and all her bravery – hugging a man who would, against all the odds end up being Ben – Ben Hanscom with his quiet intelligence and his unshakeable dependability – he was at peace. These were his friends, best friends he’d ever had, and no matter how distant he’d become or how much he kept locked up in the secret places inside himself, he would always love them.

Bill – Bill Denbrough, serious and mournful and carrying an intensity and sadness Richie both feared and respected – and Mike – Mike Hanlon, observant and intelligent and filled with determination – were waiting inside, too. People Richie respected and loved, would once have driven his bike right off a bridge for if they’d only asked him to. And then…

Then he saw Eddie and when their eyes met all the feelings came back. God, it would have been nice for him to be able to say he was over it, to feel nothing at all when they looked at each other and carry on the meal as just old friends. But it wasn’t possible to switch off the part of himself that loved Eddie; he had R + E carved into his soul, and he could feel the edges of it inside him every time he breathed.
There never seemed to be anyone working at the bar, or at the front desk for that matter, so Richie took it upon himself to get a drink. He walked behind the bar to check the shelving and found a bottle of whiskey that he vaguely remembered drinking before and finding acceptable and poured himself a finger. He was taking a drink when Beverly walked inside and sat down on one of the barstools opposite him.

“Pour me one,” she said.

He obliged, watching her silently as she took the glass and threw it back in one go. When she placed the glass back down on the countertop, she raised her eyebrows like she was inviting a comment. Richie nursed his drink and didn’t say anything.

“What is it?” She said, eventually.

“Kind of a lot to drop on us,” Richie said. “You been holding onto that stuff this whole time?”

“Have you?” Beverly challenged.

“No. No, I forgot everything.”

“Mike… He knows what he’s doing. We’ll go out with him tomorrow; he’ll help us figure out what to do. Right now, all we can do is get some rest.”

Richie stared at her and gestured a hand to show that both of them were sitting around drinking and not, in fact, getting any rest. Bev shrugged delicately and held out her glass for another drink. Richie poured her a generous one and topped off his own.

“You want a smoke?” He said.

“Please.”

The two of them took their glasses onto the porch of the Derry Town House and sat on the bench. It was a quiet street, and other than the row of their cars opposite, there wasn’t traffic anywhere near. No one was walking by this time of night. Richie, used to living in huge cities, let himself take in the quiet as he lit cigarettes for Beverly and himself, handing one to her. She took a long drag.

“So, you and Bill, huh?” He said.

Beverly snorted and shook her head.

“There is no ‘me and Bill’. We’re both married.”

“How’s that going for you? You’ve been awful quiet about it.”

Beverly sipped her drink and didn’t meet Richie’s eyes. He nodded slowly.

“That good, huh?”

“Can you keep a secret?” She said.

“Probably not, but if I put it in my act, you can sue me.”

“Well, Eddie said you don’t write your own material, so I know it won’t.” Beverly leaned back on the bench, looking up at the dark, cloudy sky. “Honestly, I don’t think I have a husband to go back to.”
“And is that a good thing or a bad thing?” Richie said.

“I hit him with a photo frame. Two, actually.”

“Jesus, Bev. I’m guessing he deserved it.”

“Yes.”

“Well then… Atta girl.”

Richie put an arm across the back of the bench and Beverly leaned her head on his shoulder. She patted him on the knee. He wasn’t looking at her face, but he could sense, somehow, that she was trying not to cry. He rubbed her gently on the shoulder, the two of them taking in the cold breeze rolling in off the road. Somewhere in the far distance, a dog howled. Derry at night was less familiar to him; the memories that were rapidly beginning to file into place in his mind were of a dozen sun-soaked summers, winters piled high with snow just waiting for the destructive energy of a handful of small boys, riding through the town streets as their bike wheels slipped through puddles. Not many memories were of the town quiet, empty and dark, lights too distant to stop there from being large pools of dark in the spaces between.

Beverly lifted her head again after a moment, smiling distantly. She took another drink and sighed before she looked at Richie with a carefully scrutinising eye. He stared back at her, taking a drag on the cigarette.

“What about you?” She said.

“What about me?”

“What’s going on with you and Eddie?”

The question stole the breath out of Richie’s lungs. He didn’t think anyone had noticed. He sat there with his mouth hanging open as Beverly watched him struggle to think of anything to say that wasn’t immediately incriminating, which wasn’t helped at all by the drinks he’d been putting away all night.

“What are you talking about?” He said.

“You couldn’t stay away from each other all night.”

“Old habits die hard, I guess. We were always like that, following each other around fighting about anything we could. It’s like it was my life’s goal to drive him crazy.”

“Did he always look at you like this?” Beverly made a pathetic puppy-dog face, stretching her eyes wide and making her mouth pout tragically. Richie shoved her gently away from him, pulling a disgusted face that made her laugh.

“You’re making shit up,” he said.

“I’m really not.” Beverly flicked her cigarette butt into the bushes. “Have you two met up before now?”

“What makes you say that?”

“When I saw you at first it was like… For a little while, I didn’t know who you were. But it was like the moment you saw Eddie…”
“Uh… Yeah. We did. I was on tour in New York. We ran into each other.” Richie glanced at her and then away, fidgeting with his glass.

“You don’t sound happy about it,” Bev said.

“We didn’t get on.”

“You never get on.”

“He’s an asshole!”

“You’re both assholes.”

Beverly was laughing and Richie couldn’t decide if he found it funny or not. She didn’t know everything, or even half of it, so he couldn’t hold it against her, but he still didn’t want to joke about it. It felt too much like laughing with a gaping knife wound in your face; how was he supposed to smile without it tearing open?

“Forget me and Eddie, what about you and Ben?” Richie said. “Talk about puppy dog eyes. The man looks like he’s carved out of marble and he still can’t stop following you around like a baby duckling.”

“Ben?” Beverly said, her eyes wide and her face a mask of amused confusion. “What are you talking about?”

“Oh my God, Bev.”

“What??”

“Oh my God, you can’t be this clueless.”

“Richie!”

“I’m going to bed. I’m somehow not drunk enough for this.”

Richie got up, shook his head to clear out the cobwebs and walked around to the door. Beverly grabbed his forearm to stop him, looking up at him with a sympathetic smile that made him want to crawl under his own overpriced car and die. He didn’t want sympathy; he didn’t want to be perceived as needing sympathy. He wanted to be an unwavering wall with everyone on the outside laughing when he made them and everything inside quiet and locked away.

“You are ok, right?” Beverly said.

“We’re all about to get killed by a killer clown any day now, so I’ve been better,” he said. She shook her head and didn’t really smile, and he walked back inside the hotel.

Getting out of the house and away from Myra had been an expectedly huge ordeal. She had been on the verge of hysteria the second she’d seen his car with the horrible new dent in the front bumper and his assertion that he had to go and he had to go now because it would take probably eight hours to get to Derry made her instantly snap. She had not wanted him to go and he could understand why; as many difficulties as they always had, understanding why Myra felt the way she did had never been one of Eddie’s problems.
“Are you in trouble? Why won’t you tell me?” Had been her repeated cry as Eddie pulled himself out of her grasp, throwing bags filled with any random crap he’d been able to grab into the back of his SUV.

He couldn’t tell her, of course. He didn’t understand it himself, the idea he’d be able to explain it to anyone else was ludicrous. All he could do was frantically try to get ready for the trip ahead, knowing he was undertaking something bigger than it seemed. His memory was still filled with blocks and trap doors that wouldn’t let him proceed all the way, and that was probably for the best. If he knew the full truth, he might never have sucked up the courage to leave.

It was scary enough, knowing there were consequences for what he was doing, and that Myra might never forgive him after he slammed the car door in her face and sped off down the drive without looking back. Sitting in the car heading north out of New York state, he realised he might not have a wife to go back to after this and couldn’t decide if that was scary or thrilling. He thought again about his mother, and how she’d wielded the threat of him never being able to come back if he walked out the house, and how he’d done it anyway. She’d been lying about that, just like she had been about a lot of things in his life.

There was a lot on his mind when he pulled up outside the Chinese restaurant and bailed out to go and face the music. Somehow, he hadn’t even been thinking about having to see Richie again. It was so easy to fall back into the old routine with people he knew and loved profoundly that he almost forgot all about it anyway; almost, until he looked Richie in the eye in the silence between sentences and it was like getting sucker-punched with longing all over again. He couldn’t really tell if Richie was thinking the same and the possibility made his chest ache. He’d fucked it, and he was only going to survive if he somehow managed to never be alone in a room with Richie ever again.

He’d been running on the assumption that it was permanently fucked when he ran into Ben outside his room, right before he turned in for the night, after Beverly had dropped a huge and very horrible bombshell on them all. Eddie hadn’t really decided if he was ok with the idea that they were all for sure, for definite going to die, either now or very soon. He was muddling over the idea that Beverly could probably tell him how he died if he wanted to ask her when Ben called his name.

It was extremely obnoxious that Ben was so wildly attractive now. He really was the only one of them who looked like he’d aged backwards, though Beverly and Mike also looked irritatingly beautiful. It was making Eddie, in his slouchy hoodies and worried mouth, feel a little insecure.

“Are you ok?” Ben said.

“Not… Really, Ben,” Eddie said. “I’m a little preoccupied by the idea I might die horribly any minute now.”

“It’s a lot, I know.”

“Yeah. Are you ok?”

Ben shrugged. “I’m… Dealing, I guess. It’s really, really good to see you all again.”

“Yeah… You too, man.”

Eddie leaned on the door to his room, hand resting on the handle like he needed the chance to make good his escape at a moment’s notice while Ben stood in the hall, hands shoved deep into his pockets. Ben was very clearly trying to work out how to bring something up and Eddie watched him with narrowed eyes, trying to beam the idea into his mind that actually, it was a bad idea to
bring it up and no, they didn’t need to talk about it. Unfortunately, Eddie’s lack of psychic powers failed him again.

“Are you and Richie… Alright?” Ben said, his voice wandering up and down as he tried to approach the question as delicately as he could.


They stared at each other in silence.

“It’s just that… The two of you…” Ben said.

“The two of us what?”

Ben pulled a face, glancing away awkwardly. Eddie sighed with his entire body, sagging against the door.

“I don’t know. Maybe I’m seeing stuff,” Ben said. “I just wanted to know if everything was alright. It felt like… I dunno.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know, man, don’t bite my head off.” Ben held his hands up in defeat. “Just every time I looked at the two of you it was like you were going to explode.”

“Well, it’s fine. There’s nothing wrong. What’s wrong with you?”

“What?”

“I don’t know. I’ll see you in the morning.”

Eddie was about to turn in when there was a creak on the stairs. Both he and Ben whipped around to face the intruder and saw Richie frozen at the top of the stairs, staring back at them with some concern about the distinct poses of rigid alarm he was faced with. Ben slunk down the hallway towards his room, mumbling a goodnight and throwing a nervous glance over his shoulder as Richie slowly climbed up the final few stairs.

He walked over to the door to his room which, by the cruel hand of fate, was the one right next door to Eddie’s. He didn’t look at Eddie while he tried to twist his key in the lock, but it was obvious his ears were burning under the curls of his hair. The key jammed and he sighed loudly – in the pause his eyes slipped over and the two of them locked into an awkward gaze.

“If you can’t get into your room, you can stay in mine,” Eddie said. A loud screaming noise of horror began playing in his head more or less the exact second he started to say it, but it was too late to take it back.

“That would be a first,” Richie said, looking at the key like he was worried he’d missed something that would magically make it work again.

“Yeah, it would.”

Richie finally looked at him, and his expression was not happy. Eddie had been hoping maybe it would be, like the restaurant had been, easy to slip back into the usual way of things. But without an audience, Richie was unusually reticent, and Eddie wasn’t convinced he was going to turn this around. He twisted the door handle to his own room a few times as he tried to think of anything to
“Myra really didn’t want me to leave this morning,” he said. “I’ve never walked out on her like that before.”

“Yeah, you haven’t.”

“Fuck you, ok? I’m sorry. I really wanted to just… Make things better. I don’t want to only see you every six months.”

“Look, man, it was your choice.”

“My choice? I called you that last night in New York and you hung up on—”

“No, Eds. What happened is I said, ‘come over’ and you said, ‘No, I’d rather stay with my wife’.” Richie’s imitation of Eddie was not flattering. “You got all freaked out about me even knowing about Myra, don’t pretend I’m the one making the problem when you’re acting all fuckin’ guilty.”

“You think I’m ashamed of you?”

“You’re ashamed you’re cheating on your wife, yeah.” Richie’s door popped open. “Look, we have to kill a fucking clown tomorrow, so I think I should get some sleep before we all die in a circus.”

He pushed the door open and Eddie had that same moment he’d had before; how easy it would be to chase Richie, to apologise, to kiss him and say how fucking sorry he really was. But the weight of what he would be saying had him rooted to the ground again, trapping him where he stood. The simple truth was that if he said he loved Richie, he would never be able to take it back. There would be no undoing it and the idea that he might say it now and have Richie turn a cold eye on him and still say it wasn’t enough made Eddie wither, the tiny amount of courage he could ever summon up dying on the stem like the last of the harvest, gone unnoticed.

The other horrible option that Eddie hadn't really considered was that maybe Richie just didn't want him as badly as he wanted Richie. The idea made his entire body clench in fear, and as much as he knew logically that the fear in him meant he needed to tell Richie the full truth or risk losing him entirely, Eddie still couldn't go through with it.

Richie had been right. Eddie was ashamed. But he was ashamed of himself, and the cowardice that had him locking himself inside his own room when everything he wanted was a few feet away from him. At least if he was miserable for the rest of his life, he'd know who to blame.

Over the next few days Eddie would get stabbed, stab someone, fall a little more in love watching Richie cleave a man in half with an axe, fail to save Richie, succeed in saving Richie, and then once again, at the very end, fail to save himself.

Chapter End Notes

The title is from Rain in Soho by the Mountain Goats. Updates will be episodic from now on not all at once! Part 2 is taking a while cus its very long. Im trucking on with it but there's a LOT to work through.
that i fell hard in your arms/i went and died in your arms that night

Chapter Notes

title is Arms Tonite by Mother Mother

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Every time Eddie saw Richie it was like being struck with a bolt of electricity, becoming turbocharged; his motormouth spinning out of control and lacing his words with fuck you! and shut up, asshole, his aggressiveness shooting through the roof. He hadn’t been able to stop for a moment, never could, not since they were kids. He was five beers deep in the restaurant, locking hands with Richie so they could arm-wrestle, feeling the surprising amount of strength in his friend’s arm while all the others cheered them on when the thought had struck him -- what are you trying to prove?

And he didn’t have an answer. But he knew that he had to prove something; he had been gripped since childhood with the need for him to be seen as something, something more than the weak, scrawny kid who trailed behind his friends as they all led the way and he followed, fussing and whining. He’d been bullied horribly for as long as he could remember, surrounded by bigger, stronger kids who weren’t filled with the same kind of all-consuming terror that he was. Eddie Kaspbrak had been afraid every day of his life, and he tried to hide that, through big words and fast-talk, but everyone knew. The fear and the anxiety radiated off him, and it had made him an easy target. So, the defensiveness came with that; if anyone would understand who he really was, it would be his friends, and he would show them.

All of that had been so concentrated in Richie; never was Eddie faster, more defensive, more filled with bluster and bullshit. From almost the moment they’d met the two of them bounced off each other like atoms colliding and releasing an explosion of energy. Whenever they were together it was like he was begging for Richie to notice him, somehow never growing tired of it even when they were driving each other crazy -- and they were always driving each other crazy.

But somehow it wasn’t until Richie had his hand on Eddie’s face and was telling him how many times he’d been brave that he understood. It was approval he wanted; he’d been dying the whole time for Richie’s approval. After a lifetime of being told he was small and delicate, in need of protection from any delusions of confidence that crossed his mind, someone believed in him. Not just someone, but the person he’d wanted to believe in him all along. Even though he’d forgotten about his childhood, part of him had always known that his life was missing something. For a long time he had thought that was just the fundamental problem with being alive; the constant sense that you were doing something wrong and something wasn’t working even when you were doing absolutely everything you were supposed to…

And then Richie put his hand on his face and told him he could do this and Eddie did feel like he could do it. He felt like he could do anything. Like save Richie from being killed by that stupid fucking clown. He’d seen Richie kill Henry Bowers only hours ago and had felt the same way then as he had done when he’d seen Richie raise a bat against It twenty-seven years ago; like he was about to pass out from fear but his heart was swollen with pride and envy and love for his best friend.
He was kneeling over Richie and there was a hand on the back of his neck, and he thought that he might kiss him. Damn everyone watching and damn the stupid fucking clown, they'd been apart for too long and gone through too much to stop now. Eddie knew, really actually knew he loved Richie, and he wasn't afraid of that any longer. For the first time, he looked at Richie and the idea of being in love with him filled him with an ecstatic thrill. For the first time, maybe ever, Eddie Kaspbrak was happy to be alive.

For one long moment there wasn’t anything but the two of them and the past they had shared and Richie’s hands on him again and his hands on Richie and parted lips and --

Then Richie was gone.

Things stopped making sense after that. There was pain, enormous pain, worse than when he’d broken his arm. So all-consuming that he could barely speak, spitting out the words in a haze of semi-consciousness. Sometimes Richie was there, fading in and out of his sight like a ghost, and Eddie was filled with a sense of strange calm. Somehow, he knew everything was going to be alright; whatever happened, he was certain his friends would fix it all. He couldn’t even really say where his confidence came from, his vision only filled with incoherent images of his friends and things so nightmarish they shouldn’t have had cause to exist, the tears on Richie’s face glimmering in the strange deadlights the only constant in Eddie’s new shattered, dreamlike world.

Then everything was gone. The cold, the pain, the heat of his own blood, his friends, Richie, the monster, the sewers… There was nothing.

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He was in school. It was both a dream and a memory; he was a man, but the halls and walls were as huge as they’d seemed as a child, the world around him locked into that perspective. Around him, kids who were impossibly bigger and stronger buffeted him as they walked through the halls, ghosts of ghosts, only smudges to indicate that there was a person there at all. It was hard for him to keep his place as the ghosts pushed by, almost dragging him down in their thoughtless path. The world wavered around him; that ugly mural the seniors had done in his first year was splashed over the wall by the gym, cartoonishly inept colours and figures contorting in what was meant to be a cheer but looked like -- Richie’s voice ringing in his head as clearly as if they were standing side by side -- some kind of fucked-up mutant orgy. Mr Bishop’s classroom had that huge crack in the door from the time Bowers had ‘accidentally’ kicked it. Trophies sat in the display cases, polished and glittering in the strange sourceless light that was all around him.

Where was Richie? Where was anyone? Eddie hadn’t been alone in this school for a moment, and yet there was no one he recognised to be found. He took the path he was familiar with, turning his back to the gym and walking against the tide of ghosts. At the end of the corridor, he took a turn, heading deeper into the school. His locker would be around the next corner; it was the last one in the row, and had a huge heart scraped into the paint. He wasn’t sure where that had come from, only that it had been there ever since he’d gotten the locker.

There was his locker. The heart pulsed steadily as he looked at it, twisting the combination lock on the front. The code was the same it had always been and it struck Eddie then that he used the same number to unlock his phone; when he’d set it, it had been an entirely arbitrary choice. Had he really been carrying it with him for this whole time? The random string of numbers set by the school when he’d been granted the lock?

The door sprang open and Pennywise’s awful, bloated face stared out, those hideous eyes drifting across in entirely random patterns. It was Pennywise, but it wasn’t Pennywise. Not the actual beast
itself, but just an image, thrown up by Eddie’s brain. He stared back at it apathetically.

“I can’t believe I was so scared of a fucking clown,” he said.

When he reached into the locker, the visage crumpled under his hand like so many cobwebs, reacting with the unreal physics of a dream to fall apart. The inside of his locker was tidy; he was a tidy child. There was a little mirror at the back. In the little mirror, he could see himself, aged about 13, and Richie standing right behind him, the same age. Richie was crying.

When Eddie turned around to ask what was wrong he became aware, through the coldness of the dirt packed in around him and the distance of the dark, colourless sky, that he was six feet under the ground and staring up at Richie from the bottom of a pit.

No, not a pit. A grave.

“What the fuck?” He said, not particularly poignantly.

The walls of the grave towered above him, hard-packed dirt that looked as monumental and impassive as stone towers. His friends – not just Richie, but all his friends, even Stanley – were gathered around, watching him. None of them were more than thirteen but the pain in their faces was beyond their years; they knew, had seen, more than any child should. It had not really occurred to Eddie until now how much of his childhood he had lost to fear, how much it had held him back. Not anymore. He rose to his feet, hands grabbing at the walls to lever himself upright. Under his hands the dirt was wet, almost freezing with the ice water that was running down the sides. If the rain kept up like this it would turn all the dirt into –

A quagmire of mud was sucking at the bottom of his shoes. The mud was thick and black, almost tarlike, and when Eddie attempted to raise his feet it dragged them back down. It was a huge physical effort to lift even one leg and even when he managed that, the other foot sank deeper into the mud and put him almost in a worse position than he had been.

"Guys?” He called helplessly up the sides. They couldn't hear him; they were all just standing there fucking weeping and wailing like he was already dead and wasn't trying his hardest to get back up to them.

Irritated, Eddie plunged his fingers as deep as they could go into the dirt sides, ignoring how it felt as it sunk under his nails and patterned every crease in his hands with a thick outline of muck. There was no point being a bitch about being dirty now; if he got out of this, he could have the longest, hottest bath of his life but right then he needed to work on getting out. He reached up with his other hand and took hold of a tree root emerging from the dirt and then he heaved.

He thought he was going to tear his arms out of his sockets. The mud around his legs might as well have been grasping hands trying to drag him down to his early death for the sheer force they were exerting over him. It took everything he had to pull one foot free, wedging it into the wall to hold himself in place as his other foot remained trapped, the mud trying to drag him back down almost like it had a will of its own.

If it did though, if this really was all It, something was different. Compared to what he had seen before, this was almost pathetic in comparison. The idea occurred to him so naturally that it might have been the wildest jump to conclusions in the history of man, or might have been some kind of innate understanding, that this could be Its last dying grasps. That as It was slowly letting go of whatever life it really owned it was attempting to drag him down with it.
"Not this fucking time. Not me," Eddie hissed.

He reached up higher with his hand, grasping onto a rock in the dirt like a rope being tossed towards him and dragging his other foot up out of the mud with a strength he didn't really know he'd had. Fuck, 48 hours ago Richie Tozier had been kicking his ass at armwrestling, and now Eddie was dragging his entire body weight up a sheer dirt wall and fighting the forces trying to pull him back down every step of the way.

"I did not… Get puked on… By that fucking leper," Eddie said between heaving breaths, "just to die… In some fucking… Dirty hole."

Arm up, drag himself up that few more inches, feet scrambling for purchase. Arm up, drag himself up, plant feet in the dirt. Arm up, drag himself up, plant feet in the dirt… Every pull up the wall took almost everything Eddie had, and the higher he climbed the worse he felt. Instead of feeling lighter as he dragged himself to the surface, he felt heavier and more agonised. The pain had started in his chest as a low, dull hum, but now it was an opera and it was playing every part of his body. It surged outwards from beside his heart, radiating through the muscles and veins he was using to try and save himself from this fucking pit and tried to force him to back down.

He’d never felt pain like this; feeling it then, he couldn’t believe anyone ever had and lived. The idea occurred to him, just as naturally as the thought that maybe this really was It's final dying gasps as it was being sucked into the void it had come from, that maybe it would be easier to just give up and die. It was such a quiet thought that for a moment he didn’t question it. Trapped halfway up the wall, the black, bleak sky above him and the roiling sea of mud below, it would be so easy to just let go and fall back. It felt like a reasonable option in the moment; more reasonable than dragging his painful, aching carcass another ten-twenty-thirty feet up the side of this wall. What he was doing was insane. No one would blame him for giving up.

Below, the mud shifted, rain dancing on the surface of it and leaving pockmarks. The patterns made it look like there were faces trapped in the dirt below, gaping up at him with eyeless sockets and screaming mouths. Eddie thought he could be one of them – he almost already was. The pain and exhaustion were enough that he felt closer to being dead than he did alive. He could just let go. He could just be dead.

He looked up and saw his friends. He saw Stan, at the age he would forever be frozen in Eddie’s memory because they never had a chance to meet as adults. He saw Bill and Beverly at their most scared and their most brave, Mike before he felt the burden of the future, a Ben who didn’t know what he was capable of. And Richie; there was always Richie.

“I’m not gonna die in this fucking town!” Eddie screamed.

There was a hand reaching for him but it was reaching down and he was reaching up to it, he was reaching up and he was getting closer to the surface and the rain on his face was hard and cold but he could feel the air and he –

Eddie woke up. He gasped hard and loud, feeling like he had just broken the surface of a lake and come out for the first time in too long. The air his lungs dragged in was cold but clogged with dust and as he became more aware of his body he began to pick up on his surroundings. He was in the well, the well in the house on Neibolt Street, but it was solid. There was ground beneath him, solid bedrock, as if the well had only ever been dug a few feet before it had met total resistance and then been abandoned. His head was swimming, but he could see his body lying on the ground, covered
in blood and half-buried under rock, plaster and wood, and when he craned his head back, there was the sky where the ceiling had once been.

The house, he realised, was gone. All that remained of it was parts; some walls, some foundations, the collapsed ceiling lying around him. It looked like the aftermath of a hurricane and it was deadly silent.

“Hello?” He choked out. There was nothing. The remains of the house creaked in the wind.

His mouth tasted like blood and dirt and he retched. He could see the blood on his chest and knew he wasn’t going to get out on his own, if he was going to get out at all. When he tried to move, just to fish his phone out of his pocket, the pain his chest sparked up like a fire being lit inside him and he cried out. Despite everything, he managed to grab his phone, feeling like he was tearing the hole in his chest freshly open with every move.

As much as he could make out his surroundings, Eddie’s ability to understand what exactly the fuck was happening was failing him. He could remember the spider, remember It, remember seeing Richie being held in Its deadlights right before it killed him for good. Remembered throwing that spear and thinking it might all be over but then... But then...

There was only one number he could dial, once he had his phone in his hand, smearing blood on the screen as he unlocked it. He didn’t even think about it; it was instinct. He put the numbers in and called Richie. After that, it was all black again.

Chapter End Notes

like im gonna kill him? like im gonna write 26,000 words of this and kill him? if i had that kind of pure malicious evil in me id either be the devil or stephen king.

mr king if you're reading this: i AM available to write IT 2: Richie and Eddie Get Married and if you wanna collab you can put some interdimensional turtles in it or whatever i just wanna do the gay bits.

reminder that my twitter is @rorschachisgay ! a tweet once every minute on the minute or every time my kitten does something funny guaranteed
and i swore, i swore i would be true/and honey, so did you

Chapter Notes

chapter title is Linger by The Cranberries

See the end of the chapter for more notes

After Eddie died, after the Losers had held him as he cried in the quarry, and after he pretended that the small comfort of their love could ever fix what was wrong with him, Richie went to the Kissing Bridge. He kneeled down on the bridge and found instantly the R + E carved into the wood. In his memory it was better hidden; it had seemed like such a covert action when he’d done it, aged thirteen and filled always with painful longing he only could only express with sporadic bursts of futile destruction, a way for him to vent out a little of the pressure constantly building without anyone ever knowing. But twenty-seven years on, his eyes fell on it the second he stopped by the Kissing Bridge. Carefully, he carved out the letters again.

It had been cathartic the first time he’d done it; like making a promise to himself that what he felt was real and had an effect on the world in some small way. This time he traced the letters with his knife and all it did was make him think about how bound he was to repeating himself. Twenty-seven years since he had first done it he was back again, thinking about the same boy that he would never have, in the same town he could never leave.

He wanted catharsis; it felt like a joke. Richie sat in the car with his hands gripping the steering wheel and tried not to think about every opportunity he’d had and wasted that he could have been using to tell Eddie he loved him. The enormity of the finality of death was bewildering; he couldn't take in the size of it all at once. I will never see Eddie again was too huge to understand. Like trying to envision what a billion dollars looked like in ten cent pieces, his imagination failed to stretch wide enough to accommodate the size of it. He could only focus on the small details, but these occurred to him one at a time, and each time one did the wave of grief it brought was so powerful it caved in any defenses he might have started to build since the last time.

He found himself returning to the same memory over and over; being eleven, the first time Eddie had been allowed to sleep over at Bill's house, Sonia Kaspbrak granting permission only after Mrs Denbrough had a thorough lecture on every one of little Eddie's medical needs. In the middle of the night, when Bill and Stan were fast asleep, it was Richie who was awake to hear Eddie's voice.

"Don't laugh," Eddie had said, voice a whisper in the night, "I'm scared of the dark."

With the kind of empathy that often wasn’t found in young children or in Richie Tozier, Richie had found it in him not to laugh. He'd turned on the flashlight Stan had brought -- a good, prepared boy scout -- and the two of them whispered in the dim light until they'd fallen asleep at last.

He kept tracking back to this moment, to hearing the whisper in the black of Bill's living room, a quiet voice that was asking for help but filled with trepidation that their fears might be weaponised against them.

"I'm scared of the dark," the voice rang in Richie's memory.

His hands were gripping onto the steering wheel so tightly his knuckles were threatening to rip
through his skin, and the sob that tore out of him was violent in its force, his entire body so
wracked with grief he was only sitting upright because he had something to hold onto. He took a
deep, shuddering breath and tried to slow his breathing before he completely lost it again. There
was no one to catch him if he fell. He was poised over something so perilously dark and deep that
it threatened to consume whatever of Richie Tozier was left -- because he had very little idea of
what he was now, in this post-apocalyptic world where too much of the rosetta stone of how he
understood life had been uprooted for him to know how to function in it -- and he didn’t know how
to save himself. The idea that he should have to be the one in charge of saving himself felt like
some sick joke; that after everything else he was expected to find the rungs of the ladder and do it

He was starting to feel the welt of sob forming inside his throat again and he clamped down on it,
gripping his entire body in rigor mortis tension to try and hold onto anything, anything. But then
the phone rang. It was resting on the dashboard, the vibrations as it rang echoing through the
console. Richie's eyes were screwed shut behind his glasses, lenses misty with tears, but he forced
them open to look at the screen.

The screen said: EDDIE SPAGHETTI.

The world dropped out from under Richie's feet. Prying his fingers off the steering wheel like
someone trying to pick a lock, he reached out for the phone, his hand shaking so violently that he
sent it skittering back and forth over the plastic dashboard before he managed to take hold of it. He
wasn't sure he wasn't going to throw up as he answered the call, his teeth chattering in his skull.

He thought of the whispering voices of the children emerging from Beverly's drain, the visions of
Georgie that haunted Bill. Richie knew that It could imitate those it had claimed and turned them
into weapons to torment people; one of its favourite games was to dangle possibility in front of you
and revel in your fear and your misery once you saw it was all nothing but a light on an angler fish.
It was dead, and surely could not torment them anymore -- but so was Eddie. And Richie thought
as he held the phone to his ear that if this were one of Pennywise's tricks, if he were to be burdened
with this ghost haunting him for the rest of his life, it might all be worth it to hear Eddie's voice one
last time.

"Hello?" He said, his voice a whisper in the dark.

"Richie," Eddie's voice was a death rattle, the sound of dry fall leaves being blown over the
Kissing Bridge. "I need… You…"

"Where are you?" Richie said. "What do you need? Anything, Eds, I'll do anything, I…"

"The well. I made it most of the way but you gotta… I need help."

"I'm coming," Richie said. "I'll be there."

"I knew you would," Eddie said. Then the line went dead.

Richie dropped the phone, letting it slip out of his fingers to fall onto his lap and then to the
footwell of the car. He didn't care. He was already stamping his foot on the accelerator, spinning
the steering wheel so hard that he burned the skin on his hands as he performed an extremely
illegal U-turn, the tires screaming on the tarmac.

It might not be Eddie, but Richie didn't fucking care. There was a chance. More than a chance, and
not taking it would be the stupidest thing he'd ever done. He shot out onto the road, a car horn
blasting somewhere behind him after the driver had to brake hard to stop from crashing into him
after he pulled out in front of them. He swerved around a hatchback, cutting in front of them to take the turn before they did, the driver shrieking in terror when he came within a hair's breadth of side-swiping them. For once, he felt like his penchant for sports cars was a good idea rather than an obnoxious money-sink, the Mustang offering no complaints as he took it over seventy.

He blasted through a red light. In the rearview mirror he could see his eyes were completely wild, ringed by red and wide with a spark of desperation so intense it would have burned through every car in the road if he needed to. All the blood in his body was ice water; how he avoided getting T-boned by the car he shot past at the intersection he didn't know, only that the adrenaline was making the entire world around him move with a painful slowness he had to escape. If he got dragged down into their awful, polite tedium, taking his time with things, he would lose everything again. He could not lose again. Sure, he'd been a Loser his entire life, but once upon a time he had wrestled Eddie Kaspbrak to the floor of the school canteen and written LOVER on him in huge red capital letters and that was who Richie was now.

There was a cop car in the road at a red light. Richie slammed his foot on the brakes and came to a dead stop almost kissing the car's rear bumper. He didn't know if he'd have stopped at all if there wasn't a huge delivery truck coming up the other way. His heart was beating so fast he could taste blood in his mouth. The police officer stepped out of his vehicle, staring at Richie with an expression of complete bewilderment.

Richie did not generally like or have historically good experiences with the police, particularly not the Derry PD, but he was at a point where his entire body was shaking so badly from fear and anxiety that he could barely string a coherent thought together. The officer, a man who looked like he was half Richie's age, walked up to the window, frowning deeply.

“Sir, do you know…” The cop began to say, before Richie interrupted with a stream of words that completely threw the entire process into the garbage.

“My friend had an accident in the house on Neibolt Street, I have to get there right now -- I have to get there now, or he's dead. Are you fucking listening to me? My friend's fucking dying!”

There was a pause.

“Aren’t you that comedian?” The cop said.

Richie could have fucking screamed. This town, this awful town, where a guy could be dying on the street and the neighbours would let him. And people said New York was bad… Richie didn’t think there was a place on Earth more soulless, more cruel, or more filled with people who had the disease of apathy than Derry. He was so filled with hate then that he barely heard the police officer agree to go with him; the words took an abnormal amount of time to sink in and he had to blink at the cop blindly for a moment, the guy repeating the statement with a level of increasing uncertainty.

"Let's go, then," he said, again, sounding downright afraid. Richie didn't know if his own fame had bought him the opportunity or if the raw pain and fear in his face was enough that the clearly young and inexperienced cop was intimidated by him, but he didn't care enough to find out.

The house on Neibolt Street was exactly as how Richie had left it only a few hours prior; a crater in the ground that barely gave any indication that there had ever been a house there at all. The cop gaped uselessly at it, scrambling to try and grab his radio out of his pocket to call for backup as Richie tore out of his car like a speeding bullet. He’d never run so fast in his fucking life; he was careening through the remains of the house screaming Eddie’s name like a siren, screaming until his lungs hurt, right up until he came to the well. His heart was pounding on his chest like someone
trying to get out and in a very real way, that someone was him. He was trying to get out; the Richie that still believed there was a way out, that had been the man who had fought so hard against his friends that it had taken two of them to hold him back, that Richie was still alive inside him and was waging war on the versions of him who had given up, falling into the black mud of grief.

It was that Richie that fought his way through the collapsed doorways, who jumped down a ruined flight of stairs into the basement without caring about the chance of breaking an ankle in the landing. It was that Richie who tore towards the well. He had run away many times in his life and he was running away again; running away from the chance of losing Eddie once more.

As a comedian, Richie spent most of his time trying to recount an understanding of reality in a way people could relate to. He was supposedly good with observation, with creating an image of the world. But there was no way for him to explain how the world felt when he thought Eddie was dead; his language didn’t account for that, he didn’t have the vocabulary. It wasn’t something he could put into words for other people to interpret. There was just the collapsing black hole of grief and now he was escaping from it, he would not ever allow himself to return. Being there once had been bad enough. The chance this was some final prank by It was still something he was aware of, but he couldn’t let himself believe that. If that turned out to be the truth, Richie knew simply some part of him wouldn’t survive it. Losing all hope twice was more than anyone could be expected to bear.

The well. The well. It was a small pile of stones, maybe three feet high, and when Richie looked in, he saw Eddie slumped inside. The well had a solid foundation, as if it had never been dug out at all, as if when It had gone everything it dwelled in had gone too, zipping out of existence like a wound being stitched shut. Richie truly did not care about that, because Eddie was here.

For a second he thought that Eddie might still be dead, that he had taken too long and arrived too late. His hand was trembling when he reached out to cup Eddie’s face, but then Eddie’s eyes fluttered open and the shock that ran through Richie was enough to make him bark with laughter.

“What’s so funny?” Eddie slurred.

“I’ll tell you later,” Richie said.

He was half-buried under debris and Richie swept that aside, hooking his arms under Eddie’s armpits and haulimg him out. Eddie lolled against him, limply raising his arms to place them around Richie’s neck.

Richie was not a particularly strong man. He didn’t really do much ‘exercise’, got out of breath running for ten minutes, had a smoker’s cough. None of that mattered. He had enough strength to carry Eddie Kaspbrak. He had been carrying Eddie Kaspbrak with him his whole life, and he would make it a few more feet. Bending at the knee, he pulled Eddie from the well, hooking an arm under Eddie’s legs to lift him bridal style. Eddie only had enough strength and consciousness to keep his arms around Richie’s neck, anchoring himself in place.

“I missed you,” Eddie said.

“I’m not going anywhere,” Richie said. “Not ever again.”

He walked across the basement towards the stairs; there was a hole torn through them like they’d been struck by a cannonball but he planted his feet firmly on the remains of the boards and made like a mountain goat, teetering dangerously on the wooden rungs. He made it over the hole and started up what was left of the stairs.
“Remember when I fixed your arm?” Richie said, wheezing through the clouds of poisonous dust that the wreckage of the house kicked up. “That was here.”

“You just wanted to do it cus it hurt me,” Eddie mumbled.

“No. I’d never hurt you.”

“Yeah, I know.”

The ground floor was shaking around them as they walked across it, the walls that remained threatening to collapse at any second, but it didn’t matter. Richie could see the sun and he could see the sidewalk outside, and he could see the ambulance pulling up outside with paramedics hauling out a stretcher, but it didn’t matter. He could have easily carried Eddie another hundred miles. He could have carried Eddie all the way back to fucking LA and standing there, legs shaking as he made it the final few steps towards the street, he was sure he would. But then the paramedics were there and people were prying Eddie out of his arms and the sirens were wailing loud enough for the entire block to hear and --

Then it was hours later and Richie was sitting in a waiting room while Eddie’s broken little body got ripped apart and put back together again and he didn’t know how much longer he’d have to wait, but he knew it was going to feel like forever. He hadn’t slept in a long, long time and his entire body felt so exhausted he didn’t know if he could move, but his adrenaline wasn’t going to let him calm down. Occasionally a nurse drifting by, knowing how long he had been there, asked him a few either probing or concerned questions -- how Eddie had gotten hurt and if Richie was okay were the favourites -- but he mostly just muttered noncommittally. There was nothing he could really say on either front; he was existing under everyone’s belief that he hadn’t been around for Eddie’s ‘accident’ and he didn’t really know if he was ok or not. It didn’t matter how he was. The thought of telling the others had already occurred to him by that point. He had immediately dismissed it the first time, when he was first chasing Eddie’s stretcher into the hospital, too wrapped up in what was happening to even bring himself to worry about it, but now the question had returned. He sat holding terrible vending machine coffee until it burned his fingers through the thin plastic and for a while he just tried not to think about anything; it was almost like meditation. But unfortunately, he had a mind that was cursed to whirl things around at high speed until the motion of it drove him insane and he had to take action or speak to try and block it out. Without ever making a decision, he just ended up with a phone in his hand, punching in Beverly’s number.

“Richie?” She said, her voice so filled with concern that for a moment it pierced through the cloud of black anger shrouding his mind and he felt some joy at having friends who cared… But quickly he remembered and the sympathy shut down again, his eyes glued to the door they had taken Eddie through a few hours before.

“Eddie is alive,” he said. “He lived. He’s in surgery now at Derry General.”


Richie heard Ben’s voice somewhere in the background, asking what was happening, and the idea of the Ben and Beverly together while he sat covered in his best friend’s blood didn’t really lift his spirits any.

“Yeah,” Richie said. “And you told me to leave him.”

Beverly let out a sharp exhale of shock, trying to think of what she could possibly fucking say in that moment and also let the weight of the revelation settle on her. Cruelly, he hung up on her
before she got her chance to react, and punched in Bill’s number next, then Mike’s. It was the same routine each time; he dropped the bombshell and then left them with the information. For half an hour afterward his phone rang nonstop until he turned it off, but by that point they were wheeling Eddie out of surgery again and he had other things to worry about.

Chapter End Notes

Doctors describe his condition as stable but homosexual.
I caught a glimpse of this life it could be such a very good life/we could find a place for just me and you

Chapter Notes

Title is Spanish Moss by Against Me

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Eddie had been in the hospital several times as a kid; when he’d broken his arm, when he’d had an asthma attack or when his mother had blown up about some rash she was sure would be the death of him, and a couple of times, now only the most distant of memories, to visit his father as the man slowly died of cancer during the first few years of Eddie’s life. But none of those stays had been anything more than a quick day trip. He’d never been in the hospital overnight. He’d never slept in a hospital bed.

Waking up, the first thing he became aware of was the lights beaming down at him. They were horrifyingly bright, and he tried to raise his arm to block them out a little only to find that he was tethered by an IV. He weakly tugged at it a little bit, trying to get his eyes to focus by blinking. He glanced around the rest of the room and his eyes fell eventually onto a man slumped in a chair in the corner, snoring loudly. It took a second for Eddie to get his head together enough to see who it was.

“Richie?” He said, mouth slurring his words a little as he tried to rediscover his own tongue under all the painkillers.

Richie snapped awake instantly, his glasses hanging off his ears at an angle as he stared at Eddie, the confusion in his eyes clearing steadily. As soon as it did he leapt out of his seat, nearly knocking the heavy wood chair over in his sudden burst of energy, throwing himself across the room. He wrapped Eddie into a hug, burying his face into the crook of Eddie’s neck and only just holding back on a full-body sob, his arms clutching tight until his glasses jutted uncomfortably into flesh. Eddie didn’t care; he lifted his free arm to wind it around Richie’s neck, gripping onto him like he was scared the current would rip them apart.

“God, I was so fucking scared,” Richie breathed, his voice husky with emotion. “I thought I… Jesus Christ, Eds. When you called, I couldn’t believe it…”

He put his forehead to Eddie’s, both hands cradling Eddie’s face. Eddie closed his own eyes, breathing raggedly as he felt Richie’s chest convulse with a barely restrained sob. He smelled, he was sweaty, and he was coated in a thin layer of ash and dirt. He was probably putting Eddie at risk of about seventy different infections, but Eddie couldn’t fucking care less. Richie Tozier was going to be the death of him one way or the other.

"I thought you were fucking dead," Richie said, his voice a strained whisper.

"I'm okay," Eddie said, finding his own voice too thick with feeling to speak easily. "I'm okay."

When Richie pulled back, Eddie was a little shocked. To say he looked rough was the least of it; he was wearing three days’ worth of stubble and just as many days without sleep, and he looked pale under the awful lighting. He was in a ratty T-shirt and had been wearing it for a while, clearly
sweaty and unwashed.

“What the fuck happened to you?” Eddie said.

“Me?!” Richie laughed, disbelieving. “I’ve been waiting for you, man. You think I was going to fucking sleep? I couldn’t stop freaking out that you were going to flatline while I was passed out.”

Eddie reached a hand down and laid it over his chest. There were thick layers of bandages swaddling his wound, so much that it felt almost plush to the touch. Richie put his own hand over Eddie’s and let their fingers twist together.

“What… Happened?” Eddie said. “I don’t really remember anything after I saved your ass.”

Richie barked a laugh. “Yeah, well, after you saved me, you fucking got yourself speared like a kebab.”

“Yeah, I noticed.”

“Then uh… The house…” Richie’s free hand was a balled fist and then he spread it wide, like paper unfolding and flattening out. “It fell down but the caverns they like… It was like once Pennywise was gone the whole thing just… Popped out of existence.”

“Jesus. What the fuck?”

Richie made the universal noise of having no fucking idea. Iunno. But he didn’t really seem that concerned about it; he couldn’t stop touching Eddie, their hands linked and the other constantly moving over to touch on the face or shoulders, as if it was the only thing grounding them both. He was cradling Eddie’s face in his hand then, thumb running over the undamaged cheek. The other cheek was still wrapped up in a thick layer of gauze.

“But then you called me, and I came and carried your sorry carcass here,” Richie continued. He cleared his throat to half-heartedly cover up the fact he was definitely on the verge of crying. “Then you were in surgery for like ten fuckin’ hours while they tried to fix your shit. And after that you’ve been asleep for… A day?”

“I cannot… Fucking believe…” Eddie began, Richie looking at him with huge, concerned eyes. “That after all this… You had to save me again.”

Richie stifled a laugh. “And I’ll do it another hundred times.”

Eddie wanted to kiss him so badly, but he tasted and felt disgusting and as bad as Richie looked, was sure he looked worse. He settled for squeezing Richie’s hand hard.

“Where’s everyone else?” Eddie asked. “Are they all ok?”

When Richie’s face turned hard, Eddie immediately feared the worst, but while the answer he got was terse, it was surprising.

“They’re fine. They’re not here,” Richie said. His words were clipped, and Eddie had the very clear impression he’d missed something.

“What’s going on?” Eddie said.

“Jesus, forget about that. It’s a fucking miracle you’re alive. I really thought…”

“What, that I was going to let myself get killed by that thing? Believe me, the only clown around
here that’s going to kill me one day is you.”

Richie laughed despite himself. “Pretty good one, Eds.”

A nurse came in then, batting Richie away from Eddie so she could check on his wounds. Richie hovered anxiously about three inches away, not even pretending to be holding onto his cool. The nurse gave him a look that could have stripped paint but Richie, always ready and eager to be obnoxious, did not back down or move any further than sitting at the foot of the bed. Eddie looked away to avoid seeing his own surgical scars as she changed his bandages, going pale just at the sight of the ugly black stitches turning his chest into a topological map.

“It’s good to see you awake, Mr Kaspbrak,” the nurse said. “Dr Stapleton will be in to check on you later, but he was very confident with the results of your surgery.”

She paused for a second, trying to figure out what she was going to say. Eddie watched her nervously; he didn’t like medical professionals not knowing what they should say. It was the one type of person he felt should always know what to say. The silence made him very nervous and he was about to ask what the hell was going on when she said:

“This one hasn’t been away from you for a moment,” with a voice of some concern. “Is that alright?”

Eddie stuttered as he tried to think of what to say.

“Yeah, that’s really fine.”

Richie smiled a little and Eddie's heart felt soft; he owed so much to Richie and he knew there was only one way he could repay him. Quietly, he reached out to put his hand on Richie’s and they both understood, in that moment, that nothing had been forgotten.

When the surgeon arrived a few hours later, he assured Eddie he was going to live and dealt with a barrage of questions that could have drowned a less prepared man. Eddie, who was stepping out of bed for the first time, clung to Richie like an unsteady skater on an ice rink holding onto the railing as he paced the few steps between the bed and the toilet. Richie, to his credit, did not ever complain, just offered Eddie his arm for support without criticism. He did make fun of Eddie's non-slip hospital socks, but in the grand history of Trashmouth remarks, it was a pretty inoffensive jab.

"You're doing incredibly well, Mr Kaspbrak," Dr Stapleton said. "I'm almost inclined to say it's a minor miracle. The fact that none of your organs retained damage and your spine was unharmed is… How did you say you were injured, again?"

"I fell," Eddie said.

"Right," Dr Stapleton said. "Of course. Onto a seven inch wooden bar."

"Not the first time you've had a seven inch piece of wood in you," Richie whispered into Eddie's ear. Eddie elbowed him in the stomach for his troubles.

Richie and Eddie had spent some time debating the lie they would tell about the injury; after the nurse left they'd huddled by the bed, arguing in soft voices about what would protect them both. Somehow, neither of them were particularly gifted liars. Richie always put too much on it, talked like it was part of some elaborate stand-up routine where he was the only one who got the joke. Eddie always froze up, struggling to get the words out more than when Bill was mid-stutter. In the end, the simplest was the best; Richie was mostly in the clear by virtue of having been with the cop and wasn't expected to know much, and Eddie just went with trespassing. It worked well enough.
Why exactly a middle-aged insurance man was exploring an abandoned house on his own was the clear question on the mind of everyone who heard the story, but everyone hesitated to push. They all knew there was something wrong, but their imaginations didn't stretch far enough to guess what it might have been and the subject was dropped out of fear they wouldn't like what they heard. It was another small blessing.

The real miracle, of course, was that the effect of the claw that had pierced through Eddie’s entire body had withered down to leave a wound that was more akin to a puncture wound from a large knife than the awful arm of some giant monster. The reasoning of this was as inexplicable as the collapse of the house on Neibolt Street, the fact the Losers had all become vastly successful, the fact they were all childless. The horrible and completely inexplicable ripple effect that It had on the rest of the world, warping reality around it. Like that, Eddie thought, or like the time when they had all pitched in to scrub Beverly’s bathroom clean while her father was oblivious, unseeing of the carnage It had wrought. People just didn’t see what It had done; they only saw what they wanted, or what they could understand.

The result though was that Eddie was up and walking with minimal muscle damage and surviving on a steady diet of prescription painkillers. That first day of wakefulness he didn’t test himself much, mostly lay in bed with Richie in the armchair he’d pulled up to the side of Eddie’s bed so they could watch bad daytime TV, the two of them eating jello and mocking sitcoms like the human Statler and Waldorf. There was something bizarrely peaceful about it; it reminded Eddie most strongly of dull, rainy days where the two of them would pitch up at Richie’s house after school and watch TV. Frequently, Richie’s parents wouldn’t be home until late, and for dinner the two kids would nuke some hot pockets or break out huge bowls of cereal, feeling the strange novel thrill of responsibility without any adults available to tell them to stop.

There was a sense of that now; the two of them were cocooned in the cotton-wool safety of the hospital and the realities of their lives could just stop existing for the time being; they didn’t have to worry about work, family, or anyone outside the four walls of the room. Their biggest responsibilities were making sure they ate and got enough sleep. It was intoxicatingly simple; they fell into the pillow of having nothing to worry about without any resistance.

Richie didn’t leave Eddie’s side all day. He had gained a guard-dog like watchfulness; not aggressive but far more alert than a man who had slept maybe four hours in the last 48 should have to be. As the day faded to night he grew visibly more exhausted but still jerked awake every time Eddie spoke, as if he was scared that the moment of peace might be over. He was falling asleep at that moment, head lolling back in the seat, red eyes finally starting to drift closed.

“You can’t just sleep in that chair all night,” Eddie said.

Richie woke with a start. He shouldn’t have been staying that night at all; technically, visiting hours were over. He had circumvented them by stepping out of the room the last time the nurse checked around and the decision for him to stay overnight had been made without either of them having to ask or say so.

“I’m not leaving.” Richie said.

“I didn’t say you should. Get up on the bed.”

Richie stared blankly at him, as if this was an entirely foreign concept. Eddie sighed angrily.

“There’s room for both of us, just get up here,” he said.

Eddie shifted over to the side. There was not that much room at all, but he didn’t care. Richie
kicked off his shoes and clambered into the bed, lying over the top of Eddie’s sheets so the blanket was between them. It was as chaste as it possibly could be, but Eddie found his heartbeat had started to pick up like they were engaging in something entirely illicit; even after having sex with Richie a half dozen times, lying in bed with him was still intimate in a way that felt almost frightening. Not scary because it was wrong, but because of how much Eddie wanted it, and how unsure he was that he was allowed to want it.

The confined space made Richie lie on his side; Eddie lay behind him and curled a protective arm around his chest, pressing his face to the back of Richie’s neck. When his hand rested over Richie’s heart, he could feel it thumping away just as hard as his own.

It took a minute for them to get comfortable; they both shifted around on the mattress, trying to figure out where they fit together in the narrow space. It was a little silence, the small amount of light coming through the blinds illuminating Richie’s paled skin white and washing out his hair, making him a black and white sketch of himself. It felt unreal even as Eddie was pressing his face to the back of Richie’s neck, feeling the curls of hair stroke over his cheeks. It was hard to talk for a moment.

“This is the first time we’ve ever slept in the same bed,” Eddie said. The darkness and stillness made his voice soft, like he was afraid of shattering the moment.

“It’s not gonna be the last,” Richie said.

The words put a shiver down Eddie’s spine and he clung to Richie harder, folding his bent legs inside the curve of Richie’s, the two of them locked together like two puzzle pieces that had finally fallen into place. He balled his fist, gripping tightly onto the material of Richie’s shirt like he needed the extra security to hold them together.

“Thank you,” Eddie said.

“You saved me. Now we’re even.”

They had saved each other. Eddie closed his eyes; he could still see the soft swirl of Richie’s dark hair behind his lids. He wanted to see it for the rest of his life. With all of his memories firmly in place, he felt assured he would not forget what it was like to hold Richie in his arms, and that gave him some confidence.

"Eddie…” Richie said, his voice heavy with sleep and with something that sounded a little like grief. "You know, don't you? You know I…”

"Yes. I do. And you know I do too."

"I always knew. Even when I left, I knew."

"It's ok. I know. I know why you did."

Richie laid a hand over Eddie's and clutched it; they fell asleep like that, the warmth of their embrace lulling Eddie into a quiet, dreamless sleep where there was nothing to fear.

When they woke up, Eddie peeled open his eyes and saw that he was still holding Richie to his chest like a protective ward. Richie was still asleep, snoring gently, one arm pillowed under his head and the other hand still holding onto Eddie's. In the early morning light, his eyelashes looked golden as the sun hit them, and the softness of the light made the hard right angles of his jaw and chin less severe. Eddie reached up to run a finger over the sharp edge of his jaw, feeling the scratch of several days of stubble, thought idly about how nice Richie might look all clean-shaven and in a
good suit. Wouldn't really be his Richie then, though. Unfortunately, Eddie did like him the way he was. Messy, stupid, annoying. Apparently the kind of man he’d wanted his whole life.

Not a sentence he’d ever thought would run through his mind, and he didn’t really know what to do with the idea now that he’d thought it. It drifted around in his head, untethered to anything, like a rock in space that hadn’t yet picked up enough velocity to become a comet.

"Hey," Eddie said, softly, his eyes still half-closed. He lay his head on Richie's shoulder so they were cheek to cheek, and felt the muscles in Richie's face shift as he started to smile.

"Hello," a woman said.

Eddie snapped his head around so fast he nearly pulled a muscle. The nurse was standing in Eddie's doorway glaring at them. Richie stared at her blearily and fumbled for his glasses as Eddie unwound his arms from the close hug they'd been lying in all night and shifted himself into a sitting position, immediately drenched in obvious guilt. The stitches in his chest panged painfully as he moved and he winced, hoping the nurse would provide him with something to alleviate the pain even if he'd clearly been flagrantly disobeying the rules. Richie slid off the bed and stretched, the vertebrae in his back cracking audibly as he did. He seemed completely unbothered by being caught, just shoving his glasses back on and fishing his shoes out from under the chair where he'd left them.

"Visitors are not allowed to stay overnight," the nurse said tersely.

"It was an accident," Richie said, wandering into the bathroom.

The nurse glared harder and came over to give Eddie his morning dose of painkillers and make sure he hadn't bled through his bandages. She seemed more pleased with how his recovery was coming along than she was with catching him curled up in bed with someone, but she didn't bother to threaten either of them with throwing Richie out, either because she had some sympathy or because she didn't care that much.

"I hope you're feeling better, because there's rather a lot of people in the waiting room who want to see you," the nurse said.


Richie, who had emerged from the bathroom, had a dark look on his face that was unlike him. Eddie was a little taken aback by it; it wasn’t like Richie to look so profoundly menacing.

“I’ll handle it,” Richie said.

“Wait, Richie,” Eddie started to say, but he was too slow. Richie had already walked out of the room.

Chapter End Notes

Eddie's father having cancer is drawn from the book and the 1990's series; it's not mentioned in the 2017/2019 films but i think it acts as a rosetta stone that really lets you unlock a lot of the shit Eddie and Sonia had going on in their heads. if your earliest memories are your father dying from a sickness and your mother promises to protect
you? children are already expected to just blindly follow their parents, but when you also have something to fear, a definite idea of what you're scared of... y'know. and for Sonia then it made her abuse reasonable in her mind; she just wanted to save her son from the same thing that happened to her husband. not that that actually excuses her, of course, but it explains a grain of logic she would have held onto to justify the immense control and paranoia she was displaying. it wasn't really cruelty if she was the hero! i feel like that's the story she told herself, anyway.

magic to wave away a lot of the injuries may be a coward's move but as soon as i started basing the story about being in the hospital it started withering up like a fuckin clown being negged by a group of traumatised forty year olds so i had to get shit moving. anyway this is a story about a magic space clown i can do anything i want! there's no rules here! who says it couldn't be magic!

anyway next chapter is going to be rough. not as in it's a rough draft but like, rough. for richie.
At first, leaving Eddie’s room, Richie didn’t feel anything at all. He was moving without thinking about it, walking because he was driven by purpose rather than thought. He arrived physically in the waiting room long before his mind had managed to catch up to him and by then it was too late; he was already standing there in a room of people who he loved dearly and did not want to see at all.

They all looked to Richie the second he walked in, leaping out of their seats in a surge of human motion, Ben tripping over the legs of his seat and Mike nearly falling into Richie in his haste to pull him into a crushing hug. They all tried to hug him, surrounding him in a forcefield of love and concern, all of them grasping at him with hands that demanded affection and tried to give him care. He batted them away, pulling himself out of their grip like he was extracting himself from a bed of snakes.

They’d all heard his tone on the phone; none of them looked surprised by his reaction now, only faintly disappointed. Richie’s anger was so intense and so overwhelming that he couldn’t look at even his closest friends and find it in him to forgive them. Not now. Not when Eddie had been awake a day and they were all here to try and paw at him like they hadn’t fucking left him to die; like they hadn’t forced Richie to leave him to die.

“What are you doing here?” Richie said. He’d not really yelled at them like this since he and Bill had fought as kids and all of them now looked a little uncertain in the face of this uncharacteristically honest anger. Some tall blond woman barged past him and nearly knocked him over but he didn’t even turn his head to look at her, too focused on the seething anger directed at the people he loved the most.

“What do you think we’re doing? We came to see Eddie,” Mike said, his voice straining to sound in good humour. He was being very deliberately gentle, but Richie didn’t know if he really appreciated it all that much.

“Richie, we know you’ve been through a lot…” Beverly started saying, as if she didn’t really know where she was going with it either.

“Maybe you should have fucking seen that in your visions of the future,” Richie said, “and not tried
to make me leave Eddie behind.”

The silence that followed was like the moment before an earthquake; everyone had just felt the first rumble before the real quake and they were all waiting to see if the ground split open under their feet and plunged everything into hell.

“Listen, Rich,” Ben’s voice was achingly calm and it grated on Richie’s nerves like someone was taking an angle grinder to them. “We were wrong. But we had no way of getting him out.”

“How did he even… How did you…” Bill floundered, trying to figure out how it could have worked out.

“If you think that I’m just going to fucking let this go and forgive you all for dragging me out of there when I was right, and he did need my help… If you think I’m going to forgive you after you almost made me leave him for dead… You are fucking delusional. You could have let me try to get him out, but you didn’t, and he spent a day lying in a burned down wreck before he could call me. You can’t blame this on the fucking clown. You did this.”

Richie was seething. He wasn’t an angry person by nature, at least not openly. He tended to be more filled with quiet resentment that he bottled up along with everything else, but now he couldn’t hold back on it. He felt entirely alien to himself, and judging by the faces of his friends, they didn’t recognise him either. But he also didn’t care; they were going to see his anger, in all its ugly resentfulness, and they would deal with any fucking guilt they felt. They had to understand.

“Richie, I’m sorry,” Beverly said.

“We’re all sorry,” Mike said. “But the important part is Eddie’s okay. We lost so much, we need to remember that we still have each other.”

“Yeah, no thanks to any of you! I carried him out myself! I had to fucking… I had to pick him up and carry him out alone. You could have helped me. But you didn’t.”

“The whole house was falling down,” Bill said. God he sounded so fucking insufferably confident now the stutter was gone. “If you’d stayed behind to carry him out, then we would have lost you too, and I don’t think I could have taken losing two friends in the same day.”

“At least I would have died with him!”

The earthquake hit, the impact of what had been said shaking all of them. Beverly put a hand to her mouth, speechless. Bill was pale, his eyes fixed onto Richie with fear and pleading questions.

“Jesus, Rich,” Mike breathed.

“Richie, you can’t mean that,” Ben said.

“Yeah? How would you feel if it was Bev, huh? How would you feel if Beverly was dying and you got dragged out by people who say they’re your fucking friends but are too scared to stop her from dying alone, in the dark. How would you fucking feel?”

Ben’s mouth moved wordlessly, looking back at Beverly and failing to bring himself to say anything at all.

“What are you saying?” Beverly said.

“Oh, don’t pretend you don’t fucking know,” Richie said.
No one spoke. Everyone knew. That had really always been the problem. Everyone knew, before Richie even knew himself. They’d smelled it on him, some stink of difference that marked him out and turned the kids around him savage and cannibalistic in their hunger to kill what they didn’t like. The idea of telling anyone was ridiculous; why would you tell someone what they already knew? For him to be able to tell anyone on his own terms, they would have to believe otherwise in the first place. He’d put in so much work into making as many people as possible believe what the rumours said weren’t true. He’d put in so much work to convince everyone that Richie Tozier was straight he’d begun to believe it himself.

“How do you think I felt when it was Georgie?” Bill said. “And I didn’t know if he was alive or dead?”

“I followed you through those sewers all summer,” Richie said. “And I was there to kill that clown the moment you asked. Oh, we weren’t together all summer? Yeah, I was fucking thirteen, and I was scared out of my mind. But I was still there, when it counted. And when I needed you, none of you were.”

The nurse at the reception desk was staring in short, confused bursts and Richie became painfully aware of how many people were probably listening. He turned his back on all of them and started for the stairs back up to Eddie’s floor. In their fucking obnoxiously loyal persistence, all of the Losers followed him back up, refusing to take no for an answer. He didn’t really want to turn the entire thing into a public screaming match, smiling with a toothy grimace at nurses who passed him by, trying to disguise what was happening.

“I thought I told you to fuck off,” he hissed, glancing over his shoulder at the others with increasingly bad temper.

“Yeah, well, we’re not here to see you. We’re here to see Eds,” Bill said. “We’re his friends.”

Richie could smell the tough love approach and felt himself bristling.

“If you were his friends you wouldn’t have given up on him,” he snapped back. They were right outside Eddie’s door right now and he knew he really couldn’t and didn’t have any right to throw them out, but he didn’t want to see them. There was a protective venom in him that was making him blind and hostile.

“You’re not the only one who had to mourn him,” Mike said. “You’re not the only one who lost somebody. You can’t really think it was easy for us to walk out of there. Jesus Christ, man, I thought you were going to kill yourself in front of me. You think that wasn’t hard? You think I held you back like that for fun?”

“I’m sorry that we didn’t help him, but I wasn’t going to let you fucking kill yourself,” Bill said. “We lost Stan, we lost Eddie, I wasn’t about to lose you too.”

The looks of hurt on the other’s faces were so vivid; Richie recalled the first time Eddie had broken his arm in the house on Neibolt Street with sudden, sickening clarity. Even beyond the grave the clown was trying to keep them apart. Bringing up Stan knocked the wind out of him a bit; they were all on the same ground on that one and the comparison burned, especially because he could not deny the point they made. As far as they had seen, at the time, he really had been asking them to be willing to lose another friend on a quest they thought they’d already failed. The knowledge they had a point did not, however, make him feel better.

Richie slammed the door of Eddie’s room open, not knowing what he was going to say once they were all in there, not knowing if he would so easily be able to let go of everything inside him. He
walked through the door and then stopped dead, the others almost colliding with him.

There was a woman in Eddie’s room. She was tall and blond and had a commanding air to her and Richie recognised immediately that she was the same woman he’d seen in vacation photos on Eddie’s phone that had been passed around at the restaurant a few days before. She was talking so fast that she apparently hadn’t processed the door opening yet, an absolute gust of verbal information that would have been impressive if it wasn’t making Richie feel like he’d fallen through ice and right into a frozen lake. He stood, speechless.

“An abandoned house. I mean God knows what kind of infection you can get from a place like that! You could have died — you almost did die, and I knew it, I knew something was going wrong when you didn’t call me. I should have come sooner and maybe I would have stopped you from being so… So incredibly stupid!” Myra Kaspbrak was a woman on a warpath and Eddie’s fumbling attempts to interrupt her were not going to fly here. “Why would you do something so dangerous? It’s like I don’t even know you, I just don’t understand why you’d come all the way out here in the first place, to this awful little town, just so you can go and nearly die doing something… Who are all these people?”

Eddie’s eyes had slipped from Myra over to the door during her one-woman show of misery and she had followed his gaze to finally see the group of people standing in the doorway and staring in with five matching looks of horror. Richie could only think about Eddie’s mother the day when Eddie’s arm had been broken, the cold force of absolute rage they’d all been up against. The dynamic wasn’t really the same, of course, none of them were kids beholden to the expectation they would be polite to their elders, and Myra lacked the hold of sheer terror Eddie’s mother had possessed over them all. But Richie still had the exact same feeling he did every time an adult had caught him doing something wrong when he really didn’t want to; that there were going to be consequences.

Eddie, sitting upright in the hospital bed, was paler than the underbelly of a fish and seemed just about as brave or intimidating. His mouth had been moving silently at various points, but it was like his heart wasn’t really in the attempts to interrupt, or more like he knew he didn’t really have any good answers. Nothing that anyone would believe, anyway. If he told her the truth, he’d be institutionalised.

“These are my friends,” Eddie finally said. He coughed and cleared his throat. “They’re my friends. That’s Richie, he…”

Eddie beckoned like he wanted them to come in and Richie sensed instinctively that he needed support. He wanted help, and Richie was frozen in fear like a deer in headlights. Fear, and even more anger. There was so much roiling inside of Richie he didn't know how he was going to keep onto it all; he was starting to feel like a glass bottle that was being superheated, and now the entire thing was under threat of exploding as the contents expanded too much for the container to hold. He was already so angry, so miserably fucking angry and betrayed by his own friends, and now there was a mixture of guilt and spite making his body feel electrified. It was like he was standing on a live wire; and the source of the power was Myra, who was evoking so much resentment in Richie he felt his throat closing up as bad as one of Eddie's asthma attacks.

"So they're the ones who got you into trouble?" Myra said.

"They didn't get me into trouble .”

God, Richie hated her. It was irrational and cruel; at the same time, he was sick with guilt that he was ruining this woman's life. Facing her for the first time, he had to look her in the eyes and see how much pain she was in right then and actually accept that she was not an obstacle but a human
woman who, in her complete delusional misunderstanding of who Eddie was, wanted to protect her husband. But even knowing that, Richie hated her. He was furious that she would get to have five years with Eddie of marriage and Richie didn't, when he was the one who really knew Eddie, knew him better than anyone else. Loved him more than anyone else. Myra didn't even know who Eddie was, or why he had picked her to marry. She didn’t realise, or didn’t care, that she was nothing more than a disguise and enabler keeping Eddie in the same shackles his mother had cast him in.

And then there was another guilt. A guilt that didn't have anything to do with Myra, or with the affair, or even really with Eddie. It was a shame that had haunted Richie since he was thirteen years old and had first started to notice the way other boys looked; the gnawing feeling of disgust and embarrassment that rose up inside him when he snuck a look that was a little too long at some handsome guy and he got caught. That black feeling that he was doing something deeply wrong and yet knew he could not stop it.

“Excuse me,” Richie said, then he ran into Eddie’s bathroom and threw up.

Chapter End Notes

richie having a really intense anger about eddie being abandoned was one of the things i really wanted to write about with this fic; i just thought it was an angle that would be interesting to explore. as with other chapters, im not so much interested in a single character being in the right about everything as i am in just having characters who do really believe what theyre saying.

hey i've mentioned i have a twitter (@rorschachisgay) but i also have a TUMBLR -- saints-row-2! i have like no IT mutuals on tumblr please come hang out with me :( you can even send me mean asks if you want (please dont im delicate).

and big news : i have a NEW FIC, portrait of two boys in free fall, artist unknown is a no Pennywise AU reddie fic where the losers grow up in Derry together -- but an incident means that Richie leaves for twenty years, until he suddenly gets a letter calling him home. please check it out if you want to read about the Losers Club as dumb teenagers! second chapter should be out soon.

thank you all again for your support. i love you guys
Mike, always the only guy who seemed to know what was going on, was calmly disentangling the group from Myra, who did not want to see any of them right then and was getting increasingly angry about the presence of five people she didn’t know during an exceptionally stressful time in her life. The other Losers were having a mixture of what conflict they were involved in; Eddie was failing to voice his desire that his friends should stay, Ben sounded like he wanted to fall through a hole in the floor, and Beverly didn’t particularly like Myra’s tone, all while Bill and Mike tried to corral the group out of the room and into the vague agreement they would visit again later, when things had calmed down. Richie was sitting on the floor in front of the toilet with his head pressed against the wall. He decided that if he sat there for long enough the cool tile might eventually freeze all the anxiety in his brain and he’d be able to be normal. He shook his head at the idea. As if he’d ever been normal.

Back out in the room, Bill was trying and failing to explain why exactly Eddie had come all the way out; he’d gotten as far as it being ‘a reunion’, but none of them had decided on any particular explanation for what was going on and it wasn’t working now. Richie’s legs were shaking, but he stood up anyway, sparing a quick glance at himself in the mirror. He looked like a walking corpse, pale as hell with a faint shimmer of sweat clinging to him and dark rings around his eyes that his glasses made huge. Great.

“Are you all insane?” Myra was saying as Richie stepped out of the bathroom. “You all live in worlds where you can drop everything in your lives and run away whenever you like? None of you can give me a straight answer, but you all just want me to be okay with whatever this is!”

“I didn’t want you guys here,” Richie said to the others, voice quiet and strained.

“What the fuck are you talking about?” Eddie said to him.

“They didn’t… If it wasn’t for them, we would have gotten you out sooner,” Richie said.

“And maybe you’d have gotten beamed in the head by falling debris and dropped dead, asshole. What is this... Trying to keep my friends away shit?” Eddie said. “I’m not a fucking china doll, you don’t have to protect me from them. You’re not the official Eddie Kaspbrak armed guard.”

“I’m not trying to be the big fuckin’ hero!” Richie said. “But they all left you down there. You could have died.”

“Richie, no one is trying to tell you that you shouldn’t be angry, but we’re not your enemies,” Ben said. “If it wasn’t for all six of us, none of us would have gotten out.”

“It’s always been us, together,” Beverly said.
“Then why weren’t you there?”

“Because I called you,” Eddie said. “And they’re here now. I don’t want to sit here and listen to you guys tearing each other apart!”

Myra made a strangled noise that made everyone’s heads snap back to her, as if they’d forgotten this weird interloper was there at all. She looked like she’d been grafted into the room unnaturally; it was like someone had seen a hole in a puzzle and tried to cram in the nearest piece they had, neither knowing or caring if it turned the pattern into a jarring mess.

“Who are you?” She demanded. “What are you talking about? You put Eddie in danger? On purpose?”

“Eddie is a grown-up,” Richie said. “He can do what he wants.”

The look Myra gave him was one of pure disgust, wrinkling her nose up at the state of his unwashed face and dirty clothes. The other Losers all looked deeply concerned about the state of him, Beverly taking a few steps across the room to try and place a hand on Richie’s shoulder, but he shrugged it off.

“Grown-ups,” Myra said, with venom, “don’t just leave their jobs, their wives, and their homes with no explanation to go on some adventure because they feel like.”

“Eddie did it for us,” Richie said. “Because he’s brave. Braver than you know. Because you don’t know him. Not like we do. Not like I do.”

Eddie, still in bed, looked at him then. Its den under the Neibolt House was present in their minds like an unspoken secret; Richie could almost feel Eddie’s face in his hand as he told him you’re braver than you think and meant it. They held each other’s gaze for a moment and Richie tried to will Eddie to speak, but he was struck as dumb as he’d been when that fucking Stan spider had been trying to rip Richie’s face off.

“Excuse me?” Myra said.

“We’ve known Eddie since he was a kid. And I’ve seen him do incredible shit. Shit that you’re never going to understand, because you just want to keep him locked up like he’s…”

“What are you talking about?” Myra said. “You sound like you’re in some kind of insane cult, all this stuff about loyalty and bravery and knowing…”

She stopped, her righteous anger snapping to a single focus point. Her eyes went suddenly wide and there was something very frightening about it; Richie could see the confusion clearing from her mind and there was an explosion of anxiety in his chest at what he might be about to hear. All of the others were still huddled in the doorway, Bill standing in front of them like he was going to protect them all from some kind of oncoming storm, while Richie stood alone, cut off from everyone. His own fault.

“Oh, I understand,” Myra said.

“You do?” Eddie said, almost more curious than actually afraid of what he was about to hear.

“You’re in love with my husband.”

Richie felt like he’d been hit by a truck. The room went very, very quiet. Eddie’s eyes were bulging out of his head and he gasped in the thin, light-headed way he used to before he would grab for his
inhaler. Most of the others were divided between watching Myra or watching Richie, Mike’s face a painful mask of sympathy while Bill looked on with abject horror that someone would come out with a statement like that.

“What’re… What are you talking about?” Richie said. He was straining to speak, his attempt at lying dulled by the obvious shock, face contorting in a fearful grimace of a smile.

“Myra, stop,” Eddie said.

“Oh, please. I can see the way you look at him. You’re in love with Eddie,” Myra said. There was a confidence in her voice that made Richie feel like he was being skinned, as if she was stabbing right through him and cutting down to the bone. “You’re in love with him, and you can’t handle that he’s not gay, and you’re taking it out on me.”

“Myra, stop it,” Eddie said.

“That’s not… No, this isn’t about me,” Richie said.

“Isn’t it? Because all you’ve talked about is how much Eddie means to you. I’m sorry this is hard for you, but you’re not the only one who matters.”

“Myra!” Eddie snapped.

“You can’t… I’m not gay,” Richie couldn’t figure out what he wanted to say, floundering in a swamp of his own anxiety and the cacophony of memory that Derry always dredged up, reverting him back to being fourteen years old and staring down Henry Bowers all over again. It didn’t matter that he was forty, and successful, and had killed both Henry Bowers and an interdimensional demon only a few days prior; deep inside Richie, the teenage him still lived, and it was that teenage him that was in control right now, turning all his thoughts to terror and the urge to run.

“I think it’s pretty obvious to everyone that you are,” Myra said, looking over at the others as if she was expecting to get some kind of back-up. Instead, all of them were wearing looks of horror and embarrassment, Mike’s hand to his mouth in shock, Ben pale.

“How dare you—” Beverly started.

“How dare you—” Bill said.

“ Myra! For fuck’s sake!” Eddie interjected. “Why can’t you stop it when I’m asking you to?!”

“I can’t fucking deal with this,” Richie said. “I’m done. I’m out of here.”

“Rich, wait—” Eddie tried to jump out of bed to follow him, but hissed with pain when the stitches pulled, stopping half-in and half-out of the bed. Myra cried out and rushed over to help him as Richie shoved past everyone else, storming out into the hallway and down the stairs. He could feel everyone’s eyes on him long after he’d left the room, the sensation of stares burning on his skin.

He was almost out of the building by the time Beverly caught up to him, grabbing his arm and forcing him to stop.

"Rich, where are you going?" She said. "Can we all just slow down a minute?"

"I'm driving back to Boston, I'm returning this rental car they probably think I've fucking stolen, and then I'm getting the first flight back to LA,” Richie said.
"You can't be serious," Beverly said.

Richie gently took her hand off him, shoving his hands deep into his jacket pockets, elbows tucked into his ribs and shoulders hunched. Nothing to grab onto, nothing to touch. Sealed off and guarded.

"I'm over this. I saved this fucking town, but it's never done shit for me. For any of us. I need to get out of this place and go back to the real world. Eddie's crazy wife was right. I have like, a job, and responsibilities, and a bag of pizza rolls in the freezer. I have to live the rest of my life."

Beverly didn’t smile; he supposed he hadn’t really been expecting she would. He was just tired. For days, he had barely eaten or slept, hadn’t showered, looked and felt like garbage. He’d gone through just about the whole gamut of human emotion within the last few hours and now he needed a fucking break. At that moment, hitting the road and getting as far away as he could felt like the easiest option. He could be away from all of this so quickly, and then maybe he could forget it all again. Return to nice, peaceful ignorance. He hadn’t been happy before, but it had been a quieter kind of sadness.

"What you need is to go back to the hotel, get some food and some sleep. And a shower," Beverly said. "You're running on fumes. We can talk after that."

"I don't want to talk, Bev, I want to get out."

"You're going to get some rest, and then we're going to talk."

People in the lobby were staring and Richie knew he looked like he was sicker than anyone in the hospital. He felt like he'd woken up from a bad fever, half delirious and shivering. He was not in any real fit state to drive and he knew Beverly was right. For a second he was struck by how much he really loved her; he still felt that betrayal, but the only reason that feeling stung was because he loved her so much. She looked tired too, but there was that distinctly determined set to her face that he knew was just so Beverly.

"I'll go to the hotel," he agreed. Beverly sighed with relief, the ghost of a smile crossing her face. Richie couldn't make himself match it.

The room, with everyone else gone, was eerily silent. Eddie was winding the material of the bed sheet around his finger like a bandage, letting it unspool, then doing the same thing all over again. It did nothing but made the tip of his finger purple from the pressure, but it meant he didn't have to look at Myra. Myra was sitting in the chair that Richie had been in only hours before, her hands worrying at nothing in particular, her mouth a thin line. Two or three times she looked like she was going to say something before she was finally able to speak.

"You know, I'd always think, 'I am so lucky',' she said. "'I am so lucky I have a husband who understands why I get so worried.' So many people, even my friends, they'd always think I was too paranoid. But you would take me seriously. You never did anything stupid or dangerous. Even when we fought, you were never cruel about it. I could trust you to be careful, always. You were always just happy to do the sensible thing and then you go and do something like this..."

"I was fucking miserable, Myra," Eddie said.

Tears welled up in her eyes instantly and Eddie felt a hot sting of guilt, but he didn’t let it make him take back what he’d said. None of what she’d said had been true; it was only a reflection of what Myra had wanted to be true, and she used it now to try and win him over. The promise of peace...
between them, the restoration of the equilibrium they had just escaped, brought him no comfort. He was not going to live the quiet life to try and silence the voice of his mother’s ghost. Not anymore.

"You don't mean that. You're sick, Eddie, sick or… You bumped your head or something. You're not acting like yourself."

"I've never been myself. All I've ever been is scared."

"What does that mean? I don’t understand where all of this is coming from! You’re fine, you’re normal for years, and then all of a sudden all of… I don’t even know what this is."

"I'm trying to explain! It's so fucking hard to…” Eddie suddenly understood very profoundly what the years of stuttering had been like for Bill. "I've never thought about what I wanted. I've only ever done what my mother wanted."

"Well, what's wrong with that?"

"Because my mother was a lunatic! Because I'm sick of being scared all the time! Because doing all that shit means I have to abandon all my friends, who are the only people I should have listened to all along!"

Tears were silently rolling down Myra's face, trying to hold her face in a dignified way. She was doing that thing she always did, fanning at her face like it could blow the tears away. Eddie hated seeing her cry. There was little that made him feel as profoundly guilty and ashamed as seeing someone cry. He thought about Richie, and how he'd opened his eyes that morning hoping that was what he would see every time he did, and felt like a criminal. How could he do this to her? The selfishness of his actions had been something he tried to not think too strongly about, but the degree to which he had abandoned her in favour of chasing his own dream was mortifying. She would be right to leave him in the dust then and there, but for some reason she loved him, or at least thought she did, and that love manifested as obsessive over-concern.

That was what Eddie had always thought it was to be loved; to have someone constantly scrutinising your actions in case you might do something as stupid as think you were capable of bravery. Love was all-consuming, hungering protection from all harm that might dare to cross his path. Love was the promise he would never hurt, because he could never be hurt if he was never allowed to live. Love was suffocating to death from fear the air would be too much for his weak little lungs.

But he didn't know how to describe this to her; there was nothing Myra could protect him from here. He was in love with someone else. She could not swaddle him in cotton wool and stop him from running away and her inability to do so hurt her; Eddie rejected both her love and the language she spoke it in, and doing so after years of passive acceptance felt like a betrayal.

Sickeningly, he did think of his mother. It was hard not to. If Richie had puppy-dog loyalty to Eddie, his mother was a snarling junkyard dog in a pink house dress, fending off anything that dared to come too close to her sweet Eddy Bear. And Eddie had grown up in some crude image of her, a toothless little puppy that kept snapping and snarling without even knowing what it was barking at or about. Over the years, even almost a decade after her death – from the same cancer that had killed his father, one of life's many ironies – her voice had stayed in Eddie's head, in all its sinister, syrupy protectiveness.

\textit{You know what they have in New York, Eddy Bear? AIDs. New York is dirty, Eddie. It's full of dirty people. That's how you get AIDs. Doing dirty things.}
I heard just the other day about a little boy who got addicted to drugs because his friends wouldn’t stop pressuring him. That’s what friends get you, Eddy Bear. They just want to hurt you.

You can’t go swimming with the others because of your lungs, sweetie. You’re too delicate. You aren’t strong enough to be out with those boys. They’re too rough for you. I’ve seen how they don’t play nice. They don’t care about your health. Not like I do.

On and on it went. It had been almost a relief to drown it out with Myra’s voice of concern, two notes at the same pitch cancelling each other out. Myra was never insidious in the way his mother had been, lacked the desire to emotionally manipulate that had made Sonia Kaspbrak such a deft weaver of lies. She was just scared, like he was, and after a childhood of bowing down to the oppressive paranoia of someone who desperately wanted to control him, it was so easy to roll over and let someone else’s concerns dominate his life again. It wasn’t even that Myra wanted to own the precious little doll his mother had, it was just that he thought the only way to love someone back was to play submissive.

Or that’s what he’d thought. At first, the thought crossed his mind that he had never been in love before, but it was quickly replaced by what he understood to be the truth. He had been in love for his entire life. Everything else was a dim imitation.

“You’ve got a head injury,” Myra said, taking a deep breath to try not to cry. “That must be it. You’ve got a head injury, and that’s the reason you’re acting insane. Have the doctors given you an MRI? You got stabbed in the face, maybe you…”

“I don’t have a head injury!”

“You cannot… Treat me like this. I can see you’re unhappy, but you don’t have a right to take it out on me and not explain anything. It isn’t fair, Eddie. You ran away and left me alone for a week, you never said a word, and you’re expecting me to be fine with all of this… I… This isn’t how life works! I’m something in your way that you can get rid of whenever you’re bored of me. What are you going to do? Stay here and never go back? We need to go home. We have to sort this out. I’m not going to…”

“I’m going to explain,” Eddie said, fighting to stay calm. “I’m going to explain when we get home.”

“You are coming home with me?”

There was a lot of anger in Myra’s eyes, but a lot of pain, too. He didn’t like causing people pain; as much of a rude little asshole as Eddie could be, he wasn’t a malicious person. It might have been less cruel to tell her outright I am in love with Richie Tozier, but he knew the moment he said it that it would destroy everything. He needed to be out of the hospital when they had this conversation; somewhere he could talk knowing a nurse wasn’t going to walk in, where they could both make a fucking huge scene. Because it was inevitably going to be a huge scene.

It wasn’t cowardice that was holding him back. He was going to tell Myra. It was just a matter of timing. He was going to be braver now, he was not going to be stupid.

“Things aren’t going to go back to the way they were. They can’t,” he said. “You have to understand that.”

“We’re going to get through this together,” she said, as if it pained her to do so.

“We’ll get through it,” he said. “But not together.”
check out my new fic *portrait of two boys in free fall, artist unknown!* second chapter has just been posted

next chapter something good happens i promise. well, kinda. i dont know if you noticed but i realised somewhere around when i hit the 40,000 word mark that this fic wasnt going to wrap up neatly quickly. but like, good things will happen. i didnt walk out of that theatre and go "fuck i need to write a 60,000 word fic to really make sure eddie is never happy again". just unhappy for like, half of that. which is still less unhappiness than in the novel. you read that shit? its long. its 445,000 words long and ive read it twice. it took me like five years to get around to reading the amazing adventures of kavalier and clay but ive managed to read IT twice within like two years. you know i had a job interview yesterday and the manager was like "whats a character you relate to?" and i said richie tozier? i talked to another human being in a professional setting for twenty minutes and managed to talk about fucking richie tozier. it was the only thing i could think of that was true but wouldnt sound deranged in a job interview. like what else would i say? moon knight? i dont have time to unpack all of that. i just want to work in your fucking film store. what was i talking about?
Richie took a long shower and then slept for eight hours, waking facedown on the mattress with his glasses still on and his mouth tasting worse than his shoes after climbing out of Derry sewers. He wasn't thrilled with how he looked in the mirror, but it was good to change clothes and brush his teeth. He was about to pass out from hunger and it was around 6PM so he took the car into town. A quick survey of the cars outside would suggest that most of the others were in the hotel, but Richie wasn't in the mood for company. There was a diner ten minutes away from Derry Town House that looked completely average so he parked on the sidewalk and headed inside.

Richie had no particular memory of the place; something in the back of his mind told him there used to be a video store on this block, but it hadn't been the one he'd frequented as a kid, the now definitely defunct Blockbuster that had been on the end of his street, so he barely recalled it. The diner had bright artificial lighting and red vinyl benches, so he sat in the back corner and didn't look at the menu. It was a fucking diner. He'd have a burger and barely taste it, and then he'd figure out the rest of his life. Maybe he'd get lucky and just choke to death.

He was staring vaguely into space when the waiter came over. He was a man about Richie's age, with a thinning head of blond hair and a smile that looked a little more genuine than customer service. The badge pinned to his polo shirt said Manager, and below that it said Connor.

"How you doing today? Can I get you anything to drink?" Connor the manager asked, and the second he opened his mouth a chill of memory struck Richie like a brick to the head.

"Connor Bowers?" He said.

Connor blinked in confusion for half a second before realisation washed that away and was replaced by apparent delight. He ran a distracted hand over what was left of his once curly blond hair, beaming at Richie like they were old friends.

"Rich Tozier! Man, it must have been twenty years, how the hell are you? Other than famous, of course. I saw that show of yours, that was funny as hell."

"Oh, thank you, thanks." Richie smiled back at Connor rigidly, his mind whirling as the humiliation of the arcade returned for the first time in days after forgetting it for decades. Although he had never really forgotten. Trauma left an imprint on Richie in invisible ink, but he knew what it said.

"What are you doing back in dear old Derry?" Connor said. "Don't tell me, Hollywood got too boring and you needed some real excitement."

"Me and some friends, we had a kind of reunion."

"Yeah? That's great! Feels like a lot of people get out of Derry and just never look back."

"Not you, though."

The arcade in the lobby of the theatre hung over Richie like a dark shadow. Did Connor remember? He had to, they wouldn't be talking right now if he didn't. The diner, with its stark white lighting
and clean walls, was fading out of Richie's vision, replaced by the queasy smell of buttery popcorn, the jangle of arcade machines, the faint howl of a movie playing behind the big wooden doors. The moment was as fresh in Richie's mind as ever; the sensation of another boy's hand in his, the glimmer of hope that came with it. The awful plunge back into reality when Henry Bowers stepped out of the theatre and Connor turned on Richie to side with his cousin as easily as taking off a coat. The feeling of everyone's eyes as Richie fled out onto the street; not only the humiliation and rejection, but the fact that everyone saw. Everyone knew that little Richie Trashmouth was a fucking f…

"Yeah, I stuck around," Connor said. "Me and my husband run this place together now, so I guess we're staying unless business goes real bad real fast."

"Husband?"

It came out of nowhere and hit Richie hard, leaving him stunned. The Connor of his memory was frozen in that crystalline moment of disgust, a teenage boy who saw what Richie was and found it repellent. The idea he was happily out and married had never crossed Richie’s mind.

"Yeah! Got married back in 2012. Means I’m Connor Starling now, actually. Which is good 'cus…"

He let the silence draw on, significantly, and Richie just nodded, still trying to collect his thoughts. Derry in his memory -- fuck, the Derry he had come back to -- was like an insect in amber, perfectly preserved and entirely unchanging. His friends were the same, the town looked the same. Even Henry Bowers had been the same. The idea that Connor Bowers had grown up and escaped it all, had grown up to be proud of who he was and capable of talking about it with someone who, years before, he had scorned, had never crossed Richie’s mind. Connor had escaped this town while never leaving the city limits and Richie, who lived on the other side of the country, had carried it with him for his entire life.

Connor sat down in the chair opposite Richie, leaning over to him, his brows drawn together and mouth tense with worry.

"I know it was a long time ago, but I am sorry about all that. I was real asshole to you back then," he said.

"Jesus. Don’t be. We were just kids, and Bowers was…” Richie opened his eyes wide to emphasise what he meant without having to say it.

"Oh, yeah. Yeah."

"We’re grown-ups now. Who cares. And you’re married!" Richie found he had to swallow quite hard all of a sudden, a lump forming in his throat.

"I sure am! What about you?"

"Oh, fuck. Not married but there’s this guy… Things might be getting pretty serious."

It was true, if without details, and as soon as he said it Richie felt like a weight had been lifted off him. It was as if he was cresting and taking a breath, letting go of the air he’d been holding onto to breathe in fresh and new. Connor smiled again, clearly happy to hear it. Richie's hands were shaking. He gripped his hands together, trying to will them to stop trembling. He found he couldn't stop smiling. Connor either didn't notice or was too polite to say.

"That's great, man."
"Yeah. It is. It really is."

Connor chuckled at Richie's earnestness, but not unkindly. He was kind. Somehow he had left his childhood behind and become happy. Become confident. Become proud. Richie envied him but saw, with a clarity he'd lacked for most of his life, that he could be him. This was the first time he had told someone he was gay, and he knew, with sudden urgency, that it could not be the last.

Someone else walked into the diner and Connor stood up to wave them to a seat. He stopped by Richie's table again.

"It was really good to see you again, Richie. You need anything, just ask me. On the house, alright?"

"Hey, you'll never hear me complaining about a free lunch."

Connor laughed and Richie could not believe how light he felt inside. That sensation was still there; he had come up for air and now he could see the lake was beautiful.

The car’s tires crunched on the leaves that had drifted across the Kissing Bridge and Richie looked over his shoulder as he leaned on the barrier of the bridge. Ben stayed in the driver’s seat but Bev climbed out, walking over the bridge to come and join Richie on the side. He offered her his cigarette and she took a long drag before she handed it back to him. The sun had set and the moon now was glimmering on the water of the river below, the trees that grew densely across the side of the road leaving trails on the surface as their branches dipped into the water. In the moonlight, the pale green of the leaves looked shades of silver.

“I thought you might have left, at first,” Beverly said. “But I knew you’d be here.”

“I said I’d stay,” he said. "I didn't want to leave without saying goodbye to everyone."

She leaned her head on his shoulder and he leaned his head over too, resting it on hers so that they fit together. It was nice for a little while to just watch the breeze slowly move the trees, listen to nothing at all, and pass the cigarette back and forth. It was a little like the quieter moments of the summer they had lived together, when on rainy days, or days when one or the other did not want to see the whole group, they could find a quiet spot in town and just sit, and think, and enjoy the fact that they were both there. There was a pang in Richie’s heart when he thought about how the other person he would go to when he needed the quiet was Stan; and how in a way Stan’s memory had pulled through for them one last time. He missed his friend, and did not want to have to miss the others again.

“You know,” Richie said. “I’m gay.”

“Yes,” Beverly said.

“You never said anything.”

“Me knowing wasn’t important. It was you telling me that mattered.”

The calmness of her reply softened something inside himself; if the response had been an eye-roll, an ‘uh duh’, an expression of disbelief that he had even bothered to tell her, he would have exploded. He thought that maybe he never should have doubted her, but knew she would understand why he had. There was still that sensation inside him of lightness, and he found himself standing up straighter than he had in years.
“I was worried about what you’d say,” he said.

“Of course you were. It’s not easy, even if it is your best friends.” She took the cigarette off him again to take another drag. “Fuck, maybe that makes it harder.”

“I just didn’t want to let you down.”

“Richie, you have never, ever let me down. You have always managed to be stupider, and more annoying, and funnier, and braver than I ever expected. And when you were just a kid you helped save me. And I don’t know if I ever paid you back for that.”

Beverly flicked the butt of the cigarette away so she could wrap her arms around Richie and pull him into a hug. He leaned over to hug her back, her arms around his neck and his face in her cloud of red hair. There was the wet of tears against his cheek, and he couldn’t tell if they were hers or his.

“You’re the only woman for me, Beverly Marsh,” Richie said. “Good for Ben that I am gay or else he wouldn’t stand a chance.”

“You are irresistible, Trashmouth. Especially now that you smell better.”

They both turned to look at Ben in the car, who was staring back out at them. His face went soft the second he made eye contact with Bev and he looked for all the world like a man who had found the lost city of El Dorado and knew that he would never have to suffer again.

“Look at him,” Richie said. “That is sickening.”

Beverly laughed. “Don’t be mean.”

“Jesus, Bev. Look at him. He would do anything for you. You could ask him to jump off this bridge and he’d just do it. Like that.” He snapped his fingers. “You understand the power and responsibility you hold, right? Are you sure you’re ready to look after your own Ben?”

"Shut up. Are you coming back with us?"

She laughed and pushed him gently, and for a little while, it was almost alright. He didn't want to say anything else, but he couldn't pretend he was fine forever anymore. He was done living his life throwing as much of himself as he could onto a funeral pyre and hoping he could say goodbye to it all at last; he was through grieving for the man he never was while sacrificing everything he had potential to be.

There were pebbles on the ground under his feet and he grabbed a particularly smooth round one, feeling the weight of it in his hand and turning it over a few times.

"I love you, Bev, and I always will. But I gotta have some time, too. I can't..." He shook his head. "I know why you all stopped me. I get it. But right now I am... There's too much. I am so... Fucking angry. My life is so fucking. And I'm glad you guys are happy, but I can’t... Watch that. I can’t sit back and watch you be happy when everything is a mess and I don’t even know if...”

“Richie, it’s ok. We’ll be here for you when you need us. We... I don’t know. Things could be better.”

Richie pulled his arm back and then whipped it forward, throwing the pebble over the bridge towards the water. It skipped once and then sank without a trace, the ripples growing wide and then fading out.
“They’re going to be better,” he said. “It’s just a little more time.”

Chapter End Notes

title is diplomats son by vampire weekend

Connor, the kid from the arcade scene where Henry Bowers calls Richie a faggot, really feels like a closeted kid who's scared and hides that by turning on people when he's in danger. Which is like, maybe not the nicest thing but something I think is sympathetic.

I've been writing Richie in a way where Derry is something that hangs on him really deeply and he almost convinces himself that his past means he'll never be free of it or really happy, and seeing someone who managed to escape in a way he hasn't is really meaningful for him. Like a breaking point, but a good one. He resigned himself to being stuck in one particular way but it doesn't actually have to be that way?

Both and him and Eddie have reached a point where they understand they're too different and they can't go back to the way things were before...

twitter
tumblr
but when i return i swear it will not be as a tourist

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

After Richie had gone and Eddie had found himself involuntarily pledging fealty to Myra once again, there was a little while where everything was so normal it was as if nothing had happened. The two of them talked to the doctors about how long Eddie would have to stay in the hospital, when he would be able to go home, the physical therapy he would need. Myra was already looking into where he could be transferred, trying to get through to the insurance people to find out who would cover them (“But we can always pay out of pocket. We both have such good jobs, we can afford it. Assuming work hasn’t fired you. They might have fired you. You should call Philip. Have you called Philip? Or Adam French?”). It was as if the time they had been apart had never happened at all and now they were back to their day-to-day of doing the bills and squabbling.

It had been a few hours alone with her and Eddie thought he was going to go completely fucking insane. Everything out of his mouth sounded like it was coming from another person, and the Eddie inside himself was watching the situation with a silent scream. How was he just sitting in bed, talking to Myra about if Dr Ng was really the best physical therapist option if they’d have to drive so far every week? Every time he spoke the words I’m in love with my best friend rang in his mind, but it was like the translation filter was spoken and all he could say was things like that he thought he shouldn’t travel too much too early.

When Bill and Mike showed up it was a blissful relief. Myra went to get lunch, saying that it was far too risky to eat in a hospital, where there were infectious diseases hiding around every corner. In truth, Eddie was glad of her leaving, and was fairly sure she just wanted an excuse she could give herself, rather than needing to convince him. Tensions were high.

Mike and Bill flanked him in plasticy hospital armchairs. Both of them certainly looked like they’d just been through hell a couple of days ago. They all should have been celebrating, but clearly no one was in the mood for it, and Eddie felt a little irrationally guilty. Mike looked exhausted, and Bill had deep rings around his eyes. As much as the nightmare was over, Eddie didn’t think any of them would let go of what had happened until they all managed to put a few hundred miles between Derry and themselves. Right before he’d come in Bill had been on the phone, arguing with someone about work — who exactly Eddie didn’t know, but it felt like a warning sign. The real world, the rest of their lives, was starting to creep into Derry. No longer were they protected by their quest; they needed to start leaving, the world outside wasn’t going to wait anymore. He knew it was going to come up before Bill even mentioned it.

“I guess it’s time for all of us to start going home,” Bill said. He sounded a little lost when he said it, turning his phone over and over in his hands like a worry stone.

“Or for me to leave home,” Mike said, pleasantly.

“Where are you going to go?” Bill said.

“In the future, I don’t know. I’ve been living my entire life being the lighthouse keeper waiting to call you all home. None of you really had any control over leaving, it was all your parents, but I did lose thirty years of my life to this town. Didn’t give me a lot of chances to think about what I wanted next.” Mike rubbed his elbow, almost like he was bashful. “I think what I’d like first is to go on a long road trip. There’s a lot of America out there. I’d like to see it.”
“You should come stay with me in New York,” Eddie said. “See the Big Apple.”

“I’d like that.” Mike smiled broadly and it was the first time Eddie actually felt kind of alright about going back ‘home’, like he had something to look forward to.

“Yeah, and me and Richie are both in LA. You can stop by, help me explain any of this to my wife,” Bill said.

“Wouldn’t take that job if I was you, Mike,” Eddie said.

“I’d love to stay with you man, but I’m done being the one who has to figure out how to explain everything.” Mike said.

“It’s weird you and Richie were in the same city for years and never met,” Eddie said. “The second I saw him it was like I got hit by a truck.”

“Yeah, I mean, it’s not like I didn’t see his show or anything but…” Bill shrugged. “You two… You’re both my best friends, but c’mon. You two were always special.”

Eddie smiled and looked away awkwardly, catching a glimpse of Mike’s smile and only feeling more like a teenager playing truth or dare. He shook his head.

“How is Richie?” He asked.

The question had been weighing on his mind ever since Richie had run out; he was both furious and embarrassed he hadn’t been able to go with him, stuck in bed and barely able to make it to the shower without feeling like he needed to have his twelfth nap of the day. Because of the location of the wound, every time he moved something else in his body ached, the pain radiating out. And yet despite that, the prevalent thought on his mind was how much better he’d feel if Richie was there.

“He went back to the hotel to get some rest,” Mike said. “Beverly managed to talk him down from leaving.”

“What’s going on with him and you guys?” Eddie said.

“He uh…” Mike sighed. “He blames us.”

“That’s fucking stupid. He’s such an idiot.” It was said with aggressiveness, but everyone there could sense the affection in his voice, and a smile crept up Mike’s face.

“He was really messed up after you got hurt,” Bill said. “He really… He cares about you a lot. He uh…”

“And I love him too, but we both knew going in that any of us might die. And I don’t know if I’d have gotten better if you had all pulled me out… Something happened down there. Something I can’t explain, but I’m pretty sure it’s why I’m alive.” Eddie shook his head. “I don’t know. But he shouldn’t be angry at you guys.”

“I keep feeling like he has kind of a point…” Bill scratched at the back of his neck. “I don’t really know what I should feel. Guilty, mostly.”

“Well, cut it out.” Eddie tossed an empty plastic cup at him, which made it about three feet across the room before hitting the ground with a hollow puck. “I’m sick of people worrying about me. I looked after myself, okay? And as much as I need you guys to be my best friends, I need to know that I can pick myself up too.”
Mike leaned over to give his shoulder a squeeze of support. There was a bubble of relief that came with the fact that neither of them were arguing with him; the angry voice of Eddie’s mother in the back of his head made it seem as though no one, even those closest to him, would ever take him seriously when he said he wanted to be independent. He would only forever be sad little Eddie Kaspbrak, who couldn’t go and run with the other kids because his mother was too scared he’d fall.

But not anymore. Even saying it once, just to his friends, made it easier to believe he wasn’t crazy.

“I think that’s probably the only time I’ve heard you say something actually nice about Richie since you got back,” Mike said.

“What, that he’s an asshole?”

“That you love him.”

“Oh, right.” Eddie laughed. “Yeah, I do. Like it’s not fucking obvious.”

“Still nice to hear you admitting it.”

“Yeah, I haven’t… Told him yet. But I’m going to. Then I gotta figure out everything else.”

“Easier said than done,” Bill said.

“Yeah, that’s for fucking sure. But fuck…” Eddie looked out of the window at a distant plane leaving a trail in the midday sky, seeing past that, seeing further than the boundaries of this small town or this state, beyond the borders of New England. “It’s going to be worth it.”

Richie woke up that morning knowing he was going to leave Derry before the day was out. He said his goodbyes to the others quietly, as if he was leaving for work for the day. Them meeting again was implicit; they had already been talking about when they’d see each other again in tones of almost feverish urgency. Richie suspected that none of them were completely convinced that they wouldn’t lose all of this again as soon as they left, the trauma of forgetting sticking to them all like residue. Richie knew he wouldn’t forget, he couldn’t, but he wasn’t going to say no to any of them. Looking at his phone after a week of neglecting it was frightening -- he had briefly glanced at the stack of emails he had and turned the thing off again -- but it was worth it to watch Bill try to talk Ben through making a group text. It was hard to remember how important the little things were, but even when he was still walking around the rift of the scar in his heart Richie could look on his friends laughing together over something so small and smile. That was love, he supposed; the hot, hard edges of his anger were a small volcanic island in a sea of tenderness.

He had to take a moment before he walked into the hospital. He sat in the car outside and let his guilt run free for a little while, rioting through his body like an anxiety attack waiting to happen, then he sucked it up and got out of the car. He made it halfway up the stairs into the hospital before he spotted Myra walking outside right towards him. Briefly, the idea of hurling himself off the stairs and into the ornamental bushes growing on the sides sounded very appealing, but she’d already spotted him. He was unsure if he was visibly pulling a face, but he might as well have spat in her direction from the way she was looking at him.

For a second, he wasn’t sure he was going to say anything, but his big fucking mouth opened as soon as she was in earshot, despite the fact his brain was running about thirty feet behind him, trying to play catch-up.

“Don’t worry, I’m not going to try and smuggle him out,” Richie said. He didn’t even say it
unpleasantly; if it had been any other situation, it might have been kind of funny, but Myra was decidedly not in the mood.

“Do you think you’re funny?” Myra said.

“Yeah, it’s kind of my job.” He leaned a hip against the railing, appreciative of the support. It had begun to rain a very fine and gentle rain and he wanted to head inside, but Myra was standing in the dry doorway like a security guard, and he couldn’t force his way past her.

“I think you’re an awful person,” she said.

“You don’t know me. And you really fuckin’ humiliated me trying to out me like that in front of everyone, so you’re not such a ray of sunshine yourself.”

“I humiliated you? Don’t you think it’s humiliating to have to stand there and be the one person in the room who doesn’t know what’s going on? Eddie’s my husband, and now he’s talking to me about how I have to let him kill himself doing something stupid and that our marriage is over, while all of you strangers stand around and judge me.”

Myra, at the top of the stairs, was above Richie and he had to crane his neck back to look up at her. He didn’t like the height differential it enforced; he didn’t like having to feel so fucking small in her shadow.

“Eddie’s going to tell you everything,” Richie said. “I’m not some kind of fucking evil wizard who warped your husband’s mind and is now stealing him away from you, alright? He’s his own man.”

“So everyone keeps telling me. A man I barely know, apparently, but that you know everything about.”

“Yeah, I do. I met him when we were five.”

“And that makes you better than me? We were married for five years. That isn’t nothing. That has to count for something.”

Her anger was righteous but directionless; she focused on Richie because she was angry that life would have the audacity to put her in this position, that her plans and what she thought was simple, sealed, and sorted was falling apart in front of her. The floor of the world had fallen out from under her like the caverns underneath an ancient house snapping shut and he was an easy target.

Richie couldn’t see her as anything but an enemy. Maybe that was unfair, but he didn’t care. Myra hated him and he, already burning with so much anger and resentment, could not bring himself to not hate her. There was simply too much else in his fucking life for him not to fall into something this easy; already so eaten up by guilt and shame there was a kind of pleasure in crushing that with a maybe she deserved it. He didn’t know if that was the most morally sound call he could ever make, but she hated him and he was happy to hate her in return.

“When was the last time you had sex? Or he really kissed you? Or he did something special, really special, just for you? I don’t want you to tell me, I just want you to really, really think about it,” he said, his voice filled with venom.

Myra stared at him in shocked silence for a moment.

“Where the hell do you get off being so holier-than-thou, you sanctimonious asshole?” She spat.

“Where do you get off trying to own his whole life?”
Richie wanted this to feel better than it did; the rain was seeping through his shoes, and nothing about him standing there in front of her felt triumphant. In that moment, all he had was the same longing to see Eddie he’d had all his life, and a desire to get out of the rain. It finally dawned on him that he didn’t have to ‘win’ here at all; Myra didn’t have any power. For all her anger and her scorned pride, she couldn’t do anything. He was just kicking someone who was already down.

He made the last few steps up and came to huddle in the hospital door. Myra took a few deliberate steps away from him, holding her purse to her like she was scared he was going to rip it out of her hands.

“Look,” he said. “I’m sorry. But you need to deal with…”

“Fuck you,” Myra said. She pushed past him, storming down the stairs. Richie just headed inside.

The hospital didn’t really have a garden, but it did have some grass and a path outside that you could walk around in relative peace, away from the road. It was a quieter place to sit than the hospital, with its stale, chemical air and constant sounds of other patients with their machines and complicated lives. Most of the other patients hanging around outside were braving the sour weather to have a smoke, but Eddie was just dealing with the light, misty rain so he could be outside, sitting on a bench near the door. He’d been cooped up in the hospital for days, and it was good to just breathe in some fresh air, even if it was only a thin strip of grass wrapped around the side of the building, ten steps from the door, with someone’s cigarette smoke drifting in his face once a minute.

There was something freeing about being out in the rain. He had been told so many times as a child that going in the rain would get him a cold, which would get him pneumonia, which would obviously bring him to an untimely death. It had been just another way of exerting control over him; reduce the ways that he was able to leave the house to more and more specific circumstances and then he wouldn’t be able to go out at all. Sonia Kaspbrak was always so reasonable in her wishes. She just didn’t want Eddie to get sick, and who could blame her? She loved her son.

Eddie’s father died when he was very young; he had gotten cancer, and then he had wasted away. One of Eddie’s earliest memories was sitting by the hospital bed, looking at a man who barely knew he was there, seeing his mother flit around the room in a whirl of motion. It had been his mother that had demanded all of Eddie’s attention; she had been unable to stop trying to fix every little thing, checking on medicine and machines and painkillers, memorising huge lists and charts of information that she would reel off to the nurses at every opportunity, checking and double-checking their work. Eddie’s father had just slept, completely still, and Eddie had been afraid of that stillness. Too young to understand what cancer was or how it worked, he only knew his father was sick, and Eddie desperately did not want to be sick. In that room, he had watched his mother’s life and protectiveness and thought that she was the only thing in the world that could keep him safe. But of course he had thought that; he had been four years old.

He understood her. He understood her more than he wanted to. The fact he had empathy and love for her, and probably always would, left him feeling cold. She had watched her husband die slowly, and it was her greatest fear that the same thing would happen to her son. He understood being afraid -- but he had only really been afraid because she had taught him to be. Fear had been her longest lasting gift, and when he’d started to escape it, she’d found ways to pull him back in. Some part of him had always suspected the family moved when Eddie was a teenager precisely to escape the threat that the friendships he was making would start to outshine her importance and control in his life.

Her fear became her weapon and she used it to make Eddie into as much of a good little thing she
could control as possible. And he resented that. How the fuck could he not? How hadn’t she expected that? She had never thought he would grow up at all, Eddie was pretty sure. That if she just tried hard enough, he’d be eternally her little boy, undamaged and unharmed by life and reality. He craved the damage. He craved the harm. As much as he feared it, he also longed for the sickly feeling of adrenaline and fear you got right before you fell. Eddie Kaspbrak wanted to be afraid, but not because he was paranoid his nice, normal life would be taken away from him; he wanted to be afraid because he had a chance of getting what he wanted, because he had something to lose worth losing.

The door slid open and Richie stepped outside. Eddie smiled at him; he couldn’t conceal how relieved he was to see Richie again. They hadn’t seen each other since the day before, and a paranoid part of Eddie had been telling him that Richie had run away, that everything was over. But he shouldn’t have doubted him.

Richie sat down next to Eddie, making a disgruntled face about the wetness of the bench. He had his hands in his pockets, but leaned his shoulder against Eddie’s, warm through the material of his jacket.

“Fucking cold out here,” Richie said.

“I needed to get out,” Eddie said.

“Are we gonna do a jailbreak?” Richie said. “I can smuggle you out under my jacket, be on the road to California in no time.”

“Yeah? You think I’d like LA?”

“You’d love it. You’d fit right in. Avoiding all the crazy pyramid schemes, screaming at the shitty traffic, walking your tiny designer dog, coming home with bags of the trendiest fruits you got at an organic farmers market.”

“And where’s home? Beverly Hills?”

“Fuck me, Eddie, I don’t make that kind of money, I’m not Seinfeld. No, we’d be out in Pasadena. You’d bitch about the parking but we’d go out to the San Gabriel Mountains and you’d be like ‘this view is worth it’ when I’m dying in a ditch ‘cus it’s 95 out. And we’d fight all the tourists at the Rose Bowl flea market because you’d be sure there’s some chair that would look better in the living room and I’d be like ‘we could just go to IKEA’, but you would find the chair and it would look better, but I’d never have thought it even needed replacing if you hadn’t. I’d have just kept using the same broken shit I have for years.”

Rain made Richie’s glasses frosty, the mistiness of the air settling on him, droplets of water forming on the stray ringlets of his hair. He looked better than he had yesterday; he’d obviously been sleeping and eating, which calmed stray worries rioting in Eddie’s chest a little.

“You’d be filming some Netflix special, and I’d be working at some big insurance firm,” Eddie said, “we’d both be stressed out of our minds. You’re at home all day so why aren’t you cooking dinner? I have to come home from working 9-5 and dealing with traffic to cook my own goddamn dinner?”

“I’m not your housewife, I’ve been slaving over a hot keyboard for twelve hours. You just don’t respect my career.”

“You’re right, I don’t. I don’t know who the hell pays to see you.”
“You did. And you could have gotten in for free if you called me! You’re a fucking chump.”

“I am a fucking chump. And you’re an asshole.”

Richie laughed. His hand brushed against Eddie’s. He was smiling, but there was a profound sadness in him that was betrayed by his eyes and by the furtiveness of his affection; Eddie understood that he was still afraid of being caught. There were too many people around who might see. For that one moment in the hospital room, when they had woken up together, there had almost been the belief that there was just the two of them in the world, but it hadn’t lasted. Now they were back in the eyes of the whole world.

“I told Bev that I’m gay,” Richie said. “And she knows about us. I think everyone knew anyway, but I still told her.”

“That’s good. I’m proud of you.”

“Shut up.”

“No, really, I am. You’re braver than you think, too.”

Richie’s face was stretched into a smile, but Eddie sensed that he was fighting back tears. Eddie clenched Richie’s hand in his.

“Do you remember being eleven,” Richie said, “and we were at Bill’s. It was the first sleepover you were allowed on. And you were wearing those stupid fucking pyjamas like, matching neat little pinstripe pyjamas.”

“Yeah,” Eddie said. “My mom said they were ‘in fashion’.”

“So fucking funny. We were all in like, Ninja Turtles jammie bottoms and you looked like a tiny little grandpa.”

“Fuck you. I didn’t know any better, I’d never been to another kid’s house overnight before.”

“Yeah, I know. And then you got scared, because it was too dark.”

“Yeah. And you found the flashlight. I thought you were gonna make fun of me, but you didn’t, for some fucking reason.” Eddie smiled distantly. “I think that was the moment I fell in love with you.”

Richie’s head snapped to look at him, eyes huge in his startled face. Eddie laughed, not at Richie but with love for him.

“Thirty fuckin’ years you’ve known?” Richie said. “Asshole.”

“I didn’t know. I was eleven. And, like, you were a boy. I hadn’t… Fuck, I still don't think I've figured all that out yet. But like, benefit of hindsight?”

“Alright, well, I still haven’t made up my mind if I like you that much, so don’t get your hopes up or anything.”

“Fuck you.”

“Not right now, it’s wet, and not even in the fun way.”

“I take it back. I hate you.”
It was starting to rain more and Eddie was shivering in his thin hospital robe so Richie pulled his jacket off, draping it around Eddie’s shoulders like a shroud. Eddie leaned into him more, slotting into his chest. They probably should have gone back inside, but there was the understanding that once they did everything would be over. Neither of them had to say it; they knew the sojourn in Derry would end eventually and the time they had before the world picked them off one by one was rapidly vanishing.

It wasn’t that he didn’t want to leave Derry; he did. Fuck Derry. It was an awful town, with a black history, generations of trauma laced so thick and deep that the suffering it had seen had sunk into the soil, poisoning what grew. It felt destined to be a town that only ever spawned misery, but Eddie knew that wasn’t true. He had found rare and beautiful things here, and they were almost enough to make him stay. It was easy to make himself comfortable in a place of suffering when he had something small to hold onto; he could endure a lot when the fear he would lose the little he had was holding him in its grip. Why would you risk it all when there was no guarantee the risk would outweigh the reward? At least the poisoned soil was stable.

But that wasn’t a good enough reason. There was more to life. No one was supposed to live like this.

“I got into college when I was eighteen,” Eddie said. “I graduated top of my high school, I did good. I was honor roll. I got into my first choice: I was gonna go to New York to do statistics. And all along Mom was telling me no, no, something’s going to go wrong, you’re going to fail, you can’t make it. What if you get sick, what if something happens in New York, what if the plane crashes? And the whole time I’d say Mom, it’s gonna be fine. It’s going to be ok. Then on the day I’m supposed to leave I have my suitcase in my hand and she’s standing in the doorway with the car keys, because she has to drive me to the airport because she never let me learn how to drive, and she says ‘You’re not going, Eddie’, and you know what I said?”

Richie looked at him. His face said please tell me you said no, and Eddie wished that was what he could say, that he could tell a story about standing up to his mother and getting out on his own terms, but Richie’s eyes said that he already knew Eddie had not, and there was no point even trying to lie.

“I said, ‘Okay Mama’, and then I called the college and told them I’d start next year,” Eddie said.

“Jesus, Eds.”

Eddie laughed. He didn’t really know why; there was just something funny to him in how pathetic he’d been. He had been eighteen years old, all of 5’8” and 120 lbs, wearing a Star Wars T-shirt and trying to stare his mom down, and she had said ‘Go to your room’, and he’d crumbled. Like fucking ashes. As bad as he’d wanted it, he’d fallen apart, because he had no control over anything in his life. It had only taken her word to stop him.

"She loved me," Eddie said.

"Yeah, and she loved the fucking Precious Moments figurines on her mantelpiece, and I don't think she could ever tell the difference."

"Probably not. It's hard, though, when someone loves you... Or thinks they do... To tell them to fuck off. Even if you're right, it makes you feel like shit."

“You’re not coming back to LA with me, are you?” Richie said, almost wistfully.

“No,” Eddie said.
Richie barked a humourless laugh and wiped his eyes with the heel of his hand. It hurt to see; Eddie wanted him to stop being in pain, to wipe it all away, but nothing was that easy.

“I have to sort my life out,” Eddie said. “I can’t just run away.”

“You can do anything you want. You don’t have to do anything. Getting in trouble is like, a fake concept,” Richie said.

“Alright, I want to sort out my life,” Eddie said. “I have twenty years I gotta pack away. I have to tell my wife I want a divorce. I gotta figure out where I’m going to live. If I want my job -- if I even have it anymore. I’m going to do this properly. I’m going to do this my way, and I’m going to do it right.”

“And then?”

“Then I’m going to come to California.”

“I think like…” Richie began, wrinkling up his nose for a second as he tried to think of what he wanted to say, his eyes fixed on a distant and invisible spot on the horizon. “If I was like, a character in a romance movie, I’d say some shit about how I wasn’t going to wait for you forever. Like, ‘I have to live my own life, I’m not going to wait for my Prince Charming to come along and save me’. Maybe that should be what I say. But that’s fucking… That’s bullshit. We both know that’s bullshit. I mean, what the fuck am I going to do? Date some other guys? That’s gonna go great. ‘Yeah, hey, whatever your name is, I don’t know if I’ll ever really be able to love you and if this other guy comes back, I’ll drop you in a second’. Like, that’s cool. That would be super fucking fair to whoever that poor fucker is.”

He pulled his glasses off to try and wipe some of the rainwater off them. He could have been crying, or it could have been the rain. Eddie remembered their first kiss, and the longing in his chest was so vast and so deep it could have burst his stitches wide open. He could have bled to death, right then and there, all because the love in his chest was too huge to be held in by his body or the staples holding him together. The love in him was vast enough to drown them both, and it would, if they tried to fight the current any longer.

“I will wait for you. Forever.” Richie put his glasses back on, his face calm and his words that soft, muted tone he took on when he was being sincere. “I’ll wait forever, and part of the reason I will is because I trust you enough to know you won’t make me.”

Once upon a time, Eddie and Richie had cut the palms of their hands and made a pact. Twenty-seven years later, they were doing the same. There was no glass bottle this time, but they didn’t need one. The scars they shared hung over them invisibly, and Eddie felt the weight of the promise he was making. It did not feel like a burden. He looked up at Richie, and Richie looked back at him.

“I won’t,” he said.

“I know.”

They sat outside for a few minutes longer, but the rain got too strong and eventually they headed back inside, pearls of water dripping from Eddie’s damp hair and rolling down the healing scar on his cheek. When the two of them parted, it was only with a slight touch of the hand, and the understanding of the promise they had made. They did not need goodbyes; they would see each other again, and it would be soon.
title is I Will Not Return as a Tourist by Boniface (which is like my unofficial themesong for this fic i think)

i think this is probably the chapter i like the most myself other than Eddie's resurrection sequence... it sort of happened accidentally but i like what i wrote. anyway things are heading.... in a direction.

as always my twitter is @rorschachisgay and my tumblr is saints-row-2, and please check out my other ongoing fic, portrait of two boys!
and to save all our lives you've got to envision/the fiery crash

Chapter Notes

oh my god getting the ios skins to work in this was a nightmare. no one say i dont do anything for you guys. (or the issue is just tht i am very stupid).

like general implied homophobia warning; nothing explicit just like bad vibes

title is Fiery Crash by Andrew Bird

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Fashion line Rogan Marsh has announced it is “pressing pause” on their upcoming fall/winter collections. The decision has come in the wake of lead designer Beverly Marsh leaving the company, citing “irreconcilable differences” between her and Rogan Marsh co-founder Thomas Rogan.

Rogan Marsh spokesperson Tamara McFarren told FashionUnited over email: “Rogan Marsh is re-evaluating the direction of the brand,” and states it is likely to relaunch in 2017 with “a whole new vision for women’s fashion”.

Beverly Marsh could not be reached for comment. Her representative Clarissa Nguyen stated that: “Ms Marsh is taking some time for herself”.

Richie

how was ur flight

Ok. Awkward. Had the car driven back and pretty sure the guy smoked in here. Smells weird.

ur not happy to be home

No. Everything feels different. I just can’t enjoy the city anymore, nothing looks the same.

How’s LA?

apartment feels too big

Too big?

with just me in it

I can fix that.

i was thinking about a dog

Doesn’t have to be either/or.
i like ur style

NOT a pomeranian.

LA never stopped being fucking hot. Maine was either humid and warm or cold as all hell; it only had the pretense of having a summer, but LA didn’t even have seasons, as far as Richie could tell. It just had heat. He was sitting in Jason’s office with the A/C on full blast, trying to stop feeling like a wet rag. The huge glass windows of the office overlooked the valley, and Richie stared out at the winding roads and backed-up traffic. It felt... Familiar. Not like home, but 'home' to Richie was somewhere he hated, that felt, above all else, wildly unsafe. He didn’t need LA to feel like home; it was fine that it just felt safe.

Jason had been giving Richie a version of the silent treatment that mostly involved looking at Richie for a long, furious moment before returning to scrolling through a seemingly endless amount of emails that probably didn’t have anything to do with him but really sold the amount of work that a poor, long suffering agent had to cope with. Mostly Richie just found it kind of funny, not that he was going to say that. He didn’t want to dig himself into a deeper hole. It was probably a miracle he wasn’t out on his ass. A miracle, or the guarantee he was still going to make Jason enough money in the future for this all to be worth it. He just sat on the couch Jason had up against the office wall while Jason sat at his desk, the two of them existing in relative peace while Richie chugged iced water and waited for them to get to the point.

Eventually, Jason gave up on the mind games and just folded his hands together like a teacher about to give a lecture. Richie wore his best apologetic face, which wasn’t really very effective at the best of times and just generally made him look very sarcastic. Thankfully, Jason knew him well enough that it wouldn’t have worked anyway.

“Thankfully, saying that you had a medical emergency covered it. The... Garbage show you delivered in Boston helped sell it. The refunds were a nightmare, but I managed to make sure we haven’t burned Eldorado Reno so much they’re not going to have us back.”

“You’re the world’s best manager, Jace. Have I told you that enough? I feel like I don’t tell you that enough.”

“Yeah, you don’t. Are you ever going to tell me what the fuck happened, or are you still on whole... It’s too deep and complex for me to understand, midlife crisis shit?”

“My boyfriend had a serious accident and he was in the hospital.”

It was a half-truth. It was many half-truths, each a tiny fraction of a different truth, none of which added up to a whole. Which meant essentially it was a lie, but it was a lie Richie didn’t feel bad about.

“Ok, right, well, why the fuck didn’t you say that in the first place?” Jason said. “You think I would have jumped all the way down your throat if you’d told me that? I’m not inhuman.”

He took a second and then squinted at Richie, waving around a stylus in a faintly threatening manner.

“Boyfriend? You haven’t mentioned that before, have you?”
“No, man. That was my subtle way of coming out to you.”

Jason had been Richie’s manager for about eight years, after Richie’s previous manager Nora had retired and kicked him over to her right-hand guy. Jason had the exact same brisk ‘I don’t give a fuck about your personal life, I like money’ attitude as her, and it was that attitude that made Richie like him. He liked having someone who was grounded in business and just wanted to get everything sorted out right. When he’d first signed on with her, aged around twenty-seven and reeling after his success as a comedian was really starting to take off, she’d told him he seemed like the kind of guy who was liable to fuck up if he didn’t have the right people around him. He’d liked the honesty, and Jason stuck to the same policy.

It had made hiding the gay thing easy. Jason did not care. If he had noticed at all that Richie had the occasional man in his orbit that was a little more than a friend, there were untold hundreds of successful men in LA who had sex with guys behind closed doors and kept that to themselves, and Jason didn’t care about them either. Richie was in good company, and Jason didn’t give a fuck about that, the other guys, or anything at all that wasn’t going to end up being a PR nightmare.

“Oh, right, I didn’t think you’d said so. You were always so… ‘So I was fucking my girlfriend’s sister when I accidentally said her Mom’s name’, y’know? Which works, I mean, you are funny.”

“Thanks, man. I’m glad you think I’m funny. You’re my fucking manager.”

“Talk to me like that, I won’t be.” Jason looked like he was considering something. “This could work, actually.”

“What, you thinking I’m funny?”

“Yes. But no, I mean the boyfriend story. Right now your public image? Not so hot. People are angry you dropped out of nowhere and they want to know what’s going on. You do a publicity tour, talk about your boyfriend’s health crisis? Sympathy, but more importantly, we’re changing the story. No more headlines about rumoured drug binges or whatever, now everyone’s talking about you being a new gay… Icon… Or whatever the kids are saying these days.”

Richie slumped on the couch, squeezing his water bottle and crinkling the plastic loudly. Jason watched him with his mouth drawn into a hard line and brow low, already knowing he was about to get hit with something.

“I don’t want to turn this into something where I’m like, profiting off being gay,” Richie said. “That’s so… Cynical. And I can’t talk about the guy, yet.”

“Start a fucking non-profit, then.” Jason considered this. “Actually, not a bad idea. You find some happy homes for gay kids fund or something, be their new face? That would really sell.”

“Oh my God, man.”

“And what do you mean you can’t talk about the guy? Oh, God, are we going to have a problem?”

“No! He’s just not, like, famous. Or out. I don’t want all of the universe descending on Joe Schmoe at his insurance firm because he’s banging me.”

Jason was unoffended, muttered something under his breath and tapped away at his keyboard for a little while. Richie laid back on the couch like it was a therapist’s office, his legs dangling off the edge. The ceiling offered him no inspiration.

“I want to go back to writing my own material,” Richie said.
“Fine by me. Material for what? It’s a bit late to finish your tour.”

“Yeah, no. I wanna do some small shows. Test some stuff out.”

Jason thought for a moment, eyes closed like he was trying to enter a trance state.

“Your show starts airing on Comedy Central in a month. We need to be doing publicity as much as possible for that. If you want to do some open mic stuff it’s your time, but we need to start looking bigger picture after. We need to capitalize on the buzz from the new season.”

Richie waved a hand in the air dismissively. “Whatever. I’ll do whatever. What are you doing now?”

“Talking to someone who can get you on TV as soon as possible. Congratulations, Rich, you’re getting a brand new public image. Goodbye Mom jokes, hello Dad jokes.”

eds

what did you have for lunch today

I had a meatball sub. I was going to get turkey but I didn’t know why I was doing that except to be healthy so I thought I’d just do what I want. It was like way too much though now I just feel sick and I’m supposed to go to physio.

sorry doc cant do physio today i ate too much hot meat

Is that the excuse you always use?

you think i do any exercise

What did you do for lunch today.

i had a meeting with a director who wants me to be in his film so i ate at a big boy restaurant and had salmon

Does it sound like a good movie?

fuck no

There was an old proverb about never being able to step in the same river twice — Eddie thought you could say the same thing about New York. After a couple of weeks in Derry, stepping back into the ever-shifting, unpredictable city was like having his legs kicked out from under him. He was almost staggered, stepping out of the car and looking up at the unmistakable skyline. It was a little like seeing it for the first time again; he was dwarfed in the scale and scope of Manhattan, nothing like what he had seen back in Derry and hiding as much potential trauma as it did opportunity. He was scared of the city, he realised. Scared of it like a newly turned out college student, who saw the possibilities fractaling in front of him but prayed only a single one would come true.

The first thing he found out was that he had been fired. He’d been inside the house for ten minutes, checked the messages on the answering machine, and learned that he’d been let go. It made sense.
He’d vanished for weeks, leaving no notice, and he was fairly certain they were glad to see the back of him. He knew he was and would always be Edward Kaspbrak, the senior analyst who had yelled at Wallace the intern until he’d cried, and leaving them all with several weeks of work with no warning hadn’t made them like him any more.

So he was out in the world with no job to call his own and one less thing anchoring him to New York; it felt like a good omen. He could get another job, but he couldn’t get another chance to leave. Besides, he had savings, he had money in the bank. He could afford to get to LA and he could keep paying the mortgage until they sold the house…

“Well, you’re going to need time off work for recovery anyway,” Myra said. “You can look for jobs in a couple of months, maybe. When you’re better.”

At the time he’d just stumbled through agreeing with her, taken aback by how calm she was and not sure if she understood the deal or not. He was going to leave. But he reasoned with himself that even if she didn’t understand then she would, when he explained, and moved himself into the guest bedroom. Myra said that she understood if he needed more room to be comfortable while he was recovering and he thought again fuck, she doesn’t get it. Telling her became imperative; he could not allow this to drag on for much longer. It wasn’t fair to her and it was only going to make his plans impossible. You couldn’t have a one-sided divorce.

He saw their lawyer alone first to discuss things and to lay the seeds of what was about to come, slipping in on the third day back, after he’d gone to physical therapy and the only time he’d been able to avoid Myra. She hung around him like she was the ghost of future past and he was the place where her mortal form rested, unable to travel too far away from him lest she cease to exist. It made for a suffocating experience when all he wanted was to get out, to run for the fucking hills -- or valleys, he guessed. Richie lived in the Valley.

He went to tell Myra on the fifth day, because he was finally cutting back on the meds and was starting to feel a little more clear-headed and a little more certain of himself. The meds made him nervous. They were just painkillers and some kind of pre-emptive antibiotics, but they represented a danger to him. He found himself being obsessively careful about them, as if it would be too easy to take too many, to fall back into bad habits. He wondered how many antibiotics he was resistant to because his overbearing mother had been too quick to get him diagnosed with something and raged at the doctor until she got to leave with what she felt was the right prescription. Jesus Christ, the doctors’ bills they must have rung up…

Myra was in the living room and he perched on the couch opposite her; they had three couches placed around a coffee table, all of them pristine and overstuffed, none of them comfortable to actually sit on. They were mostly for show by default, because neither of them really had guests over that much, only used on the rare occasion one of them sat down to watch TV. Eddie didn’t watch a lot of TV; it was 2016, he watched Netflix alone on the toilet, like everyone else.

Myra regarded him with a quiet concern, like she was on edge, as if he was about to go off into some insane outburst and start throwing things at the walls. He slightly resented it, but didn’t say so. He needed this whole situation to be calm. He sat with his hands flat on his knees, looking at her steadily. Her eyes wavered between his eyes and the bandage he still had on his cheek, disguising the scar there. The bandage was just cosmetic now; the scar had long healed up, but Myra didn’t like looking at it.

“We need to talk,” he said.

“Are you feeling ok?” She said.
“I’m fine. Myra, look…” Jesus Christ he was really fucking doing this. How was he so calm? He flexed his hands into fists. “This relationship isn’t working. We both need to admit that. I’m not happy, and I don’t think you can be happy either.”

Myra stared, her jaw tensing with stress.

“Everything was fine until you had your accident,” she said. “You never used to talk like this before.”

“I was in denial before, but I’ve realised some things. This isn’t how relationships are meant to be.”

He thought about the thing he’d told Richie, a few months ago, when Richie had first found out about Myra. ‘I’m a grown-up, Richie, no one gets to be happy all the time’. And that had felt so fair at the time, and so true. And in a sense it was true; obviously no one got to be happy all the time. There were still traffic jams and rude neighbours and taxes. No one was impervious to being unhappy.

But no one was impervious to being happy either. It felt absurd that they were expected to live like this — for what? To try and get his dead mother to finally say she was proud of him? That she thought he’d done well? That was ridiculous. She’d never said it in life, she sure as fuck wasn’t about to now that she was dead.

“No,” Myra said. “No, you never talked like this before you went home. This isn’t you.”

“This is me, Myra, this is the most me I’ve ever been.”

“No, it isn’t. I know you. We’ve been together for nearly ten years. I don’t care what all those strangers say. I know you, and you don’t really think these things. You have a head injury.”

“I don’t have a head injury! The doctors…”

“They missed something, then. Because I can’t believe you changed this much overnight.”

Eddie floundered for something else to say but Myra stood up very quickly, brimming with upset, and walked out of the room before she burst into noisy tears. He felt stricken with guilt so intense it made him sick, as if his simple request to be allowed to go and be happy was unreasonable. But it wasn’t just his happiness — it was his, and Richie’s, and fuck it, Myra’s too. She didn’t deserve to be in some fucking loveless marriage either, even if she thought this would become what she wanted.

It never would, because he was in love with Richie, and always had been. But saying that terrified him. Telling Richie, telling the Losers, that was one thing. Telling other people was different. It marked him; he would become someone else in their eyes. He would not be a man in love, he would be a man in love with a man in love with a man, which was not the same. As much as slogans liked to say it was the same thing, everyone knew it wasn’t. And the idea of having to tell people over and over, gauging their reaction every time as they judged him based on it, that filled him with fear.

He told himself, you’re braver than you think, but he thought about how Richie wasn’t really out to anyone either and that made him profoundly sad, sadder than he would have expected. Their love had been strong enough to raise him from the dead, but they couldn’t tell anyone about that. The battle they had almost died for had to be a secret between friends, and their love felt equally small and dirty a secret. Eddie was clenching his fists so hard his neatly clipped nails were digging into the skin of his palms; if this had been a year ago, he’d have been grabbing for his inhaler, but he reminded himself that he didn’t need it. Richie had always known that. How right that Richie had
always known that.

Eddie stood up and followed Myra out of the room. She had walked into the kitchen and was hovering by the counter as if he’d caught her in the middle of something, and frowned when he approached her, clearly anticipating that he wasn’t going to say anything she liked.

“What do you want, Myra?” He said, his voice loud and indignant, losing his grip on the nice, measured tone he had been using. “Like sincerely, what do you want out of life?”

“I want a normal life! I want a husband who does what I say and listens to me! You never listened, and now you’ve stopped even pretending…”

“I can’t give you those things. That’s it. I can’t. I’ve been pretending I could but it isn’t good for either of us.”

Myra turned on him then, anger flashing in her eyes, the quiet strain of her earlier logic vanishing just as quickly as Eddie's had.

"You think you can tell me what's good for me?" She said, her voice rising. "You abandon me for weeks, run off and almost get yourself killed, you want to throw me out like last week's trash, and you think you know what's good for me? How can you be so condescending? You don't even know what's good for yourself!"

"There are important things you don't know about. And I can never tell you. But you have to trust me that I know what I'm talking about."

"Why? Why would I ever trust you again? You don't even know who you are anymore, you're like a stranger…"

"I know who I am!" Eddie said.

Who are you, Edward Kaspbrak, an unpleasant voice in the back of his mind crowed. If you're so sure of who you are, if you're so proud of who you are, why can't you out yourself?

He still wore the bandage on his face and he still couldn't come out; he claimed he was certain of who he was, but he was still scared. He was still hiding the parts of himself he thought were shameful and ugly. He could pull the bandage off. He could tell Myra right then that he was in love with Richie. He could. He could. He could.

There was nothing shameful about how he loved Richie. He told himself that, but it still scared him. Sometimes what scared him was just the power of what he felt; it could be overwhelming, alone in bed at night, when the longing in his chest to wrap his arms around Richie again was so intense he thought it might kill him. The moment before Pennywise had thrust the spike through his back, when he'd saved Richie and was looking down at him and feeling, for the first time, free and strong and proud, rang through his mind often. He wanted to feel that way again and knew immediately that if he wanted to he would have to take risks. He could only feel the adrenaline that came from catching onto the other side by the skin of his fingers if he was brave enough to jump.

"If you're not going to tell me, if you're just going to keep lying and hiding things, then I don't think I have to listen and I don't think I have to trust you," Myra said, indignant but firm.

"There's… It's too much to explain," Eddie said, weakly. Some of it was, for sure. He couldn't tell her about the fucking clown, she'd have him sectioned.

The other stuff… He didn't think she'd understand. He knew she wouldn't understand. And maybe
he was scared of that too, of working up every last drop of courage he had to spill his guts out
about a truth he wasn't even entirely concrete on himself -- was he gay? -- only to have her beat it
down with questions like 'why didn't you tell me before' and 'how could you have waited so long to
come out'. He didn't know why he had to face the firing squad like this.

Fuck, maybe it would have been easier to just run away with Richie. They could have run away
when they were both standing in the parking lot of the Jade of the Orient and Richie said he was
leaving, Eddie siding with him instinctively. It would have been so easy to hit the road then, never
look back. But it would have been wrong then and it would have been wrong to run out of the
hospital and leave nothing behind but dirty bandages. He'd come back to New York to do things
right.

"That's some excuse," Myra said.

"You wouldn't understand," Eddie said, involuntarily.

"Oh, fuck you. You've always been condescending, Edward, but this really just takes the cake. I'm
going to Susanne's, I'll be back... Later."

"Myra, wait!"

She didn't wait, the front door slamming behind her. He knitted his fingers in his hair and silently
screamed with frustration, dragging his hands down his face. Despite the force with which he did
that, the bandaids holding the bandage on his face held firm.

eda

im at this party for work and im just thinking about how weve never been to a party together

I don’t do so great at parties. I’m not good at small talk.

yeah me neither i just make bad jokes which is bad when youre meant to be making connections

You always make bad jokes.

yeah and i never make good connections

At least we could get drunk together if I was there.

at least id have someone worth talking to

Sonia Kaspbrak drove a reliable car. Just two seats, for her and Eddy Bear, with a lot of room in the
trunk. A nice, safe station wagon, perfect for the two of them. No one else ever used it. Eddie
would sit in the passenger seat and draw pictures on the inside condensation on the window, hearts
and stars and his name, or the names of his friends. Right then he wrote the S and V combined,
something he did habitually, like a trademark, although in that moment he couldn't really remember
why.

In the drivers’ seat next to him, his mother was tall and commanding and he felt comforted by her
being there, because it meant someone else was in charge. Eddie didn't like being in charge all the time. He liked to be in charge of school projects, half just because he didn't trust the others to do all their work. That was why at the science fair last year it had been all him and Stan, while Bill and Richie watched from the sidelines and were instructed not to help because actually their suggestions weren't useful. Being in charge there was fine, but outside of school stuff was so complicated. It was a relief, sometimes, to just have his mom tell him how things were and then he didn't have to worry about it anymore.

Was the science fair last year? It felt very long ago, suddenly, like he was trying to look back on it through the fog you got after waking up from general anaesthesia. Wait, since when had he been under anaesthetic? Oh, it didn't matter. The car hummed gently around him and his mother's presence was so soothing. It felt like the two of them were in a little cocoon, nice and safe from any of the scary things in the outside world that might hurt him.

"Where are we going, Mommy?" Eddie said, his voice so light he felt like he could see the words drifting in front of his eyes as he spoke.

"To the hospital," she said.

Oh, yes, of course. That made sense. They were always going to the emergency room. There was always something wrong with him that needed to be checked. He'd had another asthma attack… Except no, he hadn't. He was also pretty sure he didn't have asthma? He looked nervously at his mom, who was watching the road intently. She knew he didn't have asthma, didn't she? Although, he wasn't sure. There was a difference in how people could know things. There were simple things to know, like that the Earth was round and George Bush was the president, which could be good if he listened to his mom or could be terrible according to a lot of people, but went right over his thirteen (fourteen? eleven? forty, almost forty-one?) year old head, but was an objective fact. But then there were difficult things to know, stuff you knew but didn't want to believe, really. Like how Bill couldn't believe Georgie was dead, or how Eddie wouldn't believe he was ___. It was true, and they knew it on some level, but they didn't want it to be, and belief was a powerful thing. Belief was what made gazebos work, he was pretty sure.

So, did she know? She had to, right? Eddie looked at her side-long, but his mother stayed watching the road. It wasn't asthma, so what was it?

"Why are we going to the hospital?" Eddie asked.

"We need to get you fixed! We need to fix it before it gets all warped forever," Sonia's voice was so filled with horror and grief that for a minute Eddie could feel it, feel the throbbing pain where the bone in his arm had snapped. But wait -- that wasn't right. His arm was fine.

"No, it's ok Mom, Richie fixed it," Eddie said.

"That little monster has never fixed anything," Sonia snapped. "None of them have. They're hurting you, Eddie, I don't know why you can't see it. They're going to get you killed."

Well, that was ridiculous. His friends loved him, and Eddie loved them. It was another one of those simple, inarguable facts about the universe. 2 + 2 = 4, grass is green, the Losers Club loved each other. Even his mother's anger couldn't take that away; she could fight against it all she wanted, but parents could be wrong about things, and oh boy was this something she was wrong about.

"No, you're wrong. And my arm is fine, look."

His arm was fine. All of him was fine. He was young, fit and healthy. He could ride his bike for
miles, swim across the quarry, and he was the second fastest runner, after Bev. He could do all that stuff, even if his mom didn't believe it or want to believe it.

And the car was really kind of small. Like, claustrophobically small. Eddie had started to realise the roof was pressing down on the top of head almost painfully, and the seatbelt was really starting to cut into his neck. He struggled against it but Sonia slapped a hand on his chest, pushing him back down against the car seat. She was impossibly stronger than him, and he couldn't get out from under her hand even when he started to really push back against it.

"Not your arm. You're sick inside, Eddie," his mother said. "We need to have someone make you better."

"I'm not sick!" This had been an argument they’d had countless times throughout his childhood; she was forever finding things wrong with him, even when he thought he was fine, often willing to pull him out of school if she thought she sensed a fever.

But this wasn’t about one of his colds, or the flu. This was about something inside him that was sick. She had always wanted to fix him and in the delusional, dreamy interior of the car, his heart thundering in his chest, the idea that she had seen in him that he had the capacity to love wrongly and wanted to fix it, wanted to stamp it out before it grew too fast for her to control felt sickeningly real. She had known the pills were gazebos -- *placebos you're forty years old you know the word is placebos* -- even if she hadn’t wanted to admit it. She could have looked at her young son, who was so particular in his affection, and seen that he was going to grow to love the wild-haired, loudmouthed boy he ran with.

She had always hated Richie.

"You are sick." Sonia’s voice was deafeningly loud. "You know you are. I just want to look after you, Eddie. I just want to keep you safe. Those other boys play too rough, and they're not right. They're sick, and they're going to make you sick. My friend got AIDS just from touching a pole on the subway."

"That's not real! That's not how it works!" The car was breaking his back now, forcing him bent double as he grew too large for the tiny seat he was strapped into, the cold glass of the window pressing against his face. "You don't know everything, Mom. You don't know me!"

He wasn't small. He wasn't small and he wasn't weak, and he wasn't going to be held down any longer by someone who didn't understand how life worked. Eddie kicked out, his foot breaking through the glass windshield, shards exploding out and there was a taxi, a taxi had hit his Cadillac. He'd crashed the car and Mike was asking if he was alright, because Mike loved him, Mike really loved him like a brother, and Eddie wanted to tell him he was ok. The airbag was suffocating him, but he was fine, the Cadillac had a dent in it but he was alright. He could take a little pain and still live, he could break his arm and be better, he could pull himself out of the dirt. The cab driver would be mad, but he had the best insurance, everything was going to be…

The leper in the back of the car surged forward, her hands clawing at Eddie from underneath bandages that hung off in long, rotten rolls. He twisted in the seat, trying to push the hands away from his face as they raked nails over his skin. As he turned around, frenzied with fear, he realised it was not the leper who had chased him as a child, but the face of his mother staring back at him.

"You're sick!" She wailed, clawing at him, leaving trails of something that stank like cleaning fluid on his skin. "You're sick!"

"You're dead!" He screamed. "You're dead!"
Eddie woke up with a start. He was so drenched in sweat that for a moment he thought he had a fever. He remembered being a little boy, his mother nervously feeling his forehead for a 'phantom fever' and shivered in revulsion. He sat up, his head pounding, and he realised he'd ripped the bandage off his face in his sleep, leaving pink marks where his fingernails had scratched his skin. The similarity to the dream upset him and he rolled out of bed to go take a shower.

The house was quiet -- the clock said it was ten AM, which meant Myra would be at work, selling five million dollar apartments to billionaires’ kids with more money than sense. He'd slept nearly twelve hours, but he figured that was fine. He was still in recovery, or taking it easy, or whatever. He went to take a shower.

He stopped in the bathroom to look at the scar on his face. It was big, and it had healed with a pink, knotted look to it where the skin almost hadn't met up perfectly. The knife to the face had fucked him up, all the screaming and yelling and not treating it for like two full days afterwards had made it worse, and no fucking magic would take this one back. By contrast, the scar on his back was relatively slender and precise, almost surgical looking. The scar on his face was going to be the bigger problem, if you considered it a problem. Eddie didn't know if he did, actually. It wasn't very 'attractive', maybe, but staring at it he felt… More sure of himself. It was like a reminder of who he really was, one that everyone could see. Yeah, Eddie Kaspbrak was the kind of guy who took knives to the face and fucking lived.

Cool.

He went to get breakfast from the deli down the street and the girl behind the counter, who had seen him a hundred times over the years, started with shock at the huge scar on his face. He found that a lot of strangers' eyes tended to drift to it when he walked by, and that feeling of self-assurance returned every time. Yes, this was who he was.

Fuck, he could do this. He could do this. He'd pulled that knife right out of his fucking face. He'd killed Pennywise, or helped to, twice. That was who he was!

"I'm braver than I think," he told himself again, and he felt it. He felt it in his chest, as solid and real as his heart beating.

Myra got back that evening when Eddie was in the kitchen cooking; he heard the front door click open and he gripped the handle of the saucepan in his hand a little more firmly. He could do this. He waited a few moments because he needed to finish up what he was doing, wasting a couple of idle minutes cutting vegetables before he knew he had to go out there or else his head was going to explode with all the shit he wanted to say. He turned the heat down low and walked out into the living room, where Myra was standing looking at her phone.

She looked up at him, her nose wrinkling with disgust when she saw the huge scar coursing over his left cheek. Then he saw the phone in her hand wasn’t hers, it was his, with its heavy-duty case that could survive being run over by a truck. He stared at her, and the first thing that occurred to him was how incredibly relieved he felt. There was just this sense that he’d let go of something huge. He thought about dragging himself out of the grave, the mud dragging his feet down. Christ, that had been hard. Fuck, that had been hard. It had been so hard and so difficult that for a while, he thought it might be easier to just lie down and die and avoid the pain.

But when he got to the top, Richie had been there when he woke up.

“You’ve been having an affair,” Myra said, holding out the phone as if Eddie needed to see the texts where he told Richie how much he loved him to know they were on there, as if he needed to be reminded of the things they said in private. Or, for that matter, the photos they shared in private.
“I’m in love with Richie Tozier,” Eddie said.

“You’re gay?” She said, her face bloodless with horror. “And with that?!?”

“I haven’t really… Worked that out yet. It’s not important right now.”

“Why would you marry me… Oh, my God… This whole time? Why would you marry me if you were gay? Oh, my God.”

She sat down on the couch, her head in her hands, alone in the catalogue-perfect image of their sitting room. Alone, in the perfect home she had crafted only for herself, she looked like half of a picture of perfection. The idea that Eddie, dishevelled and wounded and metamorphosing Eddie could possibly be the other half sounded like a joke. It was a square peg forced into a round hole, a piece from another puzzle, and maybe she was finally realising that. Eddie felt like he was in a dream. He was distantly aware the pot in the kitchen was boiling over -- he could hear the lid rattling -- but it was so far away that it might as well have been in a movie. He couldn’t think. Just clean couldn’t think, his mind a white mess of fog.

“I told you that I—” Eddie started.

Myra stood up so fast she knocked over a small end table, sending a glass flying. Eddie instinctively lurched backwards, still in a half-fugue that the loud noise hadn’t knocked him out of.

“Get out of my house!” She yelled.

Richie

do u think boyfriend is kind of childish sounding like who says boyfriend right who calls someone their boyfriend when theyre our age? what do people say

Partner I think.

sounds too cowboy

I like cowboys. You should be in a film like The Good, the Bad and The Ugly instead of that shitty comedy you were in last year.

yeah ok ill just resurrect sergio leone real quick

Would you call me your boyfriend?

it feels like such a teenager thing to do but i never got to be the teenager who said it

I want to be your boyfriend.

ok will u go to the prom with me

Only if you dress up like a cowboy.
it'll get worse before it gets better. next chapter is going to be...... a lot.

special thanks to Ezra even more than usual for correcting me on like three points of canon love u babe

i just published a new short one-shot Bill/Mike fic! read In Hindsight for the most sweet and fluffy Bill/Mike you could possibly imagine, because i love Mike Hanlon more than anything.

and dont forget my other fic Portrait of Two Boys in Free Fall, Artist Unknown!
and i was so young/when i behaved/twenty five/yet now i find/i’ve grown into/a
tall child

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sources from inside Warner Brothers are saying upcoming horror film ‘The Attic Room’, based on
the best-selling novel of the same name, is undergoing reshoots after disappointing test screenings.
It’s been reported that the audience had issues with the ending, having expected something more
similar to the novel.

eds

You talk to Bill recently?

no ive been kinda keeping to myself

Are you ok? It’s not healthy to isolate yourself.

yeah no i just need time to decompress or whatever. i was really angry for a while and i couldnt put
that on evryone. is bill ok?

Yeah his new movie is getting shit on. They have to do reshoots whatever that means. He’ll live.

he better we didnt go through all that so he could die of stress because someone said his movie
stinks

Mike’s coming at the end of the month. He’s helping me pack. You know he’s writing a book too?

man and ive been writing tons of shit. you need to write a book now youre the only one who isnt

I’m gonna write a self-help book called Kill Your Inner Clown.

god thats actually funny im so mad i cant use that

“And you’re seeking divorce on grounds of adultery.”

“Yes,” Myra said.

She was sitting next to her lawyer, her fresh out the packet nice and shiny divorce lawyer, who
looked like he wanted to shoot laser beams through Eddie’s head. The law office they were in, an
intimidatingly huge and glass-walled skyscraper that looked out over Manhattan like the eye of
Sauron, made Eddie miserable just looking at it. He was thinking a lot about how good it would be
to get out of New York.
“And you have evidence,” Myra’s lawyer continued. His name was Brown, and he wore cat-eye glasses that made him look like he could have rolled right out of the 50s, and he had a certain Red Scare arrogant cruelty to him.

“He admitted it,” Myra said. “And I saw the text messages. It goes back months. He even tried to elope with him.”

“That’s not what happened,” Eddie said.

“You’re denying the affair?” Brown said.

“No, I’m having an affair,” Eddie said. His lawyer winced. “I just didn’t elope with him. That was unrelated. I was just travelling back to our hometown to see friends. We grew up together, ok?”

“Right,” Brown said, unconvinced. No one was convinced. Myra had decided the narrative and it prevailed. Eddie didn’t care. Soon enough he’d be out of this city, away from these people.

“You know who the affair is with?” Myra said.

“Can you leave him out of it?” Eddie said.

“We really don’t need…” Brown began.

“Richard Tozier. That’s right. The comedian.”

Eddie put his head in his hands and sighed heavily, looking at Myra through his splayed fingers. Silence rested in the office for a few moments, only the sound of the fans noisily buzzing overhead. Brown’s paralegal, or temp, or assistant, or whoever the fuck, had been staring at Eddie with a look between astonishment and intimidation for the entire meeting. He hadn’t spoken the entire time, other than in brief whispers to Brown. Eddie didn’t know what his deal was, other than that he was maybe twenty-one and this was probably his first real job. This was the first time he’d spoken.

“The guy from ‘The Fun’s Just Beginning’?” He said. “He’s gay?”

Everyone turned to stare at him, the silence in the room heavy enough that he sank back in his chair, suddenly unable to meet anyone’s eyes.

“So… Looking at what the prenuptial agreement states in cases of adultery…” Brown said. Eddie stared out of the window and scratched the scar on his cheek.

Richie

Am I gay?

is this a joke?

I just can’t stop thinking about if I’m really gay if I’ve only ever had sex with one guy. Am I gay or are you some kind of fucking master seductor?

yes. but youre asking the wrong question man its not about how many guys youve dated its more how you look at men. like when you watched indiana jones were you hankering to be marion so you could lay one on harrison ford thats the kind of thing you think about

like for me i figured something was up when i was furiously beating off to bender from the
breakfast club

Oh my God. I’m sorry I asked.

no but really think about that shit man

It’s confusing I guess. Did I want to be Ted from Bill & Ted or did I want to fuck him? It’s hard to tell.

keanu reeves huh

Yeah, you know something? He’s still really hot. Can I say that?

hell fucking yeah dude

Time had ticked by. ‘The show starts next month’ turned into ‘the show starts next week’ much faster than Richie liked. He kept busy. He had to; both because Jason was working him like a mule for publicity and because if he didn’t keep moving his brain was going to explode. He did talk shows, he did tiny shows at open mics to work on material, he wrote pages and pages, he talked to directors and producers. He texted Eddie fifty times a day. One of his friends asked him if he was having a fucking manic episode and Richie laughed it off and didn’t think too hard about if he was or not. He just needed to be alive, and he needed something to do every day because if he didn’t, all he’d be able to do was look at the empty space in his bed and think about how soon someone was going to be there.

This show was new, but it was popular, and Jason had kicked Richie out of the room and told him to get his ass in there, no complaints about ‘can’t I just go on Seth Meyers again’. The show was called The Timmy Braun Show, which Richie had thought was a joke at first, but apparently wasn’t, and the woman who sorted out who went on The Timmy Braun Show and when apparently didn’t find it very funny when Richie asked if the guys owning the late-night talk show circuit were really called Jimmy, Jimmy, and Timmy. Jason told him to just shut the fuck up before he talked his way right out of it.

Richie was sitting in the green room and thinking about Eddie, who said he would watch the show ‘for support’, just like he watched every talk show Richie went on. It didn’t matter if Richie did a hundred of them, Eddie would watch when it aired. He’d always text something cute but mean afterwards, something silly that made Richie laugh every fucking time even though it was the most annoying thing in the world. Schoolyard shit. It made him love Eddie like crazy.

“Oh, man. You.”

Richie looked up at the woman who’d just walked in and forced a smile. Andrea O’Farrell was another comedian, and she’d just written… A book, or a show, or something. Richie didn’t know, he wasn’t exactly keeping track of her career and his mind had been everywhere for weeks. She was also Richie’s ex, of about five years ago, a relationship which had ended just about as bad as it could, which was pretty fucking bad when one of the people in the relationship was a closeted gay man who hated commitment or intimacy. The two of them had avoided each other ever since like magnets of the same polarity.

Richie tried to think of a joke about magnets of the same polarity being a metaphor for them.
having the same kind of taste in men, but he forgot whatever he was thinking about because Andrea was smiling at him in a way that was really, really weird.

“You, uh, on the show tonight?” Richie said. He really didn’t like the way she was looking at him.

“Yeah. It’s funny, I was just thinking about you.”

“Oh, God. I told you, I didn’t steal your cat. I don’t like cats.”

“I know you didn’t steal my cat, Rich.”

Richie leaned back on the sofa. He was wearing a new shirt and it wasn’t that comfortable; he kept scratching at the back of his neck. Andrea -- who Richie realised with some annoyance at himself was a short, dark-eyed brunette -- sat on the chair opposite picking at the chips out on the table. She was neatly composed in a way Richie wasn’t, alert. Like she was waiting for something. She made Richie think, unpleasantly, of a jaguar.

Some musician who was on that night kept drifting in and out of the room, bickering noisily on the phone. Richie wished they’d stay, just because it meant there would be some buffer between him and Andrea that might enforce some politeness. But as it was, they never stopped in for more than half a minute which left Richie sitting alone with his ex, which was never a situation anyone wanted to be in.

“At least we know now why we broke up,” Andrea said.

“Yeah, you said I was a ‘man-child’ and a ‘fucking bum’,” Richie said, “like some kind of fifty year old Italian-American guy.”

“Yeah, and I know why you couldn’t commit.”

“Do you have a point or do you just really like beating around the bush?”

“Oh, my God. Do you have no idea?”

“About what?”

“You’ve never seen this show before?”

“No?”


He didn’t really have much more time to ask her what she was talking about because an assistant with a clipboard and a headset was telling Richie he was coming on now, so he left the green room and tried to forget about the entire situation as fast as he possibly could. What the fuck had she been talking about? He didn’t have a clue; she had never really known much about him at all, not really, because he’d never confided in her about anything. That was part of the reason they’d broken up.

Timmy Braun was sitting behind a desk, which was something Richie never really understood about talkshow hosts -- why the fuck do you need a prop desk to ask singers pre-written questions? -- and was a tall, blond man with a shit-eating grin. Richie disliked him immediately. He was the fakest of the fake and talked to Richie like he’d only found out about Richie’s existence ten minutes before he walked on stage. But whatever, that was part of the business. You spent time with people who didn’t think about a goddamn thing that wasn’t numbers. He could look into
Timmy Braun’s eyes and just see the audience figures scrolling by like the electronic boards at the stock exchange. Maybe press tours were the worst thing, actually, maybe doing press was the worst it could get. Forget filming or doing stand-up, maybe the worst was fucking press.

He was barely thinking about what he was saying until a bright red light suddenly flashed in his face and pulled him out of his train of pre-recorded answers, the same old questions he’d been asked half a dozen times (Why do you like improv? What’s it like working live? You had your start writing for blah, blah, blah…). He’d been on for the better part of fifteen minutes and had assumed it was mostly over but now something was happening, the audience cheering like crazy for whatever was happening, Timmy Braun grinning like a prize idiot. Richie smiled too, but it was more out of nervousness than it was enjoyment.

“You know what that alarm means!” Timmy said.

“I sure don’t!” Richie said, the audience laughing. There was maybe two hundred people in the audience, which was small as far as stand-up went but still a substantial amount of people to have leering at you from the darkness of the studio.

“Looks like the guest making headlines this week is you, Richie!” Timmy said.

“I am?” Richie said, smiling back with a lot of teeth and wild, confused eyes.

The screen behind Timmy Braun, which had previously been showing the LA skyline in a mock-window rolled over to show what looked like a spread from inside a gossip rag, the headline blurred out so the only thing that showed up was a picture of Richie, an old publicity photo from a couple of years ago, next to a stockphoto of a man with a question mark over his face. Richie pulled a face, the only one not in on the joke. He was starting to sweat under the collar of his shirt as a sense of dread began to creep over him. He told himself that it was fine. It was a game, it was going to be fine.

“So you don’t know this game? You don’t watch the show?” Timmy Braun said. The audience laughed, unsettlingly.

“Oh, Tim, don’t put me on blast like this,” Richie said, as if they were old friends who were always playing little jokes. “No, I don’t know the game.”

“Well, you know these talk shows, so many of the questions are prepared in advance, the guests just talk to the hosts about what they’ve agreed on… Just the same old thing every interview,” Timmy rolled his eyes to show the audience how ridiculous he thought this was, like Richie hadn’t signed off on everything they were going to talk about a few weeks ago.

“Tell me about it,” Richie said.

“So, here, we like to surprise guests. Mix it up a bit. Ask them something they’re not expecting. Something brand new. Every week we pick a random guest and rip a story from the headlines to talk to them about.”

“Ok. What is it?”

“You haven’t checked the news today?”

“No, I actually woke up about twenty minutes before I had to get on here, so I didn’t have time.”

It was a joke, but Richie was struggling to laugh. Timmy Braun kept smiling at him with those fucking huge white teeth and the creeping feeling kept crawling up Richie’s neck. It was a little
like times when he’d realised what he was looking at wasn’t real but one of Pennywise’s bullshit tricks; the feeling that he was being cornered and stuck in a fucking trap he hadn’t even known he was supposed to be looking out for. He glanced out over the eager faces of the audience, but they were all just blurry shapes which left him with the disturbing feeling that he was being judged by a wall of ghosts.

“No guesses?” Timmy pushed.

“No?” Richie said, hopeful.

The screen flickered and revealed the headline. All the blood drained out of Richie’s face. He couldn’t even fake the smile anymore, his expression dropping like an elevator being cut down. He looked at the screen, the image vast and pixelated up close almost to the point of being incomprehensible, and then looked back at Timmy, who was smiling like it was all in good fun.

“You’ve been busy! This is like something out of a romance movie folks, it really is. Richie Tozier in love with childhood sweetheart -- who’s now getting divorced to be with him?!” Timmy turned to face the audience, who bayed like a pack of wolves.

The headline didn’t say that, though. It didn’t say anything nearly as nice. The headline said, in giant pink letters, RICHIE TOZIER STOLE MY HUSBAND. Whose husband he stole wasn’t provided; the actual ‘text’ of the article was just stylised graphics, but there was that image in the centre, of Richie and the question-mark covered stockphoto, surrounded by an explosion of cartoon hearts.

“You have to tell us the story here,” Timmy said, like he still thought this was something they could all find cute and funny when Richie had gone sheet-white. “You grew up together? Was he the boy next door?”

Richie stared at Timmy, not knowing if he was being fucking serious. Timmy was still smiling but that smile was starting to waver a little as he looked at the stricken expression on Richie’s face, like he was realising that Richie wasn’t going to play along. The audience laughed nervously. The lights overhead were searingly bright and hot and the whole studio was starting to wobble around him like it was on an axis; with the lights and the noise it brought to mind a fairground, and he thought very suddenly of Derry. Thinking about his made his stomach clench immediately in terror. He’d heard what happened at the Derry fair.

Richie tried to force himself to speak but his skin was prickling all over with sweat. He couldn’t stop glaring at Timmy, whose smile was rapidly sinking and turning into a look of concern. He glanced at some off-stage producer as Richie gripped the arms of the chair as tight as he could.

“It’s a fun story, it really sounds like it,” Timmy tried to encourage him. “You haven’t been very public about your dating life before, is this why? Hiding a little someone in the wings?”

Richie just shook his head. He couldn’t breathe. Fuck, he wished he had Eddie’s stupid fake inhaler. Oh, he wished he had Eddie. He wished he’d been called back to Derry to fight Pennywise a third time. Just fucking anything other than this, right now. He couldn’t breathe. Timmy was frowning. The audience was laughing nervously, but to Richie it just sounded like jeering.

“I didn’t…” He managed to say. “I’m not…”

“I didn’t think the story would be this shocking! When someone comes out, it’s the other people who are meant to be surprised. Although, I guess in this case, were any of us that surprised?” Timmy winked at the audience, who laughed again, their voices a scream of static.
Richie stood up too fast, his head swirling. Timmy looked taken aback, like he wasn’t sure if he was about to get punched or not, flinching a little when Richie stepped away from his seat. Timmy glanced off-stage again, where some producer was making desperate neck-slicing motions, and then looked at the cameras.

“Uh, we’ll be right back after a short break,” he said.

The audience buzzed with confusion; someone called out at the stage, but the words were just a mishmash of noise to Richie. He didn’t wait to be told he could leave. He lurched backstage, his legs shaking with every step, the polished floor treacherous as he tried not to let himself fall. He stopped to lean on a wall, his breath coming in short, shallow gasps as he rested a hand on the cool paint. The lights around him were blooming on the corners of his vision and turning everything pale and shaky. There was someone thrusting a bottle of cold water into his hand suddenly, someone else behind him saying his name over and over. Timmy Braun was in the background, yelling at someone else, who was babbling nonsense that Richie couldn’t parse through the blind panic that had settled over him. His chest was contracting like he was about to have a panic attack. He grabbed the water bottle, digging through the inner pocket of his jacket for his anxiety medication.

Someone tried to pat him on the back and Richie reared around, Timmy stumbling back in shock when Richie turned on him.

“I just wanted to say I’m sorry, man, we thought it was a fun story…” Timmy said, still smiling that insufferable smile, his tone apologetic but his face plastic.

“You thought it was funny to out me live on air? Out my boyfriend?!” Richie spat.

“It’s 2016, no one cares about that stuff anymore,” Timmy said. “Anyway, it was already in the papers…”

“What Tim means is that since the story was already out there and you hadn’t commented on it, we didn’t think there was a conflict,” the producer said, trying to smooth it over as quickly as she could, her voice soothing and gentle.

“I can’t be here,” Richie said. “I can’t fucking be here. Fuck you people, and fuck your stupid fucking show.”

Richie caught a glimpse of Andrea’s face in the green room. She looked like she was in the path of an oncoming truck, deathly pale. Their eyes met for just a second and he knew immediately that she didn’t think this was funny anymore. Good. It fucking wasn’t. Richie’s body was shaking as he downed the rest of the water, trying to force himself to breathe at a steady pace so he wouldn’t vomit all over the fucking hallway.

“Rich, it’s not that big a deal,” Timmy started to say. Richie whipped the empty water bottle at his face as hard as he could, the hollow plastic bouncing off with a puck, then turned and stormed out as Tim yelled behind him. He strode down the hallway to the exit, ignoring the pleas of the producer chasing him down as he barged out through the fire door and set the alarm off, charging down the fire escape stairs.

He stumbled out into the dark of the parking lot behind the studio, his head ringing. He managed to get to his car without falling over, leaning both his hands on the roof to try and steady himself before he unlocked it and climbed inside and slamming the door shut. He pulled his phone from his pocket, turning it back on and seeing he had seventeen missed calls. He hit the first notification he saw with Jason’s name on it, calling him. The phone rang once before Jason answered. Jason
didn’t manage to speak before Richie started yelling.

“What the fuck were thinking putting me on there? Did you not hear that that story leaked? Why did I not know about that? Do you not realise how fucking humiliating this is?!”

“Rich, Rich, Rich. What are you talking about? I just got a call from Tim Braun’s people that you ran out in the middle of the interview.”

“The whole thing about me being gay, about me and Eddie, it’s all out. Timmy fuckin’ Braun was asking me about it in front of the live studio audience! He just outed me on TV!” Richie was gripping the steering wheel so tightly in his hand he felt like he was about to rip it out of the dashboard. “How the fuck didn’t you know about this?! Don’t you handle my fucking PR?”

“I didn’t know! They must have gotten ahold of it before we did.” Jason’s keyboard clattered loudly over the phone. “I’m sorry Richie. But look, you wanted to come out anyway.”

“Are you fucking serious? I should fire you. I should fire you right now. I don’t know how you could fuck up like this.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa. I know you’re upset, but it’s going to be ok. They’re going to cut the footage, I’ll talk to them about not airing any of the stuff about…”

“That doesn’t matter. There were easily two hundred people in the audience, Jason! They said the story was already out there. I’m done. I’m fucking done.”

The cinema lobby, with the arcade machines and the smell of popcorn so sweet it made you sick, and the big swing doors into the theatre swinging open as Henry Bower poured out with all his hate and his anger and directed it at a kid who didn’t know any better. The graffiti on the school walls, slurs mixed with jokes like they were equally as funny. The awful sense you got when you walked into a room and people stopped talking. Richie knew what it was to be known, and he’d been trying to outrun that his whole life.

He hadn’t really expected that he’d come out and no one would have anything to say, that it would pass by without comment and that no one would want to talk to him about it. He’d understood that he was going to deal with people seeing him. He’d been a public figure for over ten years, had dealt with all kinds of attention, often negative. He had a Twitter account. The truth is though, he’d wanted control over it. At least a little, at least at first.

And Eddie. Fuck. If the story was out, then how much did they know? Did they know it was him? Richie didn’t think he was famous enough that people would be hounding Eddie at home… Not for long, but fuck, what if people did? Eddie, who hadn’t made a decision to come out at all, and would now have to start dealing with this shit because of him?

“I have to call Eddie,” Richie said.

“Rich, we need to talk about th-”

He hung up on Jason and punched in Eddie’s number automatically, finally pulling out of the studio parking lot to get away from what looked like studio producers or security that looked like they might descend on him. He stuck the phone on speaker as it rang, biting back hard to try and stop himself from being so upset. His hands were shaking as he turned the car out of the lot and down the road to pull over behind an office building.

“Eddie, I’m so fucking sorry,” Richie said.
“It’s going to be ok,” Eddie said, immediately. Richie didn’t know if it was.

Eddie was in a fucking Whole Foods when his phone rang. He was standing with a basket in one hand and a box of organic lightly salted rice cakes in the other trying to remember if he actually liked rice cakes or had just decided he had to like them when his phone started vibrating. He threw the box into the basket and yanked the phone out of his pocket. He didn’t recognise the number, which was immediately concerning, but he answered the call anyway.

“Edward Kaspbrak?” A man’s voice asked, with the trained politeness of a professional that immediately set Eddie’s teeth on edge.

“Speaking,” Eddie said, guardedly.

“Hi, would you be willing to talk for a minute about your alleged relationship with Rich Tozier?” The voice on the end of the line said, so smooth and so calm that it took a second for the words to actually sink in.

“What?” Eddie said. “Who is this? How do you know about Richie?”

“So you are in a relationship with Rich Tozier, the comedian?”

“Wh…No, hang on, you can’t just call me up and start asking me questions about my personal relationships. Who the fuck are you? You’re not like a PI or something, are you, because everything I told Myra was the truth.”

Eddie looked around for a second and decided he didn’t have time to unload everything from his basket all at once, so he handed it off to a random passing worker and charged out of the door as fast as possible. He made a turn so he could stand off to the side and not in the middle of the sidewalk, huddling in the recessed doorway of the staff door with his phone pressed so tightly to the side of his face that his phone case was leaving marks on his skin.

“No, Mr Kaspbrak, I’m Jamie, I’m with JXXX, do you know us? We publish celebrity news stories.”

Eddie’s lungs closed up like someone slammed a gate shut and he wheezed silently, gripping his phone tightly.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa. No I don’t want to talk to you about anything,” he said. “You need to mind your own fucking business.”

“This is my business, it’s a news site. So, are you confirming that you’re leaving your wife for Rich Tozier? How long was the relationship going on? We have a source that says you’re childhood friends, can you confirm that?”

“Can you kiss my ass!!”

Eddie hung up, staring at the phone in his hand. He had a brief moment of insanity where he considered ringing Jamie back and correcting everything, but that was the dumbest idea he’d ever had so he just smashed the phone into his face instead. He spent a little while just standing in the doorway with his hands on his head, trying to figure out what the hell this meant. Clearly the story with him and Richie was out there, and more than that, his identity was out there.
He had no idea what to do. He knew Richie was busy and probably would be all day with some talk show, and felt immediately panicked by the fact he was all alone. Oh, *fuck*. Oh, *Richie*. The horror of what Eddie realised then hit him all at once, as if a hole in the world had opened up and he’d dropped right down into it. This felt very intensely, suddenly unfair; that after everything else, there would be this last straw.

Anxiety gripped him and he found himself just standing on the street staring at the people passing by as if any one of them might be the next person to turn around and attack him. He had the creeping sensation of being watched, although the busy sidewalk flowed by without paying any attention to the huddled shape of a terrified looking man in a doorway outside a fucking Whole Foods. God, the embarrassment of having a breakdown in a fucking *Whole Foods*. At least this time it was about something real and not about the state of their avocados or something, but he was still feeling the unique shame and embarrassment that came from having a public freak out. Every breath he took felt insufficient, as if the air was too thin. Did Richie know? Had Richie already found out? Was he going to be ok? Eddie's stomach lurched. Of course he wasn't going to be *ok*. If they knew about Eddie, they knew about Richie, and if they knew about Richie, then... As a kid, the most intimacy he ever had with Richie was fleeting touches, looks that burned on his skin for reasons he couldn't explain, and even those things had felt terrifying. He had averted his gaze a hundred times, worried that someone would read too much into the look; that the tiny things would betray too much meaning and then he'd be *caught*. At the time, he never really knew what he was afraid of being caught *for*, only that he knew he was in danger. Over time, he had begun to believe this was just part of the constant background noise of paranoia that was his life, but he knew now there was a more specific fear attached to it. He had feared his mother finding out, back then, and her doing *something*. Now he was afraid of...

He didn't really know. Nothing, in a way. There was nothing *to* be afraid of, not when he was an independent adult with a solid support network and no need to justify himself to anyone. But that didn't stop the anxiety from eating away at him, toxic and huge, making his stomach and lungs ache like he was going to puke. He wanted, more than anything, to talk to Richie. The longing inside him was a physical ache, a dull pain that throbbed around the wound on his back. He missed Richie, missed him with the strength he hadn't been able to for all the years they'd lost, and wished he could know if he was alright. He attempted to call Richie once, twice, three times, but the calls all went to voicemail and he ended up accepting that it wasn't going to happen. He would have to wait, as much as the anxiety made him want to puke. He could taste bile.

Eddie went back to the hotel he was staying at because he didn't know where else to go; he had made it through the door of his room when his phone rang again. He grabbed it hoping it was Richie, but he didn't know the number and was too scared to answer it in case it was fucking Clive again, or someone like it. He hoped once more would be the end of it, but the phone kept ringing, and that was before emails started coming through. They were all polite, all overly friendly, some so informal it was like they were trying to wheedle the information out of him through friendship, others so professional it was like they were inquiring about his credentials in a job interview. *So, rumour has it you're a big queer, can you confirm?*

He tried to watch TV, then to read, but the anxiety was coiling in his gut and everything he tried to distract himself with couldn't match the rate at which his mind was racing. It wasn't until Richie called, hours later, that he could do anything but try to manage the fear that was consuming him. Seeing Richie's name was both a relief and a horror; he hadn't even considered the idea he might have to be the one to tell Richie, and the mere thought of it was bone-chilling.

But when he answered the phone, Richie spoke first.

“Eddie, I’m so fucking sorry,” Richie said.
“It’s going to be ok,” Eddie said, although he didn't know if it was.

"I was fucking… On TV, they found out about us and they asked me about it, right there, like it was a fucking joke to them." Richie sounded upset to the point of being borderline incoherent and the fury and sadness in his voice made Eddie's body rigid with tension.

"I got called by a journalist for some fucking gossip rag, and then a bunch of them started emailing me--" Eddie said.

"They know who you are? Fuck. Fuck!"

He heard Richie hammering on something in the background, like he was smashing his fist on the dashboard and flinched.

“It’s going to be ok. Look, we knew something like this had to happen, right? You’re famous, I was going to end up kind of being part of that.” Eddie was trying to calm the situation down even when his teeth were chattering from the tension in his body.

“No, this wasn’t going to happen,” Richie snapped, with force that took Eddie aback. “They fucked us. Someone got this out and now everything… God! I thought I had a fucking chance! I thought this time I was going to do this myself. And now you’re fucked… This whole thing is so fucked. How did this even happen?!"

“I don’t…” Eddie flashed back to the court and he thought of Myra, spitting the information back in his face and closed his eyes in the sudden sweep of anger that was rising through him. “I think I know.”

Richie was seething, breathing through gritted teeth and Eddie was shaking with anger, his eyes screwed shut like he’d be able to hide himself from everything that was happening if he didn’t actually look, if he just turned his eyes and looked away…

“I can’t deal with this,” Richie said. “I can’t…”

“No, Rich, don’t go,” Eddie said.

“I can’t talk to you right now. I can’t… I fucked up. And your life is fucked too, I can’t…”

“Richie, please, we can figure something…”

The phone went dead before he managed to finish his sentence.

Richie

Hey, call me.

Call me back, asshole.

You better have a good fucking reason for not calling me back I swear to god.

Please call me?
Eddie hammered on the front of their old house -- because he and Myra had decided earlier that week to sell it, in front of their fucking lawyers -- until Myra came and opened the door, looking like she wanted to rip his head off his shoulders. He stood on the doormat, gesturing with his hand in silent rage before he managed to force the words out, so angry he thought his throat was going to close up. Myra seemed faintly disturbed by his anger, looking over him in half-disgust. It was late, almost ten, and their street of nice, respectable townhouses was a long chain of black and silent windows as Eddie stood alone.

“Was this you?” He spat.

He thrust the phone out at her and she took a step backwards, tense with anger. She grabbed the phone out of his hand to read it, frowning more and more deeply by the second until she hit the moneyshot and her eyes opened wide.

“It was you!” Eddie yelled, convinced he’d spotted her in the moment her betrayal had been revealed. “How could you do this? Like, was this fun for you? Fucking cheap revenge?”

“No, it wasn’t me!” Myra said, shoving his phone back at him like she didn’t want to have to keep touching it.

“You were the only other person who knew, Myra. It was me, and you, and you’re the one with an axe to grind. So you ran off to the fucking first person who would pay you so you could have the whole world know how hurt you are without even thinking about--”

“Do you think I’d want other people to know this? Do you not realise how humiliating this all is for me?” Myra said, cutting him off. “I don’t want anyone to know about this. And I don’t want to be arguing about this on the street.”

Eddie waved his hands in frustration, gesturing at nothing in particular, just so full of high energy that it had to be vented out of him physically somehow. Myra watched coldly, absolutely no trace of amusement in her face. Had she found him endearing, ever? Had she once looked at his physical expressiveness, his motormouth, his constant swearing and liked it? He couldn’t really remember a time she hadn’t been trying to change him, but he’d always been so willing to be changed. He’d always believed that there was something wrong with him.

“If you didn’t, then who did?” He spat.

“I don’t know! Maybe that intern Clive had. I don’t know, and I don’t care. You and him have ruined everything, and you’re not getting any sympathy out of me now.”

Ah, fuck. The intern. Eddie had forgotten the wan-faced infant sitting next to Myra’s lawyer, who’d been all perky when they mentioned Richie. Yeah, that sounded about right. He vaguely wondered if he could sue, if he could prove it, or how he’d even go about that. His shoulders drooped, the anger running out of hm like a pierced balloon.

“I didn’t… He’s really hurt by this shit getting out, Myra, he’s really upset. He won’t talk to me,” Eddie admitted, the words stinging him in the cool night hair.

Myra laughed once. “Good. You deserve each other.”

She slammed the door in his face and left him out on the front stoop alone. Eddie stood helplessly and thought about how right she was, although probably not in the way she’d intended to be.

Richie
Richie, call me when you get this.

Fucking call me back already!

Please call me.

Chapter End Notes

title is first love/late spring by mitski

i wrote and i rewrote and i rewrote this chapter... every big plot element in this fic really has me questioning myself a whole bunch.

you might notice also there's only two chapters left after this! the fic is actually completed, i'm finally happy with where it's at, and i'll be posting the last couple of chapters shortly. writing this fic has been an adventure, i wrote a draft of the ending previously and decided i didn't like it and ended up rewriting the entire thing, which is why the project ended up taking longer than i intended. but! now you can be safe in the knowledge this fic is not going to be abandoned before it's over, unless i get hit by a bus or something.

make sure to check out my other fics!
you've lied, too, but it's a sin that i can't tell the truth,

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

Bloomsbury has snapped up a “hauntingly superb” debut nonfiction historical novel by Michael Hanlon, which is being co-written with award winning horror author William Denbrough.

“Derry: A Look Through Hell’s Back Door is a fascinating exploration of Michael and William’s hometown of Derry, Maine,” Susan Browne, Hanlon and Denbrough’s representative, said. “By highlighting the disturbing past of Derry, Michael and William hope to shed new light on the often unnoticed darker side of small towns. Michael has been researching the book for fifteen years, and William is thrilled to help bring this uncompromising account to the public.”

This book will be Hanlon’s first narrative history for the trade and Denbrough’s first nonfiction book. It will publish in 2018.

Eddie’d had a lot of luck in his life. He didn’t really think of it that way most of the time; it was hard for him to think of himself as ‘lucky’ when that luck didn’t come with happiness, but objectively speaking, he could see it. He’d gotten into a great college, landed an amazing job right away, worked his way up the ladder. He’d never been really sick, or had financial problems, or been in trouble with the law. He made a ridiculous amount of money and was very stable. He’d survived being stabbed through the torso by a giant intergalactic clown. There was a man who loved him waiting for him in LA.

Maybe the first time he ever really felt lucky was when Mike landed in New York, a few weeks after the entire divorce process had begun. Eddie had been spending the time since mostly communicating with her through their lawyers, but the prenup they’d signed on Myra's father's insistence meant there wasn't a whole lot of discussion to be had in who was getting what. It was pretty open and shut. The two of them, after Eddie’s outburst outside the house, were now essentially not communicating at all, spending any meeting with the lawyers in stony silence while their demands were read like competing hostage negotiators. Eddie didn’t really give that much of a shit. He was keeping what he owned, essentially, and that was enough. It was enough to get him to LA.

The truth was, none of it felt real, and it was hard for him to do anything but go through the motions. He was following what he was supposed to be doing, but there was never a sense of everything connecting. He filled out the paperwork he had to, he slept and ate, he met with Myra and their lawyer. But he barely read the words in front of him, he didn’t taste the food he ate, and when he slept, he didn’t dream. He found himself reading articles about himself written by people who had never met him and who knew Richie in name only, that conspired wildly about the circumstances of their relationship on the scant details they had. It wasn’t just that Richie was famous -- and he was more than Eddie had really allowed himself to fully accept -- it was that their story was full of so many mysteries, laced in with so much scandal. People who had never given a fuck about Rich Tozier when he was just another obscene stand-up were suddenly all in on the story of a gay man who had led a double life with a lover who had betrayed his own wife. It was like trying to read text in a dream when he saw the things people said about the two of them, so disconnected from reality the assumptions were. The idea Richie was some lothario, that Eddie was a traitorous letch, that they were both liars. Though that last part, Eddie supposed, was true.

Most strangely, from the accounts of people on Twitter that Eddie could make an educated guess
were gay, waves of support that was sometimes frighteningly on the nose. He ‘had a Twitter’, in that he’d made an account in 2013 and then never used it past following two New York senators and an author he liked, but the accounts existence allowed him to look at things people were saying. Time and time again he saw stories from people who were outraged on his and Richie’s behalf, who spoke with some authority on the damage being outed could do, who called for the journalists who’d leaked the news to lose their jobs. He knew that the intern who had actually sold the story had lost his job, but hadn’t thought about turning on the writers who’d written about it.

Over and over he saw people saying that his and Richie’s pain, the fear and trauma of the closet itself, were real and the idea that they were both justified in struggling was baffling to Eddie at first. He had never really allowed himself to actually feel anything, had always pushed it back and back and back. He’d thought that was having control of your life; not thinking about it, not letting yourself be overwhelmed by emotions, but looking at the people who had been in his position -- almost -- and who said that his anger and fear were justified gave him pause. Maybe pretending you felt nothing, hiding it all like a body in a shallow grave, was a kind of loss of control as much as having a breakdown was.

Oddly Eddie, whose primary interactions online were ignoring Facebook and getting into fights in the Financial Times comments section, was sometimes almost driven to thank people. Just for sticking up for the two of them, in a time when Richie was so far out of reach he might as well have been on Mars. For saying things that no one else was saying. There was a catharsis in having your view of reality confirmed that made Eddie realise how much having his beliefs and reality denied constantly for his entire life had scarred him.

He figured when he got to LA he’d look for a therapist.

People did keep calling and emailing Eddie, and it was only by some saving grace that they never managed to actually hunt him down in person. The information they’d been leaked hadn’t included a photograph, apparently. Not that he was going out much anyway. He would have turned his phone off completely if he wasn’t waiting for Richie to call him.

Richie would call, eventually. He had to.

The first thing that felt actually real to Eddie, in the midst of all the chaos, was when he saw Mike getting off the plane in the airport, and Eddie was able to wrap his arms around his friend, getting pulled into a hug that felt like it squeezed all the life right back into him. Mike felt more real in how familiar he was, just the same as Eddie had always known him. It felt right that it was Mike who was there; he was a lighthouse, and his light reminded Eddie of who they really were. They were kids who’d killed a god and come back to kill it again -- it made Eddie’s headaches about divorce settlements seem kind of small and ridiculous in comparison. Thinking about that made him laugh for the first time in a long time.

They went to get food first, Mike throwing his luggage into the back of Eddie’s car and the two of them joking about the importance of trying New York pizza until they ‘ironically’ ended up in a pizza joint that Eddie really did think was the best pizza he’d had, the two of them sitting companionably at one of the tables with plastic tablecloths and eating slices the size of a man’s head. Mike looked good, Eddie thought, smiling and laughing more easily than ever, visibly standing straighter now the weight of a lifetime had been lifted off his shoulders. Every time he raised his hand to touch his forehead when he was laughing too hard to talk Eddie’s heart swelled with a little more love.

“I do think this is the best pizza in New York,” Eddie said, because he felt a sudden urge to be sincere and found no reason to repress it.
“I dunno, I think the crust is too thin,” Mike said.

“Are you fucking kidding me?”

Mike cracked up laughing again and Eddie couldn’t stop himself from smiling back, face splitting into a huge smile. His smile was different now; the scar meant that his lips never curled quite as high on the left as they did on the right. He didn’t mind the difference, though. He just liked to be able to remember he had fallen, taken the pain, and not broken.

“Hey, what the hell was that story about the book you emailed me?” Eddie said. “You and Bill are writing a book?”

“Kinda.” Mike looked a little bashful but obviously proud too, shrugging like it was no big deal. “I’d always wanted to write a book about Derry -- I’d been doing research for decades, I wrote out all these stories. As soon as I showed it to Bill he went crazy about how much he loved it.”

“Oh, I see. So you wrote a book and Bill is stealing all your credit.”

“No!” Mike laughed. “I’d written all these stories but it wasn’t really... A book. It was just a collection of essays, almost. He’s helping me bring it all together. Plus, with his name on it, it was a hell of a lot easier to sell it.”

“Nepotism.”

“Well, you know me. I just care about the money.”

“Seriously though.” Eddie reached out to squeeze Mike’s shoulder. “I’m really proud of you, man.”

“Thanks. I really feel... Once this is out into the world, and I stop having to hold onto all of this, being the only one who sees... I'm so ready for the world to know about Derry so I can stop feeling like Cassandra the oracle. I'm going to be so free afterwards. For the first time in my life, all I have to be is what I want to be.”

Eddie was smiling but he could feel tears burning in his eyes. When the two of them stood up to leave he hugged Mike again, so filled with guilt that Mike had really gone through all he had, but also with a powerful sense of kinship. Mike understood without saying anything at all, just hugged Eddie back and kept a supportive hand on his shoulder. Once again, he was enormously grateful Mike was here.

They dumped Mike’s stuff at the hotel they were both staying at, and Eddie took him to the American Folk Art Museum, because Eddie thought he’d like it, which he did. Then they went to Strand Book Store and Mike cried he couldn’t take more books with him, staring at the rare books they kept behind glass with the barely restrained hunger of a three-year-old in a candy store. The sun was bright and the day was good and Eddie felt; he stood on the sidewalk shading the sun from his eyes and pointing out things on the New York skyline to Mike, and for once living in this city for twenty years felt worth it, but he was not sorry to leave it behind.

They had dinner late, eating outside at the kind of trendy new restaurant that made Eddie roll his eyes but Mike found novel. The waiter mistook them for a couple when they came in, which they both played along with, calling each other ‘darling’ with enough genuine affection that they could have passed as married. Though this was pretend, Eddie thought about how this was the first time he was ever being seen as a gay man in public and sat with that, the weight of someone else’s perception of his identity settling over him. In many ways he was still uncertain, but he didn’t know if it really was him who was uncertain, or the ghost of his mother. In a lot of ways, he had
never had the chance to decide who he was, and now the pieces of his identity were falling together it would take time to sort them all into a shape he could understand to be him.

He spilled his guts to Mike about it, letting himself bleed out all his worries because it felt to him that if he was going to have all these good friends who loved him unconditionally, he should be able to tell them what he was thinking. Mike, as always, listened with an attentiveness that was deeply comforting in how seriously he took everything he was told; you could always be sure Mike wasn’t going to laugh at you.

“I’ve dated other women, like, before I met Myra,” Eddie said, stabbing a leaf of his salad with a fork. “And I never really liked kissing and I never really liked having sex. Like, it isn’t just that I don’t like Myra. I never liked sex. And I figured… Hey, maybe that’s the kind of guy I am. Sex isn’t important to everyone. It didn’t bother me. But then, man.”

Eddie dragged a hand over his face, trying to find the words. Mike watched him patiently.

“I really like kissing Richie,” Eddie said, with half a laugh. “And I really like having sex with Richie. So, like, what is the conclusion I’m supposed to draw from that?”

“I think you’ve got two options,” Mike said. “Either Richie is better at sex than everyone else in the world, which if I’m being real, is too horrible to even consider. But then there’s the other option and I think… You already know what that is.”

“Yeah I like… Man, I’ve only ever had sex with one guy. It feels crazy to be like ‘this is my identity now’.”

“It doesn’t matter if you’ve had sex with one guy or three dozen. You’re a man in love with a man, who by the sounds of things? Is not attracted to women.” Mike raised his eyebrows, like he was giving an opportunity to have Eddie argue back. There was no counter-argument. “Look, what matters is what you do and what makes you happy. You’re not applying to become an officially accredited homosexual, you don’t need enough stamps to get a license. It’s good to, y’know, figure yourself out, but you don’t have to put pressure on yourself.”

“He does make me happy. No, actually, he makes me so mad all of the time. But I really, really love how mad he makes me.”

Eddie’s face sank and Mike’s eyes grew worried, reaching across the table to touch his friend’s hand.

“He’s been… I’m really worried, Mike. He won’t talk to me. Not since the story got leaked. I don’t know if he thinks it was my fault, or…”

Mike squeezed his hand. “He was willing to risk his life for you. There’s no way he’s angry at you. He’s probably angry at himself.”

“I just wish he’d talk to me. I’m fucking scared for him.”

“Look. Bill is still in LA. He can go to Richie’s place and check up on him.”

“Man… Richie hasn’t really been talking to Bill.”

“Yeah, or any of us. But that can’t carry on either. He’s isolating himself, and we’re not going to let him.” Mike’s tone was upbeat and constructive, gently nudging Eddie into thinking of this all as not being as hopeless as he’d feared.
Eddie smiled and scrubbed at his eyes with his hand. It really could be that simple; his friends would come in clutch when he needed them to. He leaned on the table, letting the conversation die as the waiter took away their plates and asked if they wanted more drinks; they got the bill and went through the routine of paying. Eddie insisted on paying for it, the two of them arguing companionably about it for the sake of having something to talk about. The waiter, who was still under the impression they were married, seemed incredibly charmed by the moment.

They drove back to the hotel and ended up in Eddie’s room, which was rammed full of suitcases. Mike picked his way around them, wondering what the fuck was even in them all, before finally collapsing onto the double bed next to Eddie, the two of them sitting propped up against the pillows and watching-not-watching some sitcom on tv that was about as entertaining as getting a root canal. They drank tiny beers from the minifridge, bitching about the exorbitant fucking prices.

Eddie called Bill, finding that he needed the comfort of Mike’s hand on him. He didn’t know why he was so afraid; there was just something inherently mortifying about needing to ask for help, though Bill understood immediately and was nothing but kind to him. Eddie just felt stupid for not being able to do anything himself, trapped on the other side of the country and surrounded by belongings that felt now cumbersome. He had wild thoughts of throwing everything in the trash and hopping a plane, but he couldn’t see that working out in the long run; it felt like the kind of thing you did when you were only thinking in the short term. This was not going to be a short-term thing. Eddie wanted this to be the rest of his life.

“You still want to haul my crap cross-country?” Eddie said to Mike, who was flicking the tiny beer bottle into the garbage can under the desk.

“Yes,” Mike said, instantly.

“It’s pretty much the longest journey you can fucking make in the US. It’s nearly 3,000 miles.”

Mike shrugged. “I checked. It’s a 40 hour drive, give or take a few extra.”

“Two days,” Eddie said mournfully at the exact same time as Mike said;

“So, only two days!”

They glanced at each other and laughed, a little, just at the coincidence.

“Look,” Mike said. “I want to get to LA too. We both want to start new lives. We’re going to follow our plan. I came out here to help you pack your stuff and drive it, so stop trying to put me off.”

“I’m not trying to put you off.”

“Yes you are, you’re doing that ‘no I’m fine don’t touch me’ shit.”

“I’m doing what?”

“You’re pretending you don’t want help! Oh, don’t worry Mike, I only slightly crashed my car. No, I only broke my arm, a little bit, don’t touch me.”

Eddie shoved him, which was not particularly effective. Mike just rolled back into place, nudging Eddie with his shoulder.

“Bill is right there. We have a few days to pick up your stuff, and then we’re going to head down. It’s a week. Stop worrying so much,” Mike said.
“Oh, that’s easy for you to say.”

“Excuse me? I waited for twenty-seven years, watching the sewers for It, and I managed to stay sane. If you should be listening to anyone about keeping calm, it should absolutely be me.”

“I feel like I’m going fucking crazy. I don’t know how much longer I can wait. I’ve been waiting years for this and now… I just don’t know why I can’t be with him. I don’t see why I can’t do anything I want.”

“I guess that’s ‘cus there’s no reason you shouldn’t be doing anything you want,” Mike said, as if it was the easiest thing in the world.

The good thing about having an apartment meant that no one was coming up to Richie’s door and hammering on it, but the bad thing about having a bell on the gate connected to his apartment meant that if someone wanted to they could stand outside and press it at 7PM at night and there wasn’t a goddamn thing Richie could do to stop them without going down there. He tried putting a pillow over his head while the bell shrilled, thinking that whoever it was would go away eventually, but his ability to tolerate the nonstop ringing was weaker than the willpower of whoever was pressing their entire weight on it. Richie lasted less than five minutes before he half-fell out of bed, dragging his sheets across the floor, storming out of his room to answer the bell. He jammed his thumb on the receiver.

“Are you fucking dying?!” He said.

“Are you?” The voice was instantly recognisable and Richie flinched.

“Bill? What are you doing here?” His angry tone gave way to resentment immediately.

“Everyone’s worried about you, and no one can get in touch with you. Why do you think I’m here? I love you.”

Richie rubbed a hand over his face, stubble rough against his palm. The irritation about Bill arriving was being squashed out of him with a defeated sigh. He really didn’t want to have to deal with this. He didn’t want to have to deal with anything, actually. It would be very nice to live somewhere at the bottom of the void.

“I don’t really want to see anyone, Bill,” he said.

“Too bad, because I’m coming up there. I’ll climb this gate if I have to.”

“You cannot climb the gate.”

“I can and I will.”

Richie tried to hammer on the call button again but Bill wasn’t answering. He screamed into his hands for a minute but then slammed the button that would unlock the front gate and let Bill into the complex. There was a few minutes until he heard someone thundering up the stairs to his door and he pulled it open before Bill reached it. Once the door was open, Bill didn’t wait to be invited in, pushing past Richie and striding into the apartment. It could have been in a worse state. Richie hadn’t been doing anything very much the last few days.

Bill stood in the middle of Richie’s open-plan living room with his hands on his hips, staring at Richie like he was waiting for an explanation. Richie stood there, dressed in an ancient sweater -- cartoon graphic of a banana -- and boxer shorts while Bill was dressed in what looked like $3,000
worth of clothing and an air of demanding authority around him. The entire thing was really pissing Richie the fuck off, actually, and he planted himself where he stood, refusing to say another word. They stared each other down for a long while, before Bill finally grew too annoyed with the silence and spoke up, still standing like he was a teacher and he was giving Richie a scolding.

“What’s going on with you? You haven’t spoken to anyone for a week. And you already were barely talking to anyone except Eddie. You’re isolating yourself.”

“You have a lot of guts fucking coming here and talking to me about Eddie.”

“You’ve abandoned him when he needs you so you can sulk in the dark!”

Richie’s apartment was pretty dark. It was clean, other than where his bed had spilled over onto the ground, but there was a distinct cave-like element to it. The blinds were drawn and there were a few too many empty bottles of alcohol in the trash; there was an airlessness to the room that suggested that it had been closed up and cut off from the world for a little while too long. Cigarette smoke was still circling listlessly around the bedroom, a cigarette smouldering in the ashtray. The dim light of the room meant that there were long shadows over Bill’s face as he stood with his back to the window, and it only made his contempt more unbearable.

Anger exploded inside Richie with next to no warning, gripping him with a sudden rage he’d been bottling up since the hospital. He’d spent so much time since leaving the hospital alone that he’d had no one to talk about anything with; he’d cooled off considerably since then, growing to understand that no, what happened was not the fault of his friends, but the coolness had not led back into the natural warmth of his love for his friends. Time and space made it very easy for him to turn his back on the ocean of love he’d identified as belonging to the Losers; he had done so and used that distance to help close himself off, shut himself down. It was safe, being cut off and alone. There was no one to disappoint. No one to let down. No one to hurt.

“I abandoned him?” Richie spat.

“This again?”

“Th-this again? Are you fucking kidding me? What, I should just get over it now? Stop trying to make you feel responsible? None of this would have fucking happened–” Almost without thinking about it, Richie had taken a threatening step towards him.

“Well, it has happened! Fucking deal with it!” Bill pushed him, shoved him back a step away from him.

“What, are you going to hit me now? That going to make everything better?”

“Are you still mad about me hitting you when we were thirteen?”

Richie shoved him then, a little more violently than Bill had shoved him, making him stumble backwards a step.

“I followed you into hell and back! Twice! I nearly lost everything, twice! And you couldn’t even let me…”

“Let you what, let you die?!” Bill spat. “When Georgie died, it screwed up my whole life. I had to live with the guilt that I sent him out to play alone. That it was my fault. And after Stan died, I knew it was my fault because I was the one who made everyone promise to come back. And when Eddie died, or we thought he did, I thought the same thing again. Those were all my fault. So fucking forgive me if… You know what? No, I’m not sorry. I’m not sorry I didn’t make the choice
to leave another one of my friends to die. I could never have lived with that. And if we were there now, I’d pull you out of there again. I will never give up on you.”

Richie’s hands were shaking. He looked away from Bill again, the frustration in him swelling up. He lashed out at a garbage can, kicking it into the side of the kitchen counter with a metallic clang. Bill watched with a stony expression on his face, unmoved by the outburst.

“Fuck you,” Richie said. “You have no fucking idea what this has been like for me. Ever since we were kids people have been laughing at me behind my back because they knew I was gay. You have no fucking idea how traumatic that is, alright? And the one time I actually get a chance to do it for myself, to have any control over it, it all gets taken away from me. And now I’ve probably ruined Eddie’s fuckin’ life too! So, like, what the fuck exactly should I just be getting over? Like, an entire lifetime of homophobia? That my boyfriend has his business all over fucking Twitter? The fact I wasted like, forty years of my life hating myself and wanting to be someone else? Oh, yeah, real easy to just shrug all that off, Bill. No wonder all the endings to your books suck so fuckin’ bad, you think it’s all that easy.”

“You are a grown man, you have responsibilities. You aren’t a twelve year old hiding in the arcade from the bullies anymore. If you want to take control, then do it. Like do you not realise what you just said to me?”

“What, that you’re an asshole?”

“You talked to me about being gay more than you have in forty years. You’ve come so far, and now you’re going to just stop?” Bill said. “Because you just remembered you’re famous? Big news, Richie! You’re not a kid anymore. You’re an incredibly successful comedian. You live alone in a giant apartment in LA, you have a show airing on comedy central right now, and your rich, handsome boyfriend is driving cross-country this week to come live with you. You already have control over your fucking life. You can… You can kill this fucking clown!”

Richie stared at him. He felt both annoyed and oddly sympathetic towards Bill for ending the explosion of words with a joke; it hit home in a way that reminded him they had all come, roughly, from the same place. They were connected in a way that did matter to him deeply, and it hit him how much pressure he was putting on that. There was that love again for his friends, more vast and deeper than any conflict they might run into. Time and distance would allow him to ignore it, but when he was confronted with it again, it had power that could destroy anything in its wake. That was how they’d fucking beaten It. Love.

“Have you never had to deal with asshole press before?” Bill said, voice almost gently amused. “You have PR people, right?”

“Yeah, but when I got booked on drunk and disorderly in 2007 no one gave a shit, but now they know I suck dick they like, care a lot,” Richie said. “I haven’t dealt with… This before.”

He ran his hands through his hair and then went to sit on the couch, putting his head in his hands until he got a chance to collect his thoughts. Bill sat down next to him, putting an arm around his shoulder, which Richie hadn’t realised he wanted until then. He propped his elbows on his knees, still sitting slouched over while he talked.

“I’m really sorry about all that shit,” Richie said. “I didn’t know you were dealing with all that.”

“It’s hard to talk about it when you’re a kid. Or when you have like three days before a clown eats you.”
“I don’t mean to be a fuckin’ asshole, it’s just that… Fuck this, you know? Every time I think something is going right, something else spits in my face. I told Eddie about how I’d wait forever for him and then I get one thing go wrong and I fold like a deck of cards. I don’t deserve him.”

“You were just scared.”

“That’s fucking stupid. What the fuck do I have to be afraid of?”

Bill shrugged, as if the question escaped him entirely. Richie sat up again, staring out of the window. It was dark, but the lights of LA burned bright in the distance and added a scorched hue to the horizon. Eddie was out there, thousands of miles away, waiting for him. The fact that they were going to be together at some point soon was unreal. Thinking about it again left a buzz on his skin like an electric shock; he wouldn’t believe it was happening until it did. And they were making it happen together. Eddie had chosen to go to Richie’s show, and Richie had chosen to keep contacting him. Eddie had chosen to call Richie, and Richie had chosen to go save him. Eddie had chosen to leave his old life for Richie, and Richie had chosen to wait for him. It was all them, their choices, their free will.

Eddie was thousands of miles away; so was Maine. Derry, which had lingered over Richie and Bill’s lives, over Eddie, Beverly, Mike, and Ben’s lives, was dead to him now, in a way. It took a lot of power for something to have a hold over you even when you didn’t know it existed, for you to be helpless in the thrall of something so much bigger and more ancient than yourself and for you to not only not recognise it but to think of that trauma as a part of yourself; for you to see the black seeds it had placed inside you and think that the plant that grew was yours, that the thorns cutting deep inside your heart were not an invasive species but the inevitable culmination of who you were. A trauma like that felt inescapable because the roots it grew were so deep you no longer saw the lines between them and your nerves, your veins, your bones. It all just became you, and you allowed yourself to believe that if it was you, then it was your fault, and if it was your fault, then the thing that had to die was simply… You.

It had been a dark few days for Richie Tozier. He had had many dark days, months even, in his life. There had been lows he hadn’t seen himself climbing out of. That plant had wound itself around him again and again, cutting itself so deep that it was like his flesh had healed around it, the way wounds would sometimes heal over debris. There had been a lot of late nights, lying in the dark, reading words he knew would hurt him, seeking things out even though he knew it would only hurt more, the dark memory of the face of a dead young man handing him a flyer rising to the surface. Everything he read that upset him was like another reminder that he had failed his childhood self, broken that promise to never, ever let anyone find out the truth.

To take hold of that plant and tear it out, to see it as something that had come in like a burglar in the night and stolen years of your life, to recognise that the earth it had grown in could be cultivated and given new life, that took even more strength. But Richie knew already he was more powerful than what had traumatised him; he had taken Its heart and crushed it.

He sat up, leaning back into the sofa. Bill watched him, anticipatory. Richie suddenly felt very calm. He was thinking of his childhood self, the gangly, scrawny kid with the bottle-bottom glasses and the love so strong it could kill death itself. That kid was not the only one out there who thought the same.

“You want to help me out?” Richie said.

“Of course,” Bill said, immediately and without question.

“I’m going to call my manager, and I want you to get your PR people, and I want you to get Ben
and Bev to get their people. I have an idea.”

“Okay.” Bill looked both excited and confused. “Okay, man. What are you thinking about?”

“I’m going to come out,” Richie said.

He had to go back to his room and struggle around down the side of his bed where he’d abandoned his phone, turning it back on. He ignored the 1,743 emails that immediately began screaming at him the second the screen lit up and called Jason. The phone rang once before Jason answered.

“Jesus Christ, I thought you were dead,” Jason said.

“No. You want a job?”

“As your manager? God, I’ll have to think about that one. I don’t know if it’s worth it.”

“Shut up. Ok, you know what you said about publicity stunts? How fast can you put something together? I got three multi-millionaires backing me up on this one, so money is no object.”

Jason sighed heavily down the phone.

“I guess we can make something work.”

eds

hey i have a really good idea

Chapter End Notes

i love Mike and i would die for him a minute. the title of his book is taken from the novel; the novel mentions that Mike was collecting stories and had titled them hoping to publish it, but it never says if he does or not. i like to think he would.

title is I think I Need a New Heart by The Magnetic Fields

we have one chapter to go! and an epilogue, which i'll post at the same time as chapter 20. ill save my big ending speech for then.

i've written a new reddie one-shot! its an au where Eddie is Richie's PA and they... well... you'll figure it out if you look at the tags. Eddie Kaspbrak Is: PA of the Year.

remember to check out my other longfic Portrait of Two Boys!
...RT: Oh, well, Bev, Ben, and Bill are old friends of mine. I just called them and told them if they
didn't help out they weren't invited to my birthday party. But they did, because they're like, good
people and they love me. Unfortunately, I have to have a birthday party now.

**Getting outing like this must have been a very traumatic experience. The leak came from your
partner's divorce lawyer?**

RT: Christ, yeah. It wasn't my boyfriend's divorce lawyer, it was like, an intern working for his ex-
wife's lawyer. But yeah, it was my worst nightmare. Well, second worst. I've had the two worst
things I could ever imagine both happen in my life within a few weeks, basically, so it's been a
difficult few months. But now I've been through all that I figure ****, I must be able to survive
anything.

**So, what made you think, 'if I'm out I'm going to make it into a show'?**

RT: Getting attention has basically been the only ****ing thing I've ever cared about. Making an
entire pity party show where like fifteen other comedians have to talk with my name on the poster
is a dream come true. But to be more serious for a second, and apologies for that I know it's
disturbing, I wanted to take control. Being vulnerable is scary as hell. If I was going to be forced to
do it, then I was going to do it on my terms, y'know? Drown out their voices. Me on a podium
screaming 'I'M NOT AFRAID OF YOU!' until it's true.

**Can I ask how your partner feels about all this?**

RT: This is what he just texted me, 'You keep coming up with new ways to make me so proud of
you, but will you get a haircut for once in your ****ing life'. That's kind of our relationship in a
nutshell.

**Are you going to get a haircut?**

RT: No, I know how he likes it.

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They agreed they'd split the driving evenly, but the way Eddie drove made Mike nervous and
Eddie got the impression he was trying to do more than his fair share. Too bad for Mike that Eddie
wanted to drive more; he needed to be able to think about something else than the monologue on a
loop in his brain. He was surprised by how easily what he wanted to say was falling together, but
he kept running his lines, obsessively worrying at it like a scar you couldn’t stop picking. When he
was driving, at least he could think about the road.

It felt unfair they weren't taking more time on Mike's first cross-country journey; they could have
spent weeks, months, trawling around and hunting out the secret, memorable details, the stuff that
would stay with them until they died. But it would have to be another time; this trip would be a
haze of roads and anxiety and watching the moving dot on the map move slowly closer and closer
to their destination. Eddie would never forget this trip, but it wouldn't be for the fun they had.

When they lost a day because Mike got lost driving around cornfields the panic that set in was so
immediate that it made it clear they couldn't take their time; it was five days of driving or Eddie was going to flip his fucking lid. Thankfully Mike was a rock, even if his sense of direction was shit, or at least not quite as keen as Eddie's internal compass. The two of them tracked almost 3,000 miles across the country, dragging Eddie's Cadillac and a small U-Haul further than either of them had ever driven before. It made Eddie realise a couple of things; quite how insanely vast America was, and how little he cared about his belongings. He'd left almost everything behind, in the end. It was surprising how little he actually had when you cut out what Myra had owned. When Mike had been helping him shift stuff out of the house he had looked around and said to Eddie;

"It's hard to believe you lived here. You're not in it."

And with the wedding photos now taken down, condemned to the garbage, it was remarkable how little of a mark Eddie had made on a house he'd lived in for seven years. Once he hauled his clothes and junk out, it was like the house had only ever been home to Myra. In a way, that was true. It had never really been Eddie's home, he had never felt safe, or warm, or loved there. He had only ever been a bug in amber, perfectly preserved, but completely dead. He'd looked at his wedding photo, which he'd found buried at the bottom of a case of junk, and shown to Mike like it was an archaeological artefact. As he'd held the photo he'd seen his own reflection in the glass, the older, scarred man staring down at the stranger in the ash-grey suit, and had not been able to recognise them as the same person. They weren't, really.

He'd been ready to fight for his things, initially, to argue over the minutiae and make the entire thing an absolute fucking endurance test for everyone involved, but had seen almost immediately that he simply did not care. He did not care about the furniture, because he could only think about helping Richie find that perfect table to tie the room together. He didn't care if he'd part paid for Myra's car, and if he was entitled to it, because he couldn't stop thinking about how his car was going to carry him all the way away from here. The house was worthless; she could have it, if she wanted. He had enough money to get him out. In their last few meetings -- the intern who had ratted out Eddie conspicuously absent now the threat of suing was on the board -- he was lost in his own thoughts, everything around him as dull and disconnected as a dream someone else was recounting. When he turned his back on New York he had felt only relief, the sensation of years worth of shit tying him down sloughing off like an old skin.

They drove. The highways were long and boring; Eddie read through the current draft of Mike's book and found himself horrified at how little about Derry he'd really ever known. It was incredible how even when you had seen some of the most nightmarish stuff Derry had to offer, there was more boiling under the surface than you could ever properly intuit on your own. Mike had done years worth of research, and it showed in the volumes of stuff he'd uncovered, the crime and the abuse and the prejudice. It was incredible to Eddie that anyone started off in a place so filled with murder and misery and come out of it normal. He felt like he was a wreck. But maybe that was normal; to see all the horror and feel shaken by it. He certainly felt more kinship with his friends, with their histories of trauma, than he felt any desire to fit in with the people who pretended the history of Derry wasn't worth acknowledging. The more of his childhood memories he delved through, of the averted eyes and the unsaid things, the dark silences filled with buried conspiracy that smothered the voices of those trying to cry out, the more he felt nothing but relief about being an outsider. Eddie thought it made sense that after living in a world where people didn't talk and didn't want to talk, he'd grown up to be a man who hid his feelings under mountains of repression. Thank God he could leave all that as he could leave Derry.

They drove. They ate at a diner where Eddie had a burger the size of his head that was full of grease, having not really ever allowed himself to eat something so unhealthy and so disgusting, and then got profoundly ill in the motel toilet for a night, spending the next day lying in the back of the car intermittently dabbing his face with a wet cloth while Mike tried not to laugh. The two of them
stayed in a chain of motels, tiny places that were as bare bones as they came. One particularly hot night Eddie lay on the bed in his room, starfish shape over the mattress, and remembered how it had felt to curl himself around Richie's body. It didn't matter that the air was stale with dry heat or that he was drenched in sweat; he hoped he would not have to feel cold like this again. In the mornings he would wake up and feel the ghost of touch on his skin and crave, desperately, the chance to have it again.

They drove. Both he and Mike kept up with the others constantly, personally and through the news. While a long advertising campaign has its benefits, there was a lot to be said about the draw of dropping an announcement last minute and keeping it exclusive; the amount of noise the show generated was enough for it to have sold out and stayed in the news even after that. Four -- five, once Audra threw her hat into the ring -- incredibly famous people generating an event out of nowhere got buzz; Eddie felt both proud and like he was on the verge of going out of his mind about the idea he was at all connected to this. He'd had a successful career, but no one had ever trumped up hundreds of dollars to go see him write a report on the potential liability of a corporate merger. Eddie could feel himself transitioning into a wildly different world with every day the show grew closer. The alien nature of it felt strangely good; if his life was going to change, then let it *all* change. He was ripping off the band-aid in one go.

They drove. The landscapes of America around them were sometimes familiar and sometimes alien. Eddie thought about how little of the world either him or Mike had seen, felt like he didn't even have half the excuse Mike did. For a little while he felt guilt that he'd wasted so much of his time being controlled by fear, but he shook that off. No, no more guilt. No more anger and blame. Every time they crested a hill and the lights of a city glittered in the distance, Eddie felt calmer. Every mile that passed was a little closer to home, a little further from the place he thought he would die, and he would drag himself every inch until he got there. I've earned this he thought, the first time he realised the lights he was seeing in the distance were LA. We earned this.

Jason had a nonprofit organisation interested the morning after Richie called, and then they were off to the fucking races. The charity he'd found helped homeless LGBT youth, which was exactly the kind of thing that Richie had wanted, and the second he realised he was going to actually be helping this place keep the lights on it was like the dread and the horror of the last few weeks was just gone. He thought of the moments of bravery he'd seen throughout his life; of Eddie throwing that spear, Bill standing in the doorway of the Neibolt house and making a stand, of Connor staying in his hometown and marrying a man he loved, of throwing the first rock in the rock fight, Eddie making a stand against his mother, Stan writing a letter to them all knowing what would come, Beverly running out of her home and not going back. And more, and more. He was surrounded by brave, good, dependable people, and always had been. For a long time, those things had made Richie feel like he did not deserve to stand with them; he had never considered himself brave, or loyal, even though he knew people who would disagree. For once he had good reason to feel different.

It was a simple *idea*. A show, headlined by Richie himself, featuring a variety of comedians and benefiting the LGBT charity of his choice. It would be at some fancy venue, the audience would pay through the nose for tickets and drinks, and every penny would go to charity, the entire thing paid for by Richie and his wealthy friends. It was the simplest concept in the world; the issue was how complex it was to get all the individual pieces moving.

Bill brought in his agent and his assistant, so did Beverly, Ben had an entire PR department of his company ready to go. They were getting this done through sheer numbers and force of will; Ben suggested they could just take longer and plan it more, but Richie knew what was right. He had
never been the leader, but if there was ever a time he was going to take charge of something, it was now. This was going to be all him, it had to be. If everyone wanted part of him, they were fucking getting it.

Beverly's assistant knew someone who got them into a last-minute booking in a huge theatre in Hollywood. The four of them and their accompanying teams had looked around the hall, where a huge stage faced rows and rows of tables, enough to seat easily five hundred. It wasn't an unusual size for Richie; he'd performed to far bigger audiences, and Beverly had seen her designs paraded in front of hundreds, but Ben and Bill both looked awed by the echoing silence of the room. Jason stood in the centre of the stage like he was about to launch into song and texted frantically as he argued with the guy from Ben's PR team, who Jason had hated on sight.

"Going to take a lot to fill this place," Ben said.

"Yeah, that was what the guy said in the porn I watched last night, but you know what? He did get it filled, and so will we," Richie said.

"I really wish you'd said that in any other way possible," Beverly said.

"I'm just respecting his can-do spirit when faced with like four huge-"

"Beep beep, Richie."

The four of them clambered up onto the stage, Richie pacing around the space as he thought, the others taking the chance to see what it was like to be up in front of an audience. Ben looked like he had stage fright just from standing on the empty stage, while Bill and Beverly immediately began tooling around air guitaring. Jason and Ben's PR guy kept arguing until Bill's agent went to split them up.

"If we're going to pull this off, we need numbers, Rich," Jason said, sounding a little annoyed still.

"Having you is a start, but we've got to start gathering people. We really want to book this place?"

Richie looked out over the room. Standing on the stage and knowing there was every chance this could be a total failure was daunting, but if it worked… Standing on the stage, knowing they had a place to start from that was real and physical, felt good. He was going to do this.

"Of course we are," he said.

Booking other people to perform was a nightmare. It wasn't that people didn't want to do it, it was that when you said "in a week" the schedules closed up like a bear trap. A few of Richie's comedian friends seemed genuinely upset they couldn't do it, but people started filing in as word of mouth spread amongst friends-of-friends. After a couple of days it was booked, and a couple of days after that it was sold out. Ticket pre-sales had been rapid even before they had a full set; people were too enticed by the suddenness, desperate not to miss out on what seemed like a once in a lifetime opportunity, the world's most impromptu show put on by a guy who was the disaster of the moment.

And a few more days after that Richie was standing in a tuxedo on a stage facing an audience of hundreds of LA’s rich and famous, who'd turned out mostly because they wanted to get what few else would, as well as some actual fans who'd been lucky enough to grab some tickets for themselves. It had been a while since he'd been on a stage this size; the last time had been right before he'd gotten a phone call that changed his life forever. He hoped that wasn’t going to happen again.
"Wow, I can't believe you guys all made it," Richie said. "I mean, this was pretty last minute. I would have done something a little more grandiose, but someone gave away the twist ending, so I guess we're going to have to make do with this dump."

He dismissively waved his arms at the grand arched ceiling of the theatre, the elaborately decorated walls, the soft pink and blue lighting that was turning everything in the building into a neon-soaked dreamscape. The people in the crowd laughed a little, their faces a myriad of shifting colours as the stage lights shifted gently around him. He kept hoping Eddie's face would spring out at him, that, like once many months ago, he would lock eyes with the man he had loved since before he knew what love was and the connection would ripple through them both so strong and so vibrant nothing else in the world would matter.

Eddie did not magically appear.

"So, this is Richie Tozier's Coming Out Party. I'm gay!" He said, holding his hands up in the air like he was triumphant, waiting for the applause.

And the audience did cheer. There was something distinctly surreal about it; seeing an explosion of applause as the sea of people in front of him clapped and yelled in support went to his head like a shot of vodka, his mind reeling. He found himself smiling like a fucking idiot, and had to turn his head and gently clear his throat to get the lump out of it so he could keep talking.

"I figured out I was gay when I was thirteen, because apparently the reaction you're supposed to have when you see gay porn isn't loneliness. That was also the same time I started trying to do stand-up comedy. I think you get that a lot with comics, where you're so existentially lonely and sad that you just start seeing everyone around you as a potential therapist, and doing shows is just the best way to talk about your problems without the risk of anyone ever asking you to change. You can get up and be like 'so I was blackout drunk for the seventh time that week' and everyone in the audience is like 'YEAH! I'M LIVING VICARIOUSLY THROUGH YOUR WILDLY DISORDERED LIFESTYLE!'"

There were hundreds of people there supporting him now, many of them friends or peers. He could see Bill, Ben and Beverly sitting at a table with Bill's wife and Audra, who had also helped promote the show and who had liked Richie instantly in a way he really hadn't expected, all of them looking so proud and happy to be there that Richie felt guilty he wasn't happy himself. This wouldn't be right, until Eddie was there. He had realised once upon a time that there was a human-shaped hole in his heart, and that it would not be filled until he could hold Eddie in his arms and know, really sincerely know, that no one was going to pull them apart.

"Being gay and in the closet is a little like being a spy… And everyone else is also a spy… But you work for enemy factions, and everything you say might be a codeword. But you don't know all the codewords! Everyone else knows them but you just have to fuckin’ work it out! I'm fifteen years old and all that's ever playing in my head is a montage of clips that may or may not prove my crush likes me back, just like a slideshow of every time he's ever touched me set to Creep by Radiohead, and all of a sudden there's an enemy agent and I got one fucking second to stop thinking about the time my crush put his hand on my wrist, which I've been jacking off about for like six months, so I can tell some mouthbreather I wanted to bone Pamela Anderson. All I talked about when I was thirteen was how much I was getting laid, which is hysterical, because I looked like someone had put glasses and a Hawaiian shirt on a poodle. Not even like a nice poodle, I was not housetrained. But then I grew up, and I started doing this, and all I could talk about then was girls I was dating! It was the exact same material! I wasn't even fuckin' writing it, the people I hired were just looking at me and going 'yeah this motherfucker has cried while jacking off'. Which I have, but it was to Christian Slater."
There were other things he wanted to say, things that were so real they bordered on being not funny, but he couldn't bring himself to say them without Eddie there. There was almost no point to it; he wanted them to be said so Eddie would hear. It would be nice for everyone else to hear how much he loved his boyfriend (boyfriend boyfriend boyfriend God it really was the most exciting and frightening and immature and precious word) but they could also all go directly to Hell for all he cared. He needed to prove nothing to no one but himself and Eddie.

But Eddie wasn't there.

"But this isn't all about me, even if my name is on the front. Ok, it is about me. But it's about doing the right thing, too. When I was growing up I used to think if you were gay, that was like, a death sentence. Head on the chopping block. And even when things changed, that shit stays. Like sure, gay marriage is legal, but a gay man in my hometown was murdered a few months ago." There was a ripple of dismay and horror in the audience. “And that's not funny, and I know it's not funny, but it's the world we live in, and it's the world gay kids have to live in. The difference is, when I was growing up there weren't a lot of people saying that a gay boy could be anything but dead. And it took me making it to forty to realise that a gay boy can be anything he fuckin' wants to be. For a long time having everyone know about me was my worst nightmare. But I've been through the worst shit… That can basically ever happen to a guy, and you know what? I'm not afraid of you fucking clowns!"

He winked at his friends, who waved back.

"Anyway, I'm doing this for me. But me when I was like, thirteen, who hadn't realised it was ok to love his best friend. So, yeah, it's for me. But there's a hundred thousand more kids like that out there. And this is for them. Because God knows, what they really need is another incompetent middle-aged man crying to help them out."

He ended up introducing the first other standup and got off the stage to head into the audience. He sat down in the chair between Beverly and Bill, and Beverly threw her arms around his neck, hugging him close. The four of them ended up all awkwardly hugging each other around the table, almost climbing on top of each other to have that moment, Audra watching with her eyebrows raised. When they pulled apart she smiled at Bill, who just shrugged, unable to explain it to someone who was not one of them.

The next act was in full swing, the audience periodically erupting with laughter. Richie wasn’t really watching. He was swinging between the absurd feelings of almost painful relief it was all coming together, the awe that so many people had turned out for the world’s most last-minute event, the fact that he was actually doing something that was going to help people, and then a sense of longing that he couldn’t shift. There was just the sense that things could be more perfect. That he could be happier. It was the exact same feeling that had pervaded his entire life; the difference now was that he actually knew what the problem was.

“Richie, you must be over the moon,” Beverly said.

“Yeah, yeah, of course,” he said, and he meant it.

“A whole event just for him? Of course he’s happy,” Bill said affectionately.

“Hey, it’s not for me. This is for a youth shelter,” Richie said.

“It’s a little for you,” Ben said.

“I’m allowed.”
“Of course you are,” Audra interjected. “You’ve done amazing.”

“I couldn’t have done it without all of you guys,” Richie said. “I just wish Eddie was here to see it… And Mike.”

Ben patted him on the arm. Richie tried not to let the upset creep into his voice, but it was obvious how much he missed Eddie.

“Last I heard, they were leaving Arizona this morning,” Bill said.

“Fuck me. It’s a long drive. They should have just fuckin’ flown.”

“Maybe. Little late to change it now, though.”

The comedian on was a friend of Richie’s, and he knew the bit she was delivering was something new she’d been working on, so he felt like he should stay and listen to it out of respect, but his head was in a million places. The adrenaline in him was making him shake so badly he needed another bourbon to calm himself down, ice clicking loudly against the glass. He couldn’t stop thinking about how much he wanted to call Eddie and see where he and Mike were, but he didn’t know how he was supposed to get out without attracting attention. He was meant to be back up to introduce the next speaker in like ten minutes; maybe he could stay for a couple of minutes, but would he have time to get to the toilets and back? Would Rachel think he was an asshole if he ran out in the middle of her act?

He ended up procrastinating too long and had to run back on stage, slipping through the door to the back so he could come out smiling and looking like he had nothing else on his mind but how happy he was to be there. Every time he tried to make himself stop thinking about Eddie and think about literally anything else the forcing himself not to think about it created a feedback loop where it was stuck in his mind even more. Richie decided he needed thirty drinks, at least.

After he introduced the next standup, a guy he barely knew, he dashed backstage to try and call Eddie. He paced anxiously in the hallway as the phone rang, making uncomfortable eye contact with a couple of passing stagehands as it rang, all of them concerned about the visible stress on his face. Then the phone kept ringing until it went to the answering machine, Eddie’s dryly professional message telling him to leave a name and number. He tried Mike next, but got nothing. He snarled with frustration and then turned around to see Jason standing a foot behind him and jumped out of his skin.

“Jesus! What is it?” Richie said.

“Why are you back here? Go mingle,” Jason said.

“Alright, thanks Mom,” Richie said.

He waited in the wings until he had to go on again and did, giving his few words before he slipped back into the audience. He sat with his friends again to try and throw back as many drinks as he could in about ten seconds. Beverly watched him nervously.

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“Alright, thanks Mom,” Richie said.

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“You, uh, got some stage fright, Rich?” Bill said.

“I can’t get through to Eddie or Mike,” Richie said.

“They’ll be here. Don’t worry about it.”

“Good advice, Ben, thank you.”
Ben smiled amicably, unoffended. Richie pulled his phone out under the table, Beverly making an exaggerated show of being blinded by the brightness of the screen. Richie gave her a death glare but she just pulled a face at him. No one was answering his texts either. He had to resign himself to the fact that his boyfriend was going to get here after the show was over, but that was fine. This was one night out of many, and they were going to have the rest of their lives together.

Every ten minutes or so that exact thought occurred to him. Holy fuck, it’s going to be the rest of my life. One day they’d joke about this; he was already twisting in his head the idea of talking about how he’d thrown an entire coming out party and Eddie hadn’t even shown up. It could be one of their old stories, the kind of thing that made everyone groan, no, I’ve heard that one before. Maybe he could tell it at the wedding. Fuck, when had wedding become a possibility? He was going to have to keep that shit to himself. People might start thinking he was gay.

But there was a unique and wonderful pleasure in the idea of things becoming mundane, of the two of them getting to a point where they had old jokes they’d told a hundred times before, the concept of seeing each others quirks so many times they were routine. Richie found himself almost giddy at the idea that he would one day regard all of Eddie’s eccentricities as not rare, new things to uncover but as part of his every day, that they could become something he was used to. Which wasn’t to say he wouldn’t value them; the fucking sun set every day, but he still thought the sunset was beautiful. It was just after a lifetime of being apart, there was so much joy in the idea of stability.

The audience cheered but Richie wasn’t really paying attention. He didn’t even know the comedian who was on now -- friend of a friend of a friend -- and had no idea if they’d care if he was paying attention or not.

Beverly squeezed Richie’s hand and he did think he felt better, somehow. It was ridiculous to imagine he’d ever felt bad at all. He’d spent a lifetime feeling bad and now look at everything he’d done; him and his friends had put all this together in barely more than a week. He’d taken control of his life and he wasn’t going to let it go. Not now, not ever again. He was never going to stand on stage and spout bullshit for people who didn’t care and would never give him the approval he’d always wanted. He had spent his life running and hiding, trying to fit in with the kids who abused him, and only ever been rejected. He wasn’t going to try to force himself into a box for anyone else ever again, and there was a pride in that that made him understand what the whole idea of ‘pride’ was actually about. For a long time he’d thought all that shit was stupid, but he got it now. Now that he wasn’t existing under a blanket of shame and self-loathing, he got it. Richie Tozier was ready to be happy.

“Hey, look at this,” Bill said, holding up his phone.

Richie squinted at the screen. It was a picture of Mike and Eddie from a couple of days ago, which Eddie had also texted him. He frowned at it, looking to see if there was something he had missed.

“What am I looking at?” Richie said.

“A distraction,” Bill said.

“A distraction? From what?”

The mic squealed on stage as someone fucked around with it. Richie glanced up from the phone and realised Mike was standing behind Bill, hands on the back of his chair and a huge grin on his face. Richie stared at him, bewildered, a million questions in his mind.

“Hey,” a familiar voice said.
Richie looked over at the stage.

Eddie Kaspbrak, all of 5'9" and wearing a pink T-shirt and printed shorts, the most underdressed man in the building, was standing behind the microphone with the straightest face imaginable. Richie stared at him, mouth hanging open as he tried to process that he was seeing Eds, his Eds, standing a few feet away on stage under a dozen lights and in front of a crowd of hundreds of total strangers who were expecting him to deliver five minutes of actual comedy.

"I'm not a comedian," Eddie began, casually.

Holy fuck, had he planned this? Had he actually sat down and written out a tight five in advance and learnt it, just so he could do this for Richie? Just so he could recreate the moment they had first found each other, months ago, when Richie had stood on stage in New York and not known he was a few feet away from the love of his life? Once again, Richie had walked into a place to do some stand-up and not realised he'd be leaving that night with Eddie Kaspbrak.

*Jesus Christ*, Richie thought. *I have to marry him.*

"But I am in love with a comedian, which I think most of you in the audience can appreciate is hellish," Eddie continued. The crowd actually laughed, and Richie felt a burst of pride. "I don't know if you guys think you're subtle, but I can tell when he's thinking about if something that just happened to us can work as a bit. He gets this glimmer in his eyes like 'oh what's the best way to explain this to twenty thousand strangers on my next tour, which I'm going to call 'fucking in your grandma's basement' or something equally immature?'"

Richie's face was wet. He couldn't stop smiling, ignoring the delighted faces of his friends around him because he couldn't tear his eyes away from Eddie for a second, standing on stage for the first time in his life and telling everyone there they were in love. It was the kind of thing he had not even dared to let himself dream because it had seemed too preposterous, too much of a stretch to ever entertain the idea of it happening and yet now, here it was. Eddie Kaspbrak was doing stand-up comedy for Richie, he was smiling so much you could see the deep laughter lines around his dark eyes, and Richie was so, so in love.

"We were at dinner one time and the waitress obviously knew who he was and obviously didn't like him. Which I understand because I don't like his comedy either. I've known him since I was five and I've never liked it. But this waitress was like, 'I'm going to show this guy something alright'. And she got a bunch of details wrong. Which I didn't even realise because it was only his stuff she was getting wrong. But I have a tonne of allergies, so Richie turns to me and says 'hey fake an allergic reaction'."

Hold for laughter. Hold Richie's gaze, eyes locked, mouth split into a wide smile, trying not to laugh. Not at his own material but out of a deeper, innate joy for life, a wonder that this was really happening.

"I say that I'm not going to do that, because I'm an adult. And he's like 'please, Eds, it would be so funny', because he has the maturity of a thirteen year old. 'It would be hilarious if you went into anaphylactic shock because this waitress doesn't want me to have the chicken I ordered'. Like what the fuck? You want me to fake my own death because she gave you the fish? And he just goes… 'Eddie it would be so funny'. Like he's really just thinking about a good bit at all times. Anyway, I tell the waitress, bring him the right goddamn meal, and Richie says 'oh I would not have complained if you weren't here'. He was ready to fake my death before he was ready to tell the waitress to bring him some chicken."

Richie was laughing, and so was the crowd, and he was crying, and his shoulders were shaking
"I told him 'Richie you can just ask for better in your life'. But it's fair enough that he didn't realise that, because I didn't. I spent half my life being like, some kind of horrible marionette piloted by my mother's ghost. Which sounds like the worst horror movie ever. This summer, the scariest horror movie you've ever seen: 'Eddie Kaspbrak still worries about what his mommy might say when he's forty years old'. Whatever, it might not sound scary to you, but it's scary as fuck to me. That’s my life, man. I know I sound like the comic relief character in a sitcom set in an accounting firm, but that’s my life. I didn't even know I was in a horror movie. It was like if one of the characters in Friday the 13th thought they were in Babysitters Club."

Eddie stopped for a second to wipe his face, still laughing because the entire thing was so fucking patently ridiculous all you could do was laugh. They were too old for this kind of stunt, past the point of needing to dance around the question of whether or not they were in love. No, they didn’t need to do this. But their relationship had always been the centre of attention; they had lived their whole lives a ridiculous, loud, melodramatic couple’s dance in the middle of everything. And if for once, the point was that they were in love; that it wasn’t a joke, wasn’t being said in whispers and the double-meanings of wrestling on the floor of the school canteen, then maybe that was a good thing.

They were in love, and they were going to make it everyone’s problem.

“It took seeing Richie again for the first time in nearly thirty years and him to ask if I was happy for me to realise. Oh, I can. I can ask for better. And for some fucking reason, probably because my brain is broken, the best thing I could ever want in my life is to be in love with you. I guess what I'm saying is Richie, can I crash at your place? My ex-wife kicked me out.”

Richie was out of his seat before the audience started clapping, their laughter turning into catcalls as he shoved his way through the tables at the front and leapt up onto the stage, clearing the space in just a few strides. He had never moved faster in his life than when he saw Eddie open his arms wide, and then he was diving into them, feeling them be thrown around his shoulders as he hooked his arms around Eddie’s waist, tipping him backwards in the force of the embrace. Eddie was laughing, and he was trying to say something -- fuck you probably -- but he didn’t have a chance because Richie was kissing him, and he was kissing Richie back, and they were standing on the stage with the spotlight on them as Richie dipped Eddie into a kiss that was so deep he was nearly bent double. And the crowd cheered and howled with shock and delight, because everyone could see, everyone could see that there were two boys on stage who had been in love since before they knew what love was, and everyone could see Richie Tozier’s dirty little secret. But that was fine, because it wasn’t dirty, it wasn’t little and it would never be a secret again.

He couldn’t tell if he was laughing or crying, or both, and he couldn’t tell whose tears were running down his cheeks, but he kissed Eddie on the lips and he kissed him on the scar, and he kissed him so long and deep that he couldn’t breathe. And his glasses were foggy and he was smiling so much it hurt and Eddie was cradling his face and they were both saying I love you and Richie was free. They were both free.

Richie grabbed the microphone, Eddie’s arms looped around his neck, one hand still at the small of Eddie’s back, the lights glaring off them making a bright aura around them both, bright and safe and untouchable.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” Richie said, “my fucking boyfriend!”

And the crowd exploded into cheers, and he spotted Bill, Mike, Ben and Bev in the audience.
cheering loudest of them all.

Eddie wouldn’t stop kissing Richie long enough for him to open the door into the backstage hallway with his hands so they ended up shoving it open by kind of falling into it, the door swinging wide and crashing into the wall as they stumbled into the hall. They had their arms wrapped around each other, Eddie’s hands in Richie’s hair, Richie’s arms around Eddie’s waist, kissing like they were drowning men trying to breathe.

“How the fuck did you get on stage?” Richie asked when he pulled his head back to breathe, Eddie still kissing his neck. “How did you arrange… Any of this?”

“Called your manager,” Eddie said. “Actually, Mike called Bill, who talked to your manager.”

“You’re all going behind my back?”

“Yeah, idiot. We love you. I love you. And if I don’t suck your dick right now I’m going to go crazy and throw myself into traffic.”

“What?”

Eddie grabbed Richie by the front of his blazer and pulled him into the private toilet next to them, slamming Richie into the closed door, which was both a little frightening and incredibly sexy. Eddie kept kissing him, leaning fully into it, pressing himself bodily into Richie until it became obvious he was hard under his clothes.

“Did someone steal my boyfriend and replace him with someone who has fun?” Richie said. “What is going on?”

“I have driven for like, six days, with a truckload of shit, so I can come live with you. I have a U-Haul parked outside your complex. I spoke on-stage in front of like, a million people, for the first time in my life, ever. I am fucking out of my mind. There is so much adrenaline in my body, I feel like I’m going to explode. And what I want more than anything is to suck your cock in this bathroom. So, will you let me do that?”

Richie laughed and kissed him and helped undo his belt. His heart was pounding even before Eddie dropped to his knees and tugged open the front of his pants, pulling his cock free and wrapping fingers around it. He locked the door.

“I did not think you were into this,” Richie said.

“Is it crazy I’ve always fantasised about this?” Eddie said.

“Yes. Tell me more, because that is so hot.”

Eddie gave him a withering look, but he was still softly pumping Richie’s cock until it was hard.

“I would just think about like, what if I was in a bathroom, and there was a guy, a really hot guy, and he was giving me a look …” Eddie ran his tongue over the tip of Richie’s cock. “And we’d hide in a cubicle, and I’d be on my knees, and he’d fuck me in the face. I don’t know, it was just like a taboo. Like it was a bathroom, it was all dirty, but it was so hot. I’d get hard just thinking about it.”

He parted his lips to take the head of Richie’s cock into his mouth, rolling his tongue over it. Richie held a hand to his mouth, pushing his fingers into Eddie’s hair and tightening them at the
roots. He was burning under the collar of his shirt, could barely watch Eddie as he lowered his
head, eyes looking up at him almost too intensely for him to look directly at. It was like looking
into the fucking sun.

“You’re so fucking hot,” Richie said. “God, I never want to fuck anyone else ever again. I don’t
know why I’ve ever fucked anyone else.”

Eddie grinned, moving his head back and dragging his tongue over the shaft of Richie’s cock,
going slow. He’d blown Richie a few times before but he still always had to take his time with it,
always patient with himself, adjusting to the weight of it in his throat. It had the bonus effect of
making Richie go absolutely insane with anticipation.

“It was practice, obviously,” Eddie said. “For me.”

Richie didn’t even say anything back because Eddie took his cock again, swallowing around it as it
hit the back of his throat, and all Richie could do was whine into the fist he had over his mouth,
tensing his hand in Eddie’s hair. He jerked his hips by reflex, thrusting a little deeper into Eddie’s
mouth, feeling him gag a little before he relaxed and swallowed again. Richie could feel the
tension of Eddie’s throat around his cock, hot and slick and tight.

He had to keep biting down on his hand, desperate not to be heard as Eddie’s nose came flush with
his stomach, mouth wide around the stretch of Richie’s cock. When Eddie pulled back there was a
string of drool hanging from his lip, his breath coming in short, hot bursts. He ran his tongue over
the vein at the base of Richie’s shaft, tracing patterns over it that made Richie squirm. His own
cock was straining at his pants and he was all but humping Richie’s leg, grinding against him as he
deepththroated him again, eyes rolling up to stare up at him with a frantic look like someone on the
verge of completely losing control.

Eddie hummed low in his throat and Richie bit down harder on his hand to keep from shouting,
thrusting himself deeper down Eddie’s throat. His hand was twisted tight in Eddie’s hair, holding
him close, feeling the flex of throat around his cock. It was like a red haze was winding around
Richie’s vision, and he was thrusting into Eddie’s mouth and he was panting, almost keening even
when he tried to smother the cries with his hand.

“I love you,” Richie said, voice muffled. “Fuck, fuck, fuuuuck, I love you. I love you like wolves
love the fucking moon. I love you like blood loves oxygen. I love you like fucking, like a fucking,
scarecrow loves the wheat.”

Eddie pulled back, wiping his mouth. “What the fuck are you talking about?” He said, giggling.

“I have no fucking idea,” Richie said.

Then Eddie was lapping at the precum on the tip of his cock, fingers pumping him the last few
inches closer and then Richie was feeling the pressure inside him build to a point where he couldn’t
bear it for one second longer and he pulled back, finishing on Eddie’s face. The cum hung off
Eddie’s cheekbone in ropes, his chest heaving as he stared up at Richie like he couldn’t believe
they’d just done this.

"Jesus Christ, you look so fucking hot like that," Richie said.

"With cum on my face?" Eddie frowned.

"Yeah, holy shit. I almost want to-

"You can take a picture, just don't take forever."
Richie did, pulling his phone out while Eddie played along more than he'd admit, looking at the camera doe-eyed and sluttish, lips parted just enough to show a hint of tongue.

"If anyone ever gets a hold of my phone, I'm dead," Richie said.

"Yeah, or mine," Eddie said, standing and wrapping his arms around Richie's neck, pressing himself against him so Richie could feel his hard cock under his clothes.

"No one wants to see my fuckin' nudes," Richie said.

"You'd be surprised. There's a lot of guys out there who are really jealous of me now."

"Ha! Have you been reading up on fansites or whatever?"

"Yeah, it makes me feel smug as hell. They’re talking about how bad they wanna see you naked, but I get to blow you."

Richie kissed him hot and messy, moving a hand to feel Eddie's erection. Eddie gasped into his mouth, grinding into his hand.

"God, you’re so hard just from blowing me," Richie said.

"I told you. I’m fucking crazy about you. Idiot."

"What do you want?" Richie said. "You want me to suck you off? You want to fuck me?"

"We don’t have any lubes or condoms, I’m not going to sandpaper my dick off. Just keep -- yeah like that."

"I’ve been dryfucked before."

"What? Jesus."

"I was on poppers, but…"

"Oh my God. Just fucking use your hand. Don’t stop kissing me."

He didn’t stop. Couldn’t even if he wanted to. He kissed Eddie open-mouthed and dirty, Eddie thrusting his cock into Richie’s hand, breathing heavy and clinging to him, fingers winding tight around his shirt. Eddie ground into Richie until he finished in his hand, hips jerking wildly and whining against him, biting down on Richie’s lower lip.

Richie looked at his hand and laughed a little as Eddie moved over to the sink to clean his face. He glanced over his shoulder at Richie as he wiped his face and put two and two together before Richie even had a chance to move or announce what he was thinking.

"Do not even think about licking that off your hand," Eddie said.

"Why not? I’ve swallowed your cum like a hundred times."

"It is not the same."

"Why not! It’s the same cum, it’s just on my hand."

"Do not fucking do it. Don’t do it. Come over here and wash your hands immediately, I swear to God."
Richie groaned theatrically but he went over to the sink and washed his hands, splashing some water on his face for good measure. He helped Eddie wipe his face over with a paper towel, brushing the hair out of Eddie’s eyes and trying to make it a little more neat and tidy, a little more back to normal. He laughed despite himself, disbelieving of what had just happened, but Eddie just bumped a shoulder into him companionably and helped straighten his clothes out.

They stopped for a second, Eddie just leaning into Richie’s chest, Richie wrapping his arms around his shoulders. They stood for a little while, holding onto each other. It was nice, actually, to just feel Eddie wedged under his chin, their heartbeats slowing as the adrenaline in their bodies left and they were in the quiet of just being together.

There was a knock at the door and they both jumped about six foot out of their own skins. Richie hurried over to open it a crack, making sure he looked moderately presentable before he opened it to look out at Ben, who was standing in the hallway and frowning at them both with an enormous amount of concern. Richie opened the door wider, Eddie leaning on the wall with his arms folded in the most obviously ‘something very uncool happened here and I am covering it up’ pose in human history.

“What’s going on?” Ben said.

“Nothing,” Eddie and Richie said at the same time.

“Yeah, nothing,” Richie confirmed.

“What’s uh, what’s going on with you?” Eddie said.

“I just… Uh… You’ve been missing for a while, so we were concerned…” Ben said. “Richie, you’re wanted back on stage in like, a minute and Eddie… I think Beverly might have accidentally gotten you a job?”

Eddie stared at him, Richie letting out a bark of laughter as he ushered Eddie out of the toilet, shutting the door behind them both.

“What the fuck are you talking about?” Eddie said.

“She was talking to the charity director? And she mentioned they need some new… Funding director…? Or something… And Beverly said you used to work in statistics… I have no idea, you should talk to them about it. I just got sent out because I’m basically the only one who’s sober now. Are you coming?” Ben said.

They both nodded. Ben took Eddie back out to the audience, taking a second to straighten out Richie’s clothes and hair before he ran out on stage looking a hell of a lot like he just got blown in a men’s room, and the three of them split up for a second longer. Richie felt almost a little pained seeing Eddie walk away, as silly as that was, but it was kind of great to dart out on stage and see Eddie in the audience looking up at him, the purple-pink of the lights on his face making him look vivid and alive, forced out into the light instead of hiding in the dark.

Richie grabbed the microphone and started talking even before he knew what he was going to say, so many things he’d been holding back on just pouring out of him.

“Ok, so like, this might not be very funny, but this is going back to what I was saying earlier about free therapy. And this is a charity event, so you guys should be used to the idea that there’s something serious and horrible hiding underneath it all. I’m gonna talk about my boyfriend for a while, cus he talked about me, and I have to make it even.”
Eddie already looked a little embarrassed, but Richie was determined to make it his life’s work to embarrass him constantly, so that wouldn’t stop him.

“...” Eddie was already looking a little embarrassed, but Richie was determined to make it his life’s work to embarrass him constantly, so that wouldn’t stop him.

“I met Eddie when we were like, five. And he was crying his eyes out because it was the first day of kindergarten and my friend Bill went over to try and like say, 'hey kid, it's gonna be ok', because Bill is nice like that, and then I went up and I made him laugh. Like fuck knows what about, I probably just said the word fart, we were five fuckin years old,” Richie said. “But that was the first time I ever made someone laugh and then that was it for me. All I wanted to do was make people laugh. I was trying to do stand-up when I was thirteen and all my teachers hated my guts.”

He was pacing on stage as he talked, just letting the words pour out of him as they occurred to him.

“Anyway, Eddie moved away when we were like, sixteen, and I forgot about him because I mean, how often do you think about your middle school crush, right?” Nice cover. “But my whole life I was chasing that high of making people laugh and my whole life I never... Like I never hit that moment again, it was never as good as that first time, and it stuck in the back of my mind forever like, *you can do more, you can be funnier, you can be more real* and sure some of it was just depression the same as every other comedian ever, but I always thought ‘fuck, there's something more, and I'm just not good enough to ever get there’. I thought it was me.”

Eddie was hiding his face, watching Richie through splayed fingers, but still smiling. The other Losers were split between watching Richie and watching Eddie watch Richie, amused and happy and filled with drunken joy so intense they were all nearly crying. Actually, Mike was crying.

“But then I see Eddie for the first time in like, twenty years, and I make him laugh and then that... That was it. That was the feeling again. Because I hadn't been wanting to make people laugh my whole life. Like no offence, I'm sure you're all lovely people... Or maybe you’re horrible, I don’t give a shit, but that's the truth. I wanted to make *Eddie* laugh my whole life. And it took me thirty years to realise that but once I did... I'm sorry, nothing is ever going to make me stop trying.”

Richie laughed and nervously rubbed at the back of his neck as the audience cheered, people clapping and yelling in support of the two of them. It was embarrassing in a way, but it still felt good. After spending his life hiding everything about himself, the experience of opening up the truth and having it unconditionally accepted was like nothing he had ever imagined. It was the kind of thing he had told himself was impossible.

“So, being gay made me a comedian in two ways. First, making jokes was a really good way to make people think I *wasn’t* gay, and secondly, it was the only way I knew to get to the boy I like to pay attention to me.” Richie shrugged self-deprecatingly. “No wonder it didn’t fucking work.”

He jumped down off the stage as people cheered him on, walking out into the room so he could sit in the chair beside Eddie. Eddie leaned over to kiss him again, his breath tasting faintly of champagne and his face still a little shiny from tears. This was probably the most either of them had cried in years, and it was meant to be happy. Richie couldn’t even imagine what it would be like when they got married -- *wow* that kept coming up in his mind over and over, didn’t it? Freud would have a lot to say about that, probably.

“I cannot fucking believe you just did that,” Eddie said.

“I can’t believe any of this shit,” Richie said. “You realise we’ve all had like, the stupidest, craziest lives of anyone in history? Not a single fucking thing about any of this shit has ever been normal, not for a minute.”

“Oh, not everyone is killing evil space clowns when they’re thirteen?” Bill said.
“Or having collective amnesia?” Ben said.

“Or going back to their hometowns to kill the evil clown again?” Mike said.

“Or coming back from the dead?” Eddie said.

“Yeah, one of those would be normal, but all of it is a little much,” Richie said.

Audra came back with a drink and they all shut up, their eyes darting around at each other, the mutual sense of needing to keep the secret running through all six of them. They needed each other; Richie was so glad they were all together in that moment, and in the preceding weeks. That through it all, nothing had been able to tear them apart, not even when he was trying his hardest to self-sabotage. And now here they were; they beat the clown, they beat their hometown, they beat their past. The world was coming back together as they reunited; time had not defeated them.

“To the Losers Club!” Mike said.

They all raised their glasses, clinking them together as the audience burst into laughter at the latest act. Richie turned to kiss the side of Eddie’s head.

“What do we do now?” Richie murmured into his ear.

“I don’t know,” Eddie said. “You want to get married?”

Richie choked on his drink. “You haven’t even fucking finished the first one yet!”

“God, alright, forget I said anything,”

“No, it’s fine. I mean we have to wait for my divorce papers to come through as well.”

Eddie fixed him with a look that could have started the next ice age. Bill and Mike exchanged anticipatory glances, Beverly putting a hand over her eyes.

“What the fuck,” Eddie said, “are you talking about?”

“I already told you, man, did you forget? Really?”

“Forget what?”

“Me and your mom got married, dude. I told you ages ago—”

Eddie put his face in his hands and sighed bodily as the others laughed. The gently moving lights threw them all into the spotlight for a moment, all of them lit up pink and blue and beautiful, nothing hidden anymore.

Chapter End Notes

title is hope to die by orville peck!!!! like the title of the fic!!!!!!!! i also posted the epilogue today, make sure to read that too for my final thoughts
Eddie woke up when the sun was spilling around the edges of the blackout blinds in Richie’s room and wondered why the fuck Richie didn’t have blinds that fit properly, and then thought that there was maybe nothing more like Richie Tozier than having floor-to-ceiling blackout blinds that didn’t actually fit the windows. The light around the edges was bright and soft, and Eddie rolled over in bed to nuzzle into the back of Richie’s neck. Richie murmured in his sleep, moving a hand to grip Eddie’s thigh like it was a nervous animal and he was trying to provide support.

They’d arrived back at Richie’s apartment past midnight and immediately fallen into bed, Richie pulling him through the apartment to the bedroom like they had no time to waste at all, dropping clothes and Eddie’s luggage as they went like they were leaving a trail of breadcrumbs behind them. They had dropped into the bed, kissing as frantically and passionately as two men trying to make up for the last thirty years, and then almost immediately fallen asleep. It was the adrenaline crashing, Eddie reasoned.

Anyway, there was no rush. He didn’t have to make the best of two hours before he had to go home to a wife who didn’t love him. He could lie in bed with Richie for as long as he wanted; they had nothing to do and nowhere to go, they had no one to answer to and no one to apologise to. Eddie thought *fuck, this is what it feels like to be happy*. He was not sure how any of the pale imitations of happiness before had deluded him; as he leaned over to kiss Richie on the cheek and wake him up, he wasn’t sure how he had ever settled for less than this and thought it was fine.

“Hey,” Richie said, rubbing his eyes and smiling as he finally woke up.

“Hey yourself,” Eddie said.

He sat up and stretched until his back creaked. The scar on his back twinged a little, but the stitches were long gone. Richie ran a thumb over it, the long thin sliver that ran just to the right of his spine, and Eddie shivered.

“This is so fucked up,” Richie said. “You’re already sexy as hell, and now you’ve got these huge fucking scars. You look so badass. No one’s really gonna believe you’re my boyfriend.”

“Shut up. You’re cute. Have you seen yourself?” Eddie said.

“Yeah, I look like a frog someone put a wig on.”

“You’re the handsome prince.”

“Fuck you.”

Eddie kissed him quickly on the lips and then rolled out of bed to throw the blinds open. Richie groaned theatrically when the light hit him, lying on his back and watching Eddie walk around the
room with a sleepy smile on his face. Richie’s room was surprisingly tasteful, more than Eddie would have guessed from his memories of the childhood bomb-has-gone-off nightmare room that Richie’d had as a kid. Thankfully, forty was probably too old for Star Wars bedspreads. There was some kind of artsy Lost Boys poster in a frame on the wall, but it actually looked pretty sick, so Eddie thought it was fine. The room was soft blue with oak furniture that glowed when the sunlight hit it and Eddie found himself remembering the fantasy Richie had spun about going to the flea market, finding the right piece. Bringing a home together.

They had all the time in the world to make it happen.

“Is that your Emmy?” Eddie said, pointing to a gold figurine on the top shelf of the walk-in closet that was hanging open to show just about as many graphic tees and hawaiian shirts as Eddie had expected but also a lot more nicely cut suits than he would have guessed.

“Oh, yeah.” Richie cracked his back as he sat up, ruffling his hair with both hands to try and get his bedhead a little under control. “I don’t like having it out.”

“Why not? It’s an Emmy.”

“It’s for that stupid show I did that I hated. And like, 99% of the time I’m on my own in my house, so the only one looking at it is me. Fuckin’ sitting alone in my apartment staring at my own awards? That sucks.”

“You hated the show?”

Richie shrugged, stepping out of bed and shuffling towards the attached bathroom.

“I didn’t like filming it. I was so hooked on stand-up and having all the audience right there… We’d be filming stuff for the show and I’d be doing bits in front of a camera crew just staring back at me and I could only see my own face in the lens… I got really in my own head about it.” Richie turned the tap on. “I needed like, the instant feedback, you know? It was like when I was a kid, I just wanted the attention.”

Eddie shoved the Emmy back onto the shelf and followed Richie to the bathroom, leaning on the doorframe as Richie washed his face.

“But you just made a second season,” Eddie said.

“Oh, I only did that so I could be in New York,” Richie said.

“What? To be with me?”

“Yes, idiot. I’ve been in love with you forever. Are you gonna stand there and watch me piss or are you gonna make some coffee?”

Eddie sighed gutterly and left Richie in the bathroom to wander into the open-plan living room and kitchen area that took up the vast majority of the apartment. He stopped briefly to glance at the spare bedroom, which was an office space that looked like it had been hit by a tornado and that he was itching to clean out, before going to find a coffee machine. There was a large expensive-looking one sitting on the counter next to a stovetop that was suspiciously clean and it didn’t take Eddie long to find the coffee or the mugs. He picked up one that had the DSA logo on it and one that UNT and took him half a second of wondering what that stood for before he clocked the C handle. He made Richie a black coffee with two sugars and himself a soy latte, wondering if Richie had bought soy milk just for him, handing the UNT mug over to his dopy, bed-headed boyfriend when he padded into the living room.
The room was also pretty nice. It was off-white and had a large set of double doors that opened onto a small balcony, just enough space for a table and chairs but with a view to kill for. There was a huge TV and an ugly sofa that he was definitely going to replace, a large shelf on the wall that was a tangle of books, films and random merchandise crap. A very expensive-looking RoboCop figurine glowered down from near the top; Funko Pops of completely unidentifiable origins were scattered around. A very unhappy-looking plant had leaves and vines tumbling down the side of the shelves, and Eddie wondered if it was at all salvageable. They'd never had live plants in the house, only fabric flowers; Myra was scared of bugs, and dirt. It would be a new project for him. There was a glossy tour poster of Richie’s first world-wide tour on the wall, but he was represented in that only in abstract. Other than that, there were no photos, few posters, nothing to put a face to the belongings. It was all oddly ownerless; though there was a definite sense of what the owner’s taste was, it all still felt like so much show, and not all that much like a home.

“I could get used to this,” Richie said, sipping the coffee.

“You better. I’m not leaving.”

Richie collapsed onto the couch with the grace of a horse hitting a hurdle in a race, Eddie slumping on the seat next to him. The sun was high in the sky; it was 11:30, well into the morning, and they had nothing to do. It felt like the first day of summer.

“I can’t believe I never asked if you were happy,” Eddie said.

“I’m pretty fuckin’ good,” Richie said, smiling like a golden retriever.

“No. Like, before. When we met.”

“Why are you even worrying about that now?”

Richie looked more amused than annoyed, but there was a spark of something concerned in his eyes. He let his head loll back against the couch, watching Eddie closely, his feet up on the coffee table. Eddie leaned his head against a hand, elbow propped up on the back of the couch, coffee mug cradled in his lap, hot on his bare skin.

“If you hadn’t asked me if I was happy back before we broke up,” Eddie said, “I don’t know if I ever would have even thought about it. But I didn’t ask you, the whole time we were back home.”

“I don’t think any of us were happy. Not really. We were all hung up on shit and didn’t even know it,” Richie said. “Especially not poor fuckin’ Mike or Bev. And Ben, all alone in his giant fortress house. Even Bill had like, bad book reviews to cry over, or whatever.”

“And you?”

Richie sighed, and Eddie could feel the reluctance to speak.

“No,” he said eventually. “You remember when we were kids, and I’d spend all my time making stupid jokes about fucking girls and you bring virgins or whatever? My life was like I was still playing that joke every day, with everyone. And that felt like I was killing myself everyday. It really felt like I was waking up every morning and making the decision to die all over again. So no, I wasn't happy.”

"I wish I'd been there. That we'd never been split up."

Richie made a noncommittal noise. "Maybe things wouldn't have worked out then. This is just how things are."
"That's so zen of you. Is this your new thing? Radical acceptance?"

"No, I'm going for groovy man acceptance."

Eddie snorted with laughter. He nudged his way up to Richie, leaning heavily on him. Richie rubbed a thumb over his shoulder casually.

“It was good being with all the others last night,” Eddie said.

“It really was,” Richie said.

Hearing Richie say it was kind of a relief; the relative radio silence on Richie’s end towards the rest of the group had been worrying. After what the others had said, Eddie had been worried that the fraction was going to be something they couldn’t overcome. It had been silly of him to worry, he figured. Real friendship could survive breaks.

“Are you feeling better about everything? Mike and Bill said…” Eddie trailed off.

“Yeah. I…” Richie rubbed a hand through his hair, somehow making it even messier than it already was. “I dunno. It felt kind of crazy to stay mad when you were alive and doing so well. And I kept thinking about this thing Bill said… About Stan… Losing him too… At the time I felt like either I’d save you or we’d both die but now… I don’t feel like you would have wanted that. Not really.”

“Yeah, fuck no I wouldn’t have wanted you to die for me. I would have said you had to stay in mourning for like, thirty years, had a big oil painting of me to cry at… Normal, little things.” Eddie tried to laugh but his sympathy for Richie was too intense and he reached out to grab Richie’s free hand. “No, I wouldn’t have wanted that.”

“I fucking hope not. I like this new you, though,” Richie said.

“New me?”

“Talking about your feelings.”

Eddie pulled a face and took a long sip of coffee. “I’m working on it. I’ve been thinking about therapy.”

“There’s enough shrinks in L.A. Not today though, today you’re mine.” Richie lifted up the hand he was holding and kissed Eddie’s knuckles.

“I’m yours every day,” Eddie said. “For the rest of our stupid fucking lives.”

Chapter End Notes

wow so uh

the biggest thanks go out to Ezra again, for giving me the idea and also for beta reading pretty much every chapter (i spared forcing him to beta the last chapter) and also for being unendingly supportive and kind and listening to me crying about my worries about the plot for like two months
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i have another longfic ongoing Portrait of Two Boys in Free Fall which will be continuing. i am ALSO planning ANOTHER longfic which is an au that will be essentially an entire rewrite of IT so is going to be an absolutely insane amount of work to undergo and i really hope you guys turn out and support me.

please keep up with me on twitter @rorschachisgay and tumblr @saints-row-2!!

thank you all again. i love you

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