Haunt Me, Thrill Me, Kiss Me

by Vulcanodon

Summary

Richie and Eddie bust ghosts, pine hopelessly, and get tangled up in the winding red thread of fate:

The sun is perfect when they finally start filming, just low enough to cast everything in a golden sort of light that almost makes the building look beautiful. Eddie steadies the tripod and gives the thumbs up and then they're away and Richie has his game face on.

“This is your faithful host speaking, your courageous convoy to all that is chilling and creepy, Richie Trashmouth Tozier.” Richie says, tone deadly serious. “Tonight, we venture beyond the veil, mystery lovers, to a place so disturbing and terrifying my co-host Eddie has refused to venture inside.”

“This is mis-representation.” Eddie protests from behind the camera. “I’m not scared of ghosts, but I draw the line at bacterial infection.”

Notes

Written after watching copious amounts of Buzzfeed Unsolved and then more regrettably, In The Tall Grass on netflix. Let me know what you think and Happy Halloween!

Eddie is here a little early, so he parks the van outside of Richie’s apartment and turns on the radio while he waits. It’s still dark; not even five AM yet but Eddie feels itchy to get started, be out on the road. It’s a seven-hour drive from New York to Maine and they need to be there to catch the
good light if they want to film anything today.

Richie lives in a nice neighbourhood, a holdover from his big shot comedian days, but Eddie still finds it kind of creepy in the dark, with only the light from the streetlamps. It’s quiet here too, in a way that feels weird for the city but maybe Eddie’s just used to his terrible neighbourhood with the bar below going him all night and the neon coming in through his window blind. Once he had lived in a neighbourhood like this, back when he was still married to Myra but that was a long time ago now.

He doesn’t really miss it that much, even with the constant light and noise of his new place. He never really did like the dark much anyway.

Eddie checks his phone and reads over the email again for the fifteenth time this morning, chewing at a hangnail. It’s a good offer. He really should take it.

There’s a sudden bang at his window and he jumps, looking up to see Richie’s stupid face grinning down at him. The shock is replaced by a sudden rush of guilty fear and then he feels annoyed because there’s no way Richie could have seen what he was looking at and there’s nothing to feel guilty over anyway. Eddie hasn’t even replied yet.

“Gooood morning sunshine!” Richie says, muffled through the glass. “You gonna let me in?”

“No.” Eddie tells him sourly, tucking his phone into his jacket. “I’m gonna run you over.”

Richie holds up a travel mug and taps it against the window. “How about now? I promise it’s not the instant shit.”

Eddie considers his options then opens the door because he really needs the caffeine. He doesn’t know how Richie can be like this in the morning, so fucking high energy when all Eddie wants to do is crawl into the backseat and die.

“Are you jazzed for the spirit world?” Richie asks him as he throws himself into the passenger seat, twisting round to toss his duffel in the back. “This one could be juicy. This time we get something on camera, Eddie, I can feel it. My ghosthunter senses are tingling.”

“Save it for the camera.” Eddie grouch, starting up the engine. “We both know this is gonna be a
“Wow you’re extra grumpy today.” Richie remarks dryly and thrusts the coffee cup at him. “Was Mr Clean pissed off that I dragged you away this early?”

“Don’t call him that.” Eddie says automatically. He had met his last boyfriend when they had both reached for the same bottle of cleaning product at the store; a story he now bitterly regrets sharing with Richie.


Eddie chews on the inside of his mouth and then decides to just get it over with.

“I uh, don’t know. We broke up,” he admits. “Like a day or two ago.”

Richie is silent for a miraculous second and then he’s clearing his throat awkwardly. When Eddie sneaks a glance, he’s looking out the window, watching the dark streets go by.

“What happened? Did you guys fight over the best de-grouting method or something?”

“No.” Eddie says drily. “He just couldn’t keep up. I don’t know, he had low stamina or something.”

“Gross.” Richie mutters under his breath and Eddie shoots him a glare.

“Fuck you, I don’t mean like that. I mean, like with conversations. He told me…He said I was argumentative; can you believe that?”

Richie snorts. “But you’re so calm and sweet natured!”

“I am fucking calm.” Eddie snaps. “I’m very fucking calm when people aren’t pissing me off.”
Richie laughs and snags the coffee out of Eddie’s white-knuckle grip. His fingers are very warm when they brush Eddie’s and somehow it still makes Eddie’s heart beat a little faster, even after five years.

“Aw don’t worry Eds, I know the perfect cure for a broken heart.”

“Please don’t say ghosts.” Eddie pleads.

“I was going to say ghouls.” Richie says, mock offended, and then he’s putting his feet up on the dashboard and leaning deftly out the way when Eddie tries to swat them down.

Outside the first blue tinge of dawn is creeping up on the horizon. They’re almost out of New York. Eddie feels the first little thrill he always gets at the beginning of these adventures. Maybe Richie was right. Maybe they would find something this time. This music channel seems to play exclusively sad eighties love songs but it’s kind of calming and Eddie hums along a little as he switches gears.

“That guy was an idiot anyway.” Richie mutters a little later and soon after that he’s snoring loudly with his face all pressed up against the window, while Eddie tries to relax into the drive and keep his eyes on the road.

Frank had called him argumentative, that much was true, but he had also said it was endearing. The real reason that Eddie had broken up was him was much more pathetic, and the same reason he had ended most of his brief relationships since the divorce. They had all been really nice people, interesting and kind with excellent personal hygiene but in the end, they hadn’t been Richie.

I’d rather be home feeling blue, Whitney Houston croons, and Eddie stabs at the power button so hard he almost breaks the radio.

They had met about five years ago now, back when Eddie had still been married and Richie had only just quit the stand-up business, back before Mystery Inc. was even a thing. Their first big fight
had been about the name.

“It’s terrible. It’s not scary.” Eddie had said, sipping at a glass of white wine. He had drunk wine back then, because he had the vague impression that’s what married people did.

It turned out later what you drank had fairly little to do with being married. The fact he wasn’t straight had ended up being a more important in the long run.

“It doesn’t have to be scary. It’s funny.” Richie had argued back, squinting through his glasses. “Did you never watch Scooby Doo as a kid?”

Eddie hadn’t been allowed to watch Scooby Doo on the grounds it might be traumatic, but he hadn’t wanted to admit that.

“Let me get this straight,” he had said, leaning over the table and then wincing because the bar Richie had chosen for their first meeting was gross and sticky. “You want to name your serious, adult, paranormal investigation show on a kids cartoon? What audience are you going for here?”

“The fun kind.” Richie had said. “With a sense of humour.”

Then he had given Eddie a look, the kind that said, I’ve only just met you but it’s clear that’s something you’re clearly lacking.

But in the end Eddie was just hired to film the stupid thing and Richie was the one paying, Richie was the star as he put it, so the name had stuck. And maybe Richie had been right after all because after a while they were getting kind of popular. By their twentieth episode; ‘Headless Easter Egg Kids In MY Factory? More Likely Than You Think’ they actually had something of a fanbase.

At first Eddie couldn’t really understand how they got so big so quickly. At the end of the day it was a low budget, one man, one camera, set up and Richie didn’t even pretend to believe in the stuff he was “investigating”. Eddie spent days at a time filming Richie fucking about with haunted dolls and making fun of the undead. He had spent even longer after that rewatching the footage and trying to edit it into something watchable and for ages he still didn’t get the appeal.

Then one day he had been cutting down some incredibly long spiel of Richie’s about whether you would be allowed to smoke weed in the heaven and after ten minutes realized he hadn’t done a
single edit; he had just been watching the footage and smiling dopily at Richie’s stupid face. In that moment Eddie had realized both that this show might just be good, and also that his marriage might be in more trouble than he had thought.

But they hadn’t really kicked off until about three years ago, right about the time Richie had started pulling Eddie on camera with him. It wasn’t like it had been a completely one man show before but suddenly Richie hadn’t seemed content to keep Eddie as the faceless voice behind the camera.

*People love the Mulder and Scully thing,* Richie had insisted. *You just have to sit there and look pretty. And talk about how the truth is out there.*

*So I’m Mulder?* Eddie had objected. *What if I want to be Scully?*

*You can’t be Scully-I’m the star and I called her first. Besides you’re the one who actually believes in all this stuff.*

That wasn’t entirely true. Rationally, Eddie didn’t believe in ghosts but that was easier to say when you weren’t creeping around an abandoned mansion at 2AM, hearing about all the fucked-up murders that had happened in the 1870’s or whatever. For some reason none of this ever got to Richie but Eddie may have freaked out on camera once or twice. Or maybe more than that.

It was still just the two of them though. Eddie had liked it that way, even if he would never say it. They were a team. At one point he had wanted it to stay like that forever.

Forever was a long time though.

“What button is it again?” Richie asks him, fumbling with the camera and Eddie will get them both killed if he keeps looking away from the road.

“Are you fucking serious?” He asks, pained. “We’ve been doing this forever; how do you not
understand the equipment by now?”

“There’s a lot of settings.” Richie complains, seemingly prodding buttons at random. “I hired you so I don’t have to deal with this geek shit.”

“You’re gonna fuck up my camera.” Eddie warns him. “Let me pull over, I can film you.”

“No, I got it, I got it, I want your reaction for this bit.” Richie says and then he’s hiding his face behind the viewfinder and the recording light is on. “Ok, ready-Eddie?”

Eddie rolls his eyes and tries to look a bit less manic. He’s still kind of uncomfortable being filmed but it’s generally okay if he focuses on Richie’s voice and ignores the thought of all the faceless fans watching the episode.

“So, we’re on the highway and it’s nearly eight AM now and it is a bee-yoot-iful morning. Where are we headed Ed?” Richie says, launching straight into it.

“I have actually no idea how to answer that, because all you told me was drive to Maine.” Eddie grousches. “For, to quote your exact words, a scary surprise. So, I have no idea what the fuck that means but I’m guessing I’m not going to like it.”

“So grumpy.” Richie chides him and Eddie slips up and smiles a little bit. “Eddie here is just mad I made him get up early.”

“Get up and drive you like a fucking chauffer for hours while you take a nap.” Eddie says, immediately going back on his resolution not to swear so much on camera.

“I need my beauty sleep more than you.” Richie tells him. “So, do you wanna know where we’re going?”

“Okay, tell me.”

“Do you want a drum roll?”
“Richie…”

“Okay, okay.” Richie says and then takes a dramatic pause. “Our investigation today is into one of the most haunted places in Maine…. The Overlook Sanatorium.”

Eddie sniffs. “Doesn’t sound very scary.”

“Over fifty thousand people have died here since it was first built.” Richie continues in his intro voice and Eddie look over at him startled.

“What the fuck, that’s a lot. In a sanatorium? What happened?”

Richie actually pulls back from the camera to give him a look. “What do you think a sanatorium is, dude?”

“I don’t know, it’s like a sort of spa, right? A spa-resort thing.”

Richie laughs. “A sanatorium is a private hospital. They were big in the nineteenth century for people with TB. Did you think we were going to a haunted spa? Little old ghosts in bathrobes getting ghost massages?”

“No.” Eddie says. “Shut up.”

He sounds rattled, even to his own ears. The idea of walking around an old haunted building is fine, well not great, but he’s used to it. The prospect of some abandoned hospital with all the medical equipment and jars of fluids and needles is actually kind of repellent. For a moment Eddie considers making a u-turn, heading right back to New York.

Some of this must show in his face because Richie actually turns off the camera, looking concerned.

“Hey what’s up? You’ve gone all grey.”
“Yeah, yeah I’m good.” Eddie lies. “Tuberculosis isn’t airborne right? It wouldn’t still be dangerous?’”

Richie laughs and Eddie frowns, because he hadn’t been joking. A second later Richie sees a McDonalds sign and then Eddie almost forgets all about where they’re headed with all the pleading and bickering that ensues.

Eddie gives in eventually like he always does so when they film the next segment, Richie is barely audible over all the fries he keeps stuffing in his mouth. He’s at the wheel now which means that Eddie can get all his settings back the way he likes them. He likes Richie like this, carefully framed in his viewfinder with the scenery rushing past behind him, the greasy takeout bag in his lap.

“So tell me about this plague pit we’re heading for.” He prompts.

“Sanatorium.” Richie corrects. “And don’t get your panties in a twist. It’s actually pretty photogenic. Seaside location. You like the beach!”

This is off topic and Eddie will probably cut this down later, but their viewers always seem to like segments like this, where they’re just talking, so Eddie doesn’t try too hard to keep them on track.

“I like the beach when it’s sunny. Not in the middle of winter. And not in Maine.” Eddie says. “So, what makes this place haunted?”

“It ticks all the usual boxes. Built in the 1930s for patients with chronic illnesses. Mostly tuberculosis, I think. Long creepy history, lots of patients going missing, rumours of dodgy medical tests. Mad scientist shit. Got closed down in the early 90s and it’s been abandoned ever since.”

“So, no central heating then.”

“You have your thermal jacket with the high-tech duck feather technology or whatever.” Richie says and then waggles his eyebrows suggestively. “We can always huddle together for warmth.”

“Yeah I’ll think I’ll stick with the jacket.” Eddie says coldly, even though he can feel himself blushing.
He hates it when Richie does this, flirt when the cameras are on, but Richie doesn’t seem to care about all the dumb attention it gets them, all the people going ‘cuties!!!’ in the comment section. Richie seems to think it’s kind of hilarious actually, but it pisses Eddie off. It’s too close to the bone, it always has been, but Richie never seems to let it go, reading the worst insinuations out loud and encouraging it on the livestreams.

_Sometimes_ Eddie thinks darkly, _Richie finds everything just a little bit too funny._

He wouldn’t do it if he knew how Eddie felt. Eddie knows that. He can be stupid sometimes, emotionally, but he’s never been cruel.

“How did you hear about this place? Reddit?” Eddie asks later, just after they cross the state line. He’s put the camera away for now; the next segment will be on location but they have a while left. Richie is still driving, singing along under his breath to Young MC’s _Bust A Move._

“Bill gave me a tip off. He said he wants to write about it.”

“We should have brought him along.” Eddie muses. “He’d always better at the ghost story stuff. It might bump up the views.”

Richie shoots him a weird look. “He’s in L.A right now getting that movie thing worked out. Besides if we’re bringing someone else along it would be a cameraman. Like I _suggested._”

“I’m the fucking cameraman.” Eddie reminds him, with a little warning in his voice.

This is a familiar argument now.

“If we had someone else filming then you could be on-screen full time.” Richie tries again. “You could be the Laurel to my Hardy. The Cagney to my Lacey. The Mike Wasowski to my, whatever the name of the fluffy purple guy was in _Monster’s Inc._”

“Since when do you want to share the limelight this much?” Eddie says, and then more forcefully, “I like the technical stuff, it’s what you hired me for. It works, just the two of us.”
“Fine, just us.” Richie says finally, looking pleased by the sound of it despite himself. “For now.”

He points to an exit sign as the drive by it.

“If we had gone off there we would be in my hometown in an hour or so.”

Eddie hums and cranes his neck to look back.

“Derry, right?” he asks, although he knows.

“That’s the one. Stan and Bill keep saying we should go back to visit. For old times sake or whatever.” Richie says, as though he doesn’t think much of that idea.

“Sounds like fun. Your little loser club.” Eddie mutters and Richie laughs at his expression.

“Aw, are you still jealous of them? I told you Eds, they might be my oldest friends but you’re still my bestie.”

“I’m not jealous.” Eddie says, even though he is a little bit. “I could have lived in Maine too if my mom hadn’t had taste.”

“Yeah because Connecticut is so much cooler.” Richie says, muffled around a handful of fries. “Didn’t she only change her mind because it didn’t have enough hospitals or something?”

“Connecticut is ranked 8th in the US for healthcare.” Eddie recites from memory. “Maine is like 16th or something.”

“You didn’t miss out on much. Except for me obviously.” Richie says and flutters his eyelashes.

“Is Derry that bad?”
Richie thinks about it and then says, “It’s like anybody’s hometown. Boring. Kind of homophobic.”

“Want to make a detour on our way home?” Eddie asks. He’s only half-joking. To see where Richie grew up would give him the same thrill as investigating the site of some historical murder; trying to piece together the clues of what had made Richie the person he was today.

“Fuck no.” Richie says darkly and then points at the sat nav. “Almost there now. Ready to bust a ghost?”

Eddie never is.

“Fuck this.” Eddie says as they crawl down the long drive and the sanatorium comes into view. “I’m not going inside. I swear to God, this is the line. I’m drawing it.”

“You can wait in the van. I’ll crack a window.” Richie says gleefully, watching Eddie’s face more than the fucking road.

They’ve visited a lot of scary looking buildings over the years, but the sanatorium takes the fucking cake for pure nastiness. It’s not the location, perched out in an abandoned stretch of coast, or even the building itself which would maybe be pretty if it hadn’t been left to rot, a sprawling three-storied institution that looked more like a boarding school than a hospital. Even the sightless broken windows that stared out at them would be fine, if it wasn’t for the signs.

They had been passing them for a mile now, ever since they had turned off the main road and Richie slows down now as they pass the latest.
“Turn Back Now: Biohazard.” Richie reads aloud while Eddie fantasises about strangling him. “Ooh, that’s a fun one. You’re getting all of this right?”

“Yes.” Eddie says miserably, zooming in a little on the faded white paint. “Have I mentioned how much I hate this?”

**WARNING! DANGER AHEAD**, the first sign had told them in big slapdash letters. Then a little way later, **Contaminated Area.**

Then they had just kept coming until Eddie had lost count over the warning bells going off in his head. **Do Not Trespass. Turn Back. Restricted Area.** Worst of all just the word, **QUARANTINE** in block capitals.

“It’s overkill.” Richie tells him, almost gently. “They just don’t want idiots snooping around.”

“Then we shouldn’t be those idiots!” Eddie says, putting down the camera and picking up his phone.

Richie frowns over at him. “Dude, please tell me you aren’t googling the warning signs of tuberculosis.”

“I’m not doing that.” Eddie says reading; **Fatigue, Fever, Chest pain, Coughing up blood.**

“One of these days I’m gonna find a way of blocking WebMd on your phone.” Richie says and then, more softly. “I swear Eddie, I wouldn’t bring you here if I thought you were gonna get the plague or something.”

Eddie hums in the back of his throat like he isn’t sure but then Richie is pulling the van to a halt outside the main entrance. When Eddie steps out of the van he can hear the waves crashing distantly over the sand and the sound of birds. There’s something else too, almost like a bird call, but it’s coming from the house, a sound that’s almost human, almost like someone calling his name….

Eddie looks up at the endless sightless windows and for a moment he thinks he sees a white face on the second floor, a *hand pressed against the glass*-
Then when he blinks it’s gone and Eddie shakes his head, trying not to get caught up in the strange atmosphere. He’s always doing this, getting too wrapped up in Richie’s stupid ghost stories.

It’s later than it should be, so they have to scramble to get all the equipment set up for the introduction. Which translates to Eddie has to set up the equipment while Richie does weird vocal warmups and stretches which he claims are all part of the process.

Eddie sometimes suspects the process is the process of winding Eddie up but if Richie wants to put on this weird little show then Eddie isn’t going to be the one to stop him.

“The rain in spain, the rain in spain,” Richie mutters, trying and failing to touch the tips of his toes. “Ow, fuck. Peter picked a peck of pickled peppers.”

“Are you done? Can this be over now?” Eddie asks finally, exasperated but still taking the opportunity to check out Richie’s ass when he bends over. He feels guilty almost immediately but it’s worth it.

“You’ll never understand the life of a true performer.” Richie tells him, rolling his neck like he’s trying out for a part in The Exorcist. “You’re witnessing an artist at work.”

The sun is perfect when they finally start filming, just low enough to cast everything in a golden sort of light that almost makes the building look beautiful. Eddie steadies the tripod and gives the thumbs up and then they’re away and Richie has his game face on.

“This is your faithful host speaking, your courageous convoy to all that is chilling and creepy, Richie Trashmouth Tozier.” Richie says, tone deadly serious. “Tonight, we venture beyond the veil, mystery lovers, to a place so disturbing and terrifying my co-host Eddie has refused to venture inside.”

“This is mis-representation.” Eddie protests from behind the camera. “I’m not scared of ghosts, but I draw the line at bacterial infection.”

“You heard it here first folks,” Richie carries on seamlessly. “My own partner in the paranormal, horrified by the prospect of a night inside Maine’s very own Sinister Sanatorium.”

Eddie rolls his eyes, but he loves this really. This is when he feels at his best, when Richie is safe
and snug inside the little black box of Eddie’s screen. It’s not just the control although there is a sense of security in that Eddie literally his fingers on the buttons. The sad truth is that this is the time when Eddie can look, properly and as long as he wants, take in Richie’s sharp smiles and messy hair without the risk, without the fear of being caught.

“People have reported strange noises echoing through these halls,” Richie goes on. “Distant screams in the night, faces appearing at the windows…”

Eddie feels a prickle of goose bumps and tries not to look over at the building. *He’s not going to be the one freaking out this time,* he tells himself.

He’s said this before.

So far Eddie is in the clear lead for freak outs on camera. He had nearly fallen over when they were startled by that creepy painting in a haunted library, and he had once been scared so badly by the lights going out in an old butcher shop, he had frozen up completely, covering his eyes and refusing to move. Richie had to practically carry him out of there in the end. That had been humiliating but not as bad as the time Eddie had jumped at a door closing and yelled, “FUCK OFF GHOSTS” at what had turned out to be a gust of wind.

That had been a very popular episode, people had *loved that,* so much they had made fucking *gifs* of it. Eddie had spent the weeks after in a hot rage over his laptop, scrolling through their YouTube page and muttering darkly under his breath until Richie had finally banned him from reading the comment section.

The only time Eddie has ever witnessed Richie freaking out was when they had been fucking about in the woods near Montana for their werewolf episode. Eddie had been walking backwards, trying to get Richie and a creepy footprint in frame when he had suddenly felt nothing but air behind him. He had fallen for an impressively long time down the hill, blacking out briefly when a branch caught his head and when he came to Richie had been leaning over him, white and frantic, hands all fist ed up in Eddie’s shirt.

*Eddie, Eddie, Eds,* Richie had said, nearly crying. *Are you alright, can you talk?*
Is my camera broken? Eddie had managed woozily to say, and for a moment Eddie had thought Richie might do something crazy like slap him or even kiss him.

He hadn’t done either in the end and Eddie remembers the disappointment, even with the haze of a mild concussion.

“So join us now as we step into one of the most haunted places in America,” Richie says and Eddie zooms out to follow his movements as he walks over to the door. “Perhaps…. never to be seen again.”

He gives a pause for impact and then rattles the doorknob. It doesn’t budge and Richie swears and tries again, losing a lot of the mystique.

“What the hell? This was open a second ago.” He mutters and Eddie rolls his eyes and leaves the camera running to go and help him.

“How can you not open a door?” He asks and Richie splutters but slides over to let Eddie try.

Almost at the moment that both their hands are on the cold metal doorknob, the door swings open with a loud creak of rusty metal.

Richie and Eddie stand side by side, peering into the dark. It smells like dust and something else, something sickly that makes Eddie shrink back, breathe through his hand.

“Yowza,” Richie says softly, “So that was weird.”

“I’ll be right back.” Eddie says and then jogs off to the van. When he comes back a second later,
he’s wearing the face mask with the ear loops he keeps in the glove compartment for occasions like this.

“Oh god, not the stupid mask, please Eddie I’m begging you.” Richie gripes when he sees. “I’m not gonna be able to take anything seriously if you wear that.”

“You never take anything seriously.” Eddie says, only a little muffled. “I have one for you too.”

“Oh, that’s gonna be great audio. This whole episode will have to be subtitled. I’m surprised you don’t have the gloves.”

“I lost them.” Eddie says mournfully. “In the doll museum.”

Richie makes an exaggerated sad face. “Aw, so no Dr K costume? I’ll miss him.”

“He retired.” Eddie tells him curtly. “Let’s just get this fucking thing over with.”

They get all kitted up, fresh batteries in the flashlights and all of the stupid ghost hunting equipment packed into a backpack; the night vision camera, the ‘spirit box’, the EMV meter and the fucking Ouija board that Richie insists they cram in along with everything else. As someone who used to take his job seriously Eddie has a love hate relationship with this shit. He hates the expensive pseudo-science trickery of it all and the fact his filming equipment has to share space with it, but he’s also spent a long time collecting it all and he’s become grudgingly proud of it in a way.

Sometimes he thinks back to when he was twenty-five, making serious dry documentaries about new strains of super-bacteria and feels a weird sense of regret. Sometimes he tries to sit down and watch some of his early stuff and he mostly can’t manage to make it through a whole film. Not just because it’s admittedly kind of boring but also because it makes him feel strange, thinking about the person he was before all of the ghosts, before Mystery Inc and before Richie had barrelled into his life and changed it forever.
Richie takes the bag, even though he bitches about the weight and then hovers by the doorway while Eddie mounts the camera on his shoulder and finally gives him the thumbs up. The sun is setting fully now and the shadows are long on the ground.

“Here we are- the point of no return.” Richie says and gestures at the eerie gap of the doorway. “After you Eds.”

“No fucking thanks.”

“Suit yourself.” Richie says, shrugging and then steps inside and out of view. “Oh wow, it’s actually really nice in here, come check it out. Very cosy.”

“Somehow I doubt that.” Eddie says but follows him, anyway, stepping gingerly over the lintel.

Inside there’s what looks like an old entrance hall, hollowed out and empty aside from a handful of waiting room chairs, broken and scattered. Richie shines the flashlight’s beam over a rotting front desk, complete with desiccated plant pot, and whistles.

“Wow and I thought my dentist’s waiting room was depressing. This looks more…fresh than I expected.”

“You said it was abandoned in the 90’s right?” Eddie says, pulling down his mask cautiously. He hates the idea of breathing in all this old dust and mould, but Richie’s right, it fucks with the audio too much.

“Yeah. I would have been a kid near here when it was still open.”

“Lucky you never got TB.”

“Kind of a miracle I didn’t.” Richie muses. “Did I ever tell you I used to play in the sewers as a kid? I was basically a teenage mutant ninja turtle. Minus the ninja turtle.”

“That’s the least surprising thing I’ve ever heard.” Eddie tells him and then, remembering that they have an audience. “What are the main areas of paranormal activity here?”
“Upstairs. In the wards.” Richie tells him and then laughs when Eddie groans. “Yeah, I thought you’d like that.”

“Won’t be laughing when we fall through the staircase asshole.” Eddie mutters, but follows after Richie as he picks his way across the room and through the broken-down doors at the far end.

They pass a gurney and a rusted IV stand and Eddie can’t help but feel his skin crawl even as he appreciates the footage. He thinks about the patients who had moved through these corridors, shuffling and coughing and it makes his throat itch in sympathy; Eddie’s always fucking hated hospitals.

“Hurry up slow poke.” Richie calls back, “You’re gonna miss all the hot ghost action.”

“I’m okay with that.” Eddie calls back but sticks a little closer, wishing he could hold onto the back of Richie’s jacket like a little kid.

“So, I’m hoping we’re gonna find our man up here.” Richie says and points towards a wide staircase off to the left.

“Our man? Who’s our man?”

“I’m your man, Eddie, don’t you forget it.” Richie says, winking and Eddie almost fumbles the camera. “But this guy is the main haunter, the primo paranormal suspect. Witnesses say he stalks the third floor, laughing and banging on pipes. Typical ghost stuff.”

“Laughing? What’s so fucking funny?” Eddie asks as they climb up the rotting staircase. He’s so distracted by trying not to fall through any holes he almost forgets to be scared.

“I don’t know, maybe he’s listening to a podcast or something.” Richie theorises. “That’s why I laugh at nothing in the street. Maybe he’s telling himself jokes.”

“What kind of jokes? Knock-knock jokes?”
“Yeah.” Richie says and then pauses, holding onto a flimsy looking bannister. “Hey Eddie, what do you call a ghost comedian?”

Eddie sighs and steadies the camera on his shoulder. “I don’t know, Richie. What do you call a ghost comedian?”

“Dead funny!” Richie says, striking a stupid jazz hands pose.

“I believe people used to pay to see you do this onstage.” Eddie says darkly, while Richie cackles.

“Now they pay me to hang out with you in places like this.” Richie says happily, carrying on up the stairs. “Major upgrade.”

Eddie had known who Richie was before they met but he hadn’t been Richie back then, he had been Trashmouth Tozier on the television, grinning into his microphone on the other side of the glass. Eddie had watched him a couple of times, not really laughing at the jokes. They had been classic edgy bro humor- mostly about being a bad boyfriend and not giving a shit about anything. The way Richie had told them was just interesting enough to keep Eddie coming back though- the kind of mocking edge to his voice like he was somehow in on the joke, like even he knew how dumb this bullshit was. Eddie had watched him enough to be genuinely shocked when he had quit the business, quite literally without warning.

The clip had gone viral for a while; Richie staring blankly into space in the middle of some late-night interview before abruptly announcing the end of his career and coming out of the closet, almost in the same breath.

Eddie had asked Richie about it later, years down the line, long after Richie had got in contact with him and asked him if he had seen Ghostbusters and if he wanted to try out the real thing.
What happened out there? Did you plan on it? Was it a stunt? Be honest.

Richie had considered it for a while and then he had grinned.

Did I plan on going all ‘I’m Gay Bitches’ and peace-ing out? Not exactly. Not that night. When I look back maybe I had been building up to it for a while. But who knows why I did it then? Sometimes you just have to say fuck it, I guess. Shit happens.

At the time Eddie had thought this was a purposefully enigmatic answer. He had thought Richie had been trying to impress him maybe, seem cool and impulsive. Then he got to know Richie a little better and he realised that Richie sometimes just did that, do or say things on the spur of the moment, just because he thought of them. It had been kind of scary for Eddie, the thought that people could just let themselves go completely like that, not out of anger but just for the hell of it, without overthinking or analysing.

Looking back, Eddie thinks that might have been the first time that his surface level attraction to Richie had turned into something deeper, something a lot more fucking persistent.

On the third floor the wards are just as nasty as Eddie had suspected; moth eaten mattresses still left on the rusty bed frames and medical looking things everywhere. Richie hovers with his hand over a tray of metal implements and Eddie has to stop himself from dropping the camera and tackling him away.

“Are you fucking stupid? Don’t touch anything!” He snaps. “I’m serious Richie, who knows what you could catch from this place?”

“Calm yourself Eddie-Spaghetti, I’ve already got all the diseases.” Richie says glibly and then Eddie feels his eyes mist over with white hot rage because Richie actually picks up a fucking scalpel with his bare hands.

“What the fuck are you doing?” Eddie says, hearing his voice raise at least an octave. “That’s a sharp object you idiot, it could be fucking contaminated! Do you want hepatitis Richie, is that what you want?”
Richie looks up, wide eyed and puts down the knife, saying “Eddie, Jesus, take a chill pill.”

“Chill pill?” Eddie snaps. “We’re in a fucking quarantined zone, in a hospital where people had actual fucking communicable diseases, it’s not gonna be funny when you catch something or I catch something, this stuff isn’t a joke, it’s a fucking-“

He breaks off, heart pounding because he can’t breathe properly suddenly, his chest tightening up in that horribly familiar way. He takes in a rattly breath, scrabbling for his inhaler with his free hand and then Richie is there, taking the camera and turning it off saying, “It’s okay, it’s okay, just slow down for a second, you’re alright.”

Eddie’s fingers close around his inhaler and then he’s shoving the plastic bit between his teeth and squeezing the trigger, feeling the cold chemical blast against the back of his throat. He takes in a shuddery breath, feeling hot and humiliated even with Richie rubbing his back.

“We’re cutting that out.” He rasps when he can talk again, and Richie looks almost offended.

“Duh, I mean what kind of asshole do you think I am? But listen Eddie…”

“I’m fine, it’s just the dust.”

Richie looks sceptical. “You didn’t get out of breath when we were climbing the stairs. I know that because I fucking did, and I was trying to hide it.”

“So what?” Eddie says, challenging him to say something. He glares up at Richie and suddenly becomes aware of how close they are, the warmth of Richie’s large hand on his back, slipped down just a little lower than his lungs. Richie looks back at him, mouth twisting and then steps away, holding his hands up in defeat.

“Okay, fine, you want asthma, you have asthma.”

“I do have fucking asthma you fuckwad.” Eddie says hotly but then before they can really launch into it, there’s a loud KNOCK that echoes down the ward.
Richie freezes and they both stare at each other as it comes again.


Richie shakes his head and then it comes again and Eddie scrambles to pull the viewfinder up, the power coming on just in time to catch the second noise.

“Looks like you were right Eds.” Richie whispers. “Knock-knock jokes.”

Eddie shushes him but the sound is gone now, even though he strains for it.

“What the fuck was that?” He asks finally, after nearly two minutes of silence.

“Creepsville, that’s what.” Richie says and then he’s lifting his hands up to cup his mouth and yelling down the corridor. “Who’s there?”

“Shhhh, don’t antagonise it!” Eddie nearly hisses but Richie just grins.

“That’s how the joke goes, Eddie. He’s just working up to a punchline.”

Richie takes a step down the ward, then another and then with a horrible sound of cracking wood, the floor gives out under his feet and he disappears in a cloud of dust.

Eddie shouts his name, starting forward and dropping to his knees to crawl to the edge of the gaping hole in the floor thinking, oh god, oh god, please, no.

“RICHIE?” He calls down, hearing his voice crack. “RICHIE?”

He can just see darkness below, his flashlight beam bouncing off clouds of dust and then there’s a cough from below and a shape resolves itself, Richie lying crumpled in the middle of a pile of broken timber.
“I’m okay.” Richie calls up. “I mean, I might be dead. But I’m okay.”

“Don’t move- you might be paralysed!” Eddie shouts, trying to breathe. The last seconds before Richie fell are playing on loop in his head.

“How could I move if I was paralysed?”

“Just stay still! I’m jumping down.” Eddie says and swallows because these ceilings are really fucking high.

“Don’t do that!” Richie calls up. “Eds, I’m okay. I’m wiggling all my extremities right now. They’re pissed at me but still attached, I promise. Just go back down the stairs.”

Eddie hesitates, wishing he could see more clearly.

“Don’t jump Eddie.” Richie says again, more seriously. “If that floor gave out, this one could too.”

Eddie lets out all his air in a rush, relenting, “Okay, okay, I’ll be there soon. Just…sit tight alright don’t try and get up. Do you want me to throw down some painkillers?”

“I’m happy to wait for you to come and nurse me.” Richie calls up and it’s reassuring that he can still be annoying.

Eddie wiggles backwards on his stomach away from the edges of the pit and then rises slowly to his feet. Every part of him wants to run down to Richie, as fast as his legs will take him but he’s also very aware of the creaking floorboards beneath him, so it’s with small careful steps that he makes it to the staircase. Halfway down he realizes he’s swung the camera up to his shoulder out of habit and the recording light is still on. An awful, professional part of Eddie is hoping he got the fall on camera because if Richie is fine then that’ll make a fucking phenomenal episode.

And Richie will be fine, he reminds himself, he has to be.
The second-floor layout is the same as the third, a near identical row of wards connected by a long corridor and Eddie can’t help but break into a jog as he gets closer but there’s no sign of Richie, no sign of a broken ceiling. He’s so busy looking up, for the broken plaster that he almost falls right into the hole in the floor.

He yelps and catches himself, teetering on the edge and with a dizzying sense of horror, he looks down and sees Richie staring back up at him, the flashlight beam reflecting off his glasses.

“Not to complain but you’re taking your time here.” Richie calls and Eddie looks around him wildly, feeling bile rising in his throat.

“No, no, no. I don’t understand, I went downstairs.” He says and it’s the same ward, the same rusty IV stand and broken beds.

“How can you be lost?” Richie says and then. “It’s okay anyway, I’ll come to you, I think I was just stunned.”

“No, Richie wait.” Eddie says desperately. “There’s something really fucked up happening here, just wait there, I’m jumping.”

“Don’t do that!” Richie says and he’s pulling himself up and shaking off the dust, “If you break your arm, I’ll never get you into another haunted building again. I’ll be right there.”

“Richie!” Eddie calls but Richie’s already limping away, out of sight. Eddie stares down into the dark jagged hole in the floor for a minute, breathing fast and then he closes his eyes muttering, “Come on, come on, don’t freeze up idiot, get your shit together.”

He must have doubled back somehow; there was no other possible explanation. He would watch back the footage later with Richie and laugh at it. Bolstered by this thought, Eddie heads for the staircase. He starts making his way down and he can already hear Richie’s footsteps coming up the other way, dragging a little.

“Richie?” Eddie calls down to him, struck by a new worrying thought. “Is your leg okay? Sit down idiot, don’t put any weight on it.”

There’s no answer from below but the footsteps are getting louder and Eddie suddenly feels the
need to be very, very still, the blood rushing away from his face.

“Rich?” He calls out in a weak voice. “If you jump out at me, I’ll quit, I swear to God I’ll quit.”

He can hear breathing now, ragged and laboured coming from the dark below, an awful wheezing death rattle and the footsteps are close now, so close and Eddie can hardly bring himself the raise the flashlight, not wanting to see whatever is coming up the stairs. Another rack of coughing echoes up and Eddie thinks about the TB sufferers who once filled these halls, shambling and coughing up flecks of bright blood. He has one hand on the camera, and another clutched around the heavy flashlight when suddenly Richie stumbles into the light.

Eddie lets out a heavy sigh of relief, shoulders slackening.

“Fuck you, seriously, did you not hear me calling out?” He accuses and Richie just stands there on the stairs, swaying slightly and staring at him as if Eddie’s the fucking ghost.

“Eds…” Is all he whispers, and Eddie suddenly realizes there’s something off about him, not just the way he’s out of breath, but something else too, something very wrong.

“Why are you all wet? And dirty?” He asks but Richie is staggering up the staircase towards him in a rush, grasping at Eddie’s shirt and pulling him close into a hug so hard it almost hurts.

Eddie stiffens up because they don’t really do this, as much as he’d like to and Richie is so cold, his face like ice where it presses into Eddie’s neck.

“Eddie, fuck Eddie, how did you get out? I knew it, I knew you weren’t dead.” Richie is muttering and then he’s pulling back and his hand is on Eddie’s cheek, smoothing it compulsively with his thumb. “What happened to your face man, where’s the bandage? I can’t believe you’re really here.”

Eddie blinks, barely hearing him over the feeling of being touched.

“What the hell are you talking about?” He asks and then sniffs and nearly retches. “Fuck, you smell awful Rich, this is bad even for you.”
Richie laughs a little hysterically and he still hasn’t let go, if anything he’s gripping on harder
saying, “I’m sorry I left you, I’m so sorry but we need to go, Neibolt might collapse at any minute,
I don’t know… I don’t know where the others are, they were right beside me…”

“Others?” Eddie echoes. “What’s Neibolt?”

He looks down at Richie’s filthy clothes and realizes for the first time that they aren’t the same
ones he walked in with, that he’s never even seen this ugly yellow shirt before and Richie’s glasses
aren’t right, they’re cracked and wrong, this is all so wrong.

“Richie? What’s going on?” He asks shrinking back and pushes himself out of the circle of
Richie’s arms and only then sees the dark stains all over Richie’s chest, the blood on his hands. He
looks up at Richie’s face and sees the tear tracks that cut through the dirt and this isn’t his Richie,
this is something else, something awful.

“You-you’re bleeding.” He gets out and Richie stumbles towards him like he’s drunk but Eddie
steps backwards, out of his reach.

“It’s not my blood Eds.” Richie says, looking broken. “It’s yours.”

Eddie stumbles backwards, swearing as he trips on the stair but when Richie reaches for him, he
scrambles up and away, feeling half crazy with the sudden rush of animal fear. He drops the
flashlight and as it rolls down the stairs the beam of light dances between them.

“Eddie…” Richie tries to say but Eddie can only yelp out, “Don’t touch me!”

Richie looks horrified, swaying backwards and Eddie takes the opportunity to turn back up the
stairs and start running. He can hear Richie calling his name, almost begging but that’s not Richie,
that’s something else, something cold and covered in (Eddie’s) blood so he doesn’t stop, even with
his heart pounding and lungs straining for air.

He can hear footsteps pounding behind him and Richie shouting, but Eddie’s always been fast, and
he doesn’t stop at the top of the staircase, just keeps sprinting down the hall, past the wards until he
slams into the door at the far end.

“C’mon, c’mon, c’mon,” He pleads with the door, shoving himself against it until finally it
unsticks, and he throws himself through and slams it shut behind him.

He holds his breath in the dark and waits, straining his ears for any sound but there’s nothing, no footsteps, nothing pushing against the door.

There is a strong possibility that Eddie has gone crazy.

He’s always secretly worried about that, the possibility that whatever was wrong with him was in his head, not his body but now he’s staring down the barrel of it. Because there’s no way that was real.

Maybe that was just Richie down there, Eddie thinks. That was just Richie, dirty from the fall and as for the blood, maybe he was hurt and now you’ve left him there alone. Or maybe he was joking, maybe this was just a big practical joke. Open the door. Laugh it off. Don’t be a pussy.

Eddie doesn’t open the door. He counts to ten and then still doesn’t open it.


Then he thinks about the drained white expression on Not-Richie’s face, the smell and he can’t bring himself to open the door, so instead he tries to take stock of where he is. He curses the loss of the flashlight but then he remembers the light on top of the camera still somehow clutched in his hand and he fumbles it on, swearing under his breath.

It’s a tiny space, a mouldering clothes rack on the wall and empty metal shelves in front of him and Eddie lets out a shaky breath when he realises he’s in a fucking closet. He suddenly wishes desperately that Richie was there to make a bad joke about it and the thought of Richie, the real Richie, makes him brave enough to take a deep breath and open the door just a crack and peek out.

Outside the hallway is pitch black and empty; at some point the sun has set completely and this isn’t the city; the dark here is really fucking dark. Eddie shines the camera light into the darkness but it’s not strong enough, it’s like shining a laser pointer down a deep dark well.

“Richie?” Eddie whispers and then one of the shadows fucking moves and Eddie jumps, slamming the door shut again.
“Fuck, fuck, fuck.” He mutters to himself and then there’s a knock on the other side of the door, so hard he can feel the vibrations through the wood.

For a minute Eddie thinks he might have a heart attack and then Richie’s voice calls through the door, “Eddie, Jesus, please tell me that’s you.”

Eddie wants to relax but he can’t because he’s just made this mistake once already so instead, he calls back, “What are you wearing?”

There a pause and then Richie’s saying, “The fuck are you talking about?”

“Your clothes, your fucking clothes, what are you wearing?” Eddie asks, near hysterical.

“What am I- I’m wearing the stupid fleece jacket you made me buy, what is this, phone sex?” Richie says and Eddie exhales and opens the door.

“Get in, get in.” He hisses and drags Richie inside with him and closing the door.

It’s a tiny space and Richie’s lanky form is taking up most of it, their knees and chests are brushing but Eddie almost laughs, feeling giddy from the fact this is really Richie, dry and dusty but not covered in black filth, he’s actually here and warm.

“What are you doing in a closet?” Richie asks him, his flashlight making him look like an oversized kid doing a campfire horror story.

“I was hiding obviously.” Eddie hisses, having to crane his neck in the small space. He puts his ear to the door, wondering if whatever he saw on the stairway is still out there.

“And uh, why is that?” Richie asks carefully, eyes darting between Eddie’s face the shaking camera in Eddie’s hands. “Where’s your flashlight? Your face is all dirty- what the hell dude, I was gone for like five minutes.”
“It’s not dirt, it’s blood.”

“What?” Richie nearly yelps. “Are you hurt, what the fuck happened?”

He reaches out to touch Eddie’s face and Eddie flinches back, remembering Not-Richie doing the same thing on the stairway. Richie pulls away quickly, looking hurt.

“No, no.” Eddie tries to say. “It’s not my blood, I mean it might be, but I’m not bleeding, it was you. You had blood all over you.”

“Woah, slow down.” Richie says, holding his hands up. “You’re gonna need to repeat that. But slowly and in a way that makes sense. Because I’m gonna be honest, I’m not really getting it.”

“All you need to know is that we’re leaving. Now.” Eddie tells him and opens the door, peeking out. “There’s something really wrong here Rich, trust me, we need to go.”

He expects Richie to argue but Eddie must look close to hysteric right now because he just nods and says, “Okay, lead the way then. We need to pick up the backpack though- don’t kill me but it broke my fall and I think I heard a lot of smashing.”

“I don’t care, let’s just leave it.” Eddie says and practically drags Richie down the hallway and down the stairs, trying to explain as best he can. He’s aware that it sounds crazy and his increasingly frantic hand gestures probably aren’t helping but Richie just nods slowly and makes humming noises in the back of his throat.

“So wait, you basically just saw me?” He asks when Eddie pauses to take a breath halfway down a flight of stairs. “And I was…upset?”

“And dirty. Mostly dirty.”

Richie pauses for thought. “Like dirt-dirty or sexy-dirty?”

“Not fucking sexy! Not sexy at all!” Eddie says, hearing his voice rise about two octaves.
“I mean, if you were fantasising about me anyway...” Richie says and Eddie stops in his tracks, feeling sick.

“You think I imagined this? You think I’m making it up?”

Richie winces and looks apologetic.

“I think this is a creepy old building.” He says. “And you dropped your flashlight. A lot of things look different in the dark. I mean you just saw me bellyflop through the floor, I get it.”

“I’m not crazy Richie.” Eddie tells him in a low voice. “If you call me crazy, I swear to god I’m gonna lose it. I’ll freak out right here, right now.”

“I never called you crazy!” Richie says, putting his hands up in surrender. “Can you stop making that face at me, it’s actually frightening.”

Eddie glares at him and then storms ahead, mouth clamped tight on all the things he wants to say.

The first time they had met Richie had bought him a drink, sat them down in a quiet booth at the back and asked him, “Do you scare easy?”

When Eddie thinks back, he can picture the moment perfectly in his head, the rings of condensation left on the tabletop, the way Richie had leant forward and caught his gaze, hair falling in his face. His hands had been wrapped around his beer bottle and the way he had asked the question was exciting, frightening in itself, like he was asking Eddie so much more.

Eddie who had still been on three different types of medication, Eddie who still went home every night to his wife. Eddie, who had never even kissed a guy at that point.

Eddie had blinked at him and thought, *Fuck. This might be an issue.*
“I think we should keep this professional.” He heard himself say. “I’m married.”

Then, and the humiliation of this moment was enough to try and repress the memory for years after. Richie had blinked and pulled back saying, “I meant of like, of ghosts. But cool, cool, good to know. If you want professional, I can do professional.”

And so, they had. To an extent.

But sometimes Eddie thinks back to that moment and thinks that maybe he hadn’t been misreading the look on Richie’s face, maybe that really had been an invitation. If that was true then Eddie could have said something else, not just shut it down right away. And then, and then….

In the end he should have just said, Yes. Yes, I scare easy. I’m the biggest coward you’ll ever meet, and I’m scared of you most of all, because we’ve only just met, and I can already tell you’re going to ruin my life.

But in the end Eddie had just said what he had said; there was no changing it and looking back didn’t help. There was no point in dwelling on things like that, moments like that where things could have gone differently.

Like Richie said: Shit happens.

And then you live with it.

By the time they reach the front door, Eddie’s pissed but he’s already calming down, already thinking of this whole shitty experience in past tense. He’s suddenly fiercely grateful that he held onto the camera. Once they’re ten miles away from this shitty place he can show Richie the footage, proof that he hasn’t finally flipped. They might even get a decent (if weird) episode out of it.
“Thus ends our brush with the veil, yadda, yadda yadda, buh-bye ghosts,” Richie says ceremoniously and then tries the door. He turns the knob and then swears when it sticks, rattling uselessly.

“Oh, fuck this.” Richie says and kicks the wood in frustration and Eddie bats his hands away, too done with this situation to be patient.

“Ha ha.” Eddie crows triumphantly when the lock clicks easily under his hands but the words shrivel up in his throat when the doors open.

There’s nothing but a brick wall on the other side.

“What the fuck, what the fuck.” Richie is saying but all Eddie can do is put his hand out flat on the bricks, trying to understand. They’re cold and slimy but worse than that, they feel old. Green moss is growing over the gaps in the mortar.

“We came in this way, right? Am I crazy? Am I losing it here Eddie?” Richie says, and then, incredulously. “Why the fuck are you filming this?”

Eddie looks down and realises he’s somehow unconsciously pulled the camera up and that the little red light is on.

“It’s my job,” He says, sounding panicked even to his own ears. “You wanted this right? Something scary, so guess what, it’s happening. You look for this stuff and I film it okay, so that’s what I’m doing.”

He doesn’t say it makes him feel safer to film this, capture the experience somehow, as if it’s one of his careful documentaries where he has the final cut, the control.

“Is this your way of saying I told you so?” Richie asks, frantic. “Because I gotta say, not the time!”

Even through the panic of losing their exit, Eddie does feel a weird rush of validation. Whatever is happening here, it’s happening to both of them now.

Richie makes them walk the length of the ground floor, convinced they’ve doubled back or made a wrong turn somehow. Eddie follows his lead but internally he already knows that they won’t find
the exit; in a way he’s known that since he first realized that wasn’t Richie on the stairway. Richie is all angry energy and increasing frustration, but Eddie has reached a strangely calm level of fear. He keeps his inhaler clenched in his fist, puffing on it occasionally but otherwise he can barely speak. Eddie knows that it’s not helping, that his silence is making Richie more frightened, but he can’t help it, it’s too much, the darkness, the feeling of being trapped.

It’s on the third time they find themselves back in the waiting room that he sees Richie’s name on the wall.

Richie is behind him, kicking and cursing at the brick wall again but all Eddie can do is drift closer to the chart on the wall, with it’s listed rooms and wards and in tiny small typeface the name; R. Tozier, Room 237.

“Okay how about this? I’m just gonna bash it.” Richie says from behind him. “How strong is brick anyway?”

“You bastard.” Eddie whispers. He’s shaking, he’s so angry.

“What?” Richie asks. “What did I do now?”

Eddie whirls on him, pointing a shaking finger at the wall chart.

“Is this a fucking practical joke?” He asks, the mixture of relief and rage so heady he feels almost dizzy.

“Um, no?” Richie says and then he comes closer, squinting at the chart. “What is that, is that my name?”

“Oh, like you don’t know.” Eddie says scornfully. “What did you think this was going to get us more fucking hits? What you’re bored of ghosts, now we film pranks? That was you on the stairs. Where did you hide the costume?”

“Eddie, I didn’t do this.” Richie tells him softly, looking pale and very still. “I’ve never been here before. In my life. I don’t know why it would say that.”

Eddie rolls his eyes, wondering how long he’s going to keep it up for.
“Yeah, okay, sure.”

“No, really, Eddie.” Richie says, turning and grabbing onto Eddie’s jacket like it’s a life preserver. “I don’t know what the fuck is going on.”

The sign says room 237 so they head for the second floor.

Eddie’s really starting to get sick of the staircase at this point.

Richie still has a deathgrip on his arm, like Eddie is some kind of security blanket and if this is a joke, then Richie should have been an actor not a comedian. Eddie’s never really seen Richie scared before, werewolf woods incident aside, and that was more shock. Now Richie’s the one jumping at shadows and flinching when the floorboards creak and it’s worrying, possibly the most worrying thing out of all the other worrying shit Eddie’s seen today.

They find it pretty easily, just off the main corridor, a private room complete with a name on the door.

“Lo and behold. Patient: Richard Tozier.” Richie reads out, obviously trying hard not to freak out. “This is a new level of fucked- uppery.”

“Should we knock?” Eddie wonders out loud.

“So what? We don’t catch ghost-me with my ghost pants down?”

“I don’t think this is a ghost situation.”

Richie snorts and says, “I don’t think there’s a name for this fucking situation.”
He takes a deep breath and then kicks open the door, brandishing the flashlight like a weapon. Behind him Eddie braces himself for whatever nasty thing will come scuttling out of the darkness.

“Hello, uh, me?” Richie yells into the gloom and the two of them freeze for a moment, waiting for an answer.

Richie takes a tentative step inside and Eddie follows close behind, holding up the camera. The flashlight beam dances around the room and there’s nothing, it’s bare. A bedframe, a boarded-up window, and through an open doorway, what looks like a bathroom.

“Huh.” Richie says, stepping in and sniffing the air. “If this is my room, I have a shitty sense of interior decoration.”

“No, that different from your apartment.” Eddie mutters and Richie looks offended.

“My apartment is nice. I mean, I have lamps. And a plant.”

The plant was a housewarming gift from Bill and was decidedly deceased the last time Eddie came over but they’re not getting into an argument about that now. Eddie’s attention is caught by something on the floor, just under the bedframe.

“If it was your room and it’s made to scare us it would have ‘ha ha ha’ or something equally stupid written on the walls.” Eddie says, kneeling down to get a closer look.

It’s a folder of papers, covered in dust but Eddie can make out an R on the label, so he picks it up, gingerly, trying not to get dirt all over him.

“Eds, I’m not the fucking Joker.” Richie complains loudly and then suddenly he’s freezing in place, staring through to the bathroom and making a strangled noise in the back of his throat.

“What is it?” Eddie hisses, looking up at him.

Richie doesn’t respond, doesn’t even look at him, just takes a few stumbling steps towards the
bathroom. Concerned Eddie scrambles to his feet and follows the beam of Richie’s flashlight.

There’s a bathtub just beyond the doorway, a white porcelain tub, too clean for the rest of the filthy room, a white hand curled around the edge with something dark dripping from the fingers and as Eddie watches a drop falls onto the floor, splashing onto the dust…

Eddie takes two steps forward and sees what’s inside and then he’s retching and pulling Richie backwards, away, hearing him saying, “no, no, no” on repeat, like a record with a stuck needle.

Outside in the corridor they slam the door shut and Richie leans against it heavily, with his hands in his hair, looking inches from a panic attack.

Eddie is practically vibrating saying, “It wasn’t him Rich, it wasn’t Stan, it couldn’t be, we saw him and Patsy just the other day for coffee, there’s no way it’s him.”

Richie is breathing very weirdly, his breath hitching in a way that sounds odd coming from someone else’s lungs and Eddie is pushing the inhaler at him before he stops to think if it’s a good idea.

“Just inhale okay, slowly.” He says, and Richie sucks in a greedy lungful, his stubbled cheek very warm under Eddie’s hand.

There’s a quite moment when Richie’s breathing has returned to normal and Eddie is so close he’s almost holding him and then Richie looks him in the eye and says, “We have to look. We have to check.”

Eddie shakes his head, but he knows Richie’s right. If that is Stan in there, Stan who does trivia nights with his wife, Stan who makes origami out of paper napkins and has three different ties with bird patterns, then they have to know if it was really was him bleeding out in that bathtub.

Eddie’s only known Stan for a few years but Richie’s known him all his life, was the best man at his wedding, so Eddie takes a breath and says, “I’ll look. You stay here.”

Richie hovers by the doorway when Eddie goes back in, camera switched off now and around his neck because there’s no way he wants to record this. It’s somehow not a shock when there’s nothing but an empty rusty metal tub in the bathroom; it’s much better than the alternative. Eddie lets out a breath he didn’t realise he was holding and turns back to Richie’s white face, watching him silently.
“Nothing. Nothing’s there.” He says and Richie’s face slackens with relief.

“It was real. You saw it too.”

“I did.”

“I need to call him.” Richie says and then he hits himself in the forehead with his palm. “Fuck, phones. We’re so stupid, this 2019. We should just call the police.”

“And tell them what exactly?” Eddie snaps but he’s pulling out his phone just like Richie.

There’s no signal but he has nearly twenty missed calls and almost as many voicemails and he frowns, putting the phone up to his ear to listen.

“Fuck, fuck, no service. Of course, that would be too fucking easy, wouldn’t it?” Richie curses, stabbing at the phone and then he sees the expression on Eddie’s face.

“What is it?”

“It’s uh, Myra. She’s left all these messages…” Eddie says uncertainly, closing the voicemail and opening up the next one. He frowns, trying to understand the words coming through the tinny receiver.

“Your ex-wife Myra?” Richie asks, scrunching up his nose. “I thought you guys were good.”

“We are.” Eddie says, equally puzzled. “Or we were. I don’t understand.”

“What did she say?”

“She keeps…” Eddie pauses, trying to listen. “She just keeps asking me where I am. She’s telling me to come home.”
His blood freezes when he hears her crying over the phone, saying, *It’s been weeks Eddie, how could you do this to me, I’m your wife,* and he jabs the voicemail away, staring down at his familiar phone screen as if it’ll explain somehow.

The last time he had spoken to Myra she had been telling him about her engagement to a nice accountant she had met at her church group. Myra had sounded happy, for the first time since he had asked for the divorce, maybe happier than before that even. This Myra, the wheedling, desperate voice over the phone was just a distant memory now, a person he hadn’t known for years.

“I can’t reach Stan. I can’t even text him.” Richie says in a small voice and Eddie snaps out of his funk, remembering there’s a lot more going on here.

“It’s the connection.” Eddie tells him, trying to sound reassuring. “It wasn’t real Rich, I promise, it was just a fucked-up vision. This place is trying to mess with us.”

Richie looks up at him, wet eyed behind his glasses and nods. “Yeah. Yeah, I gotcha. We need to be zen about this. Cucumber style.”

Eddie nods feeling very not-zen. “Let’s try and find a way out.”

They walk up and down the wards for hours, searching for anything: roof access, fire escapes, windows low enough to jump out without breaking every bone in their bodies. There’s nothing, only row upon row of endless beds and gurneys. They don’t turn around, sticking in a straight line and staying on the second floor but after a while Eddie starts to notice that they’re retracing their steps, passing the same IV stand and crack in the wall again and again. His feet hurt and he’s very cold, but they keep pressing forward, walking for what seems like miles down the same empty passageways.

Eddie looks at his watch, but it’s stopped at 7.45; they could have been in here for half an hour or two weeks, there’s no way of telling. His reference points for reality have fallen away; there’s only the sound of their footsteps and Richie, just a little ahead of him, lighting the way.
Finally, when he’s almost nodding off, Richie stops and Eddie bumps into the warmth of his back.

“This is useless. This is a fucking mobius strip.” Richie says, sounding hollow. “I feel like a hamster on a wheel.”

“So, what can we do?” Eddie asks, feeling frayed. “Where’s the way out?”

Richie rubs a hand over his face and says, “I don’t know, I don’t know Eds, I just know I’m fucking exhausted. Maybe we should just hole up somewhere for the night, wait till morning.”

“You want to spend the night in here?”

“Of course, I don’t fucking want us to spend the night in here, I want us to spend the night in my fucking warm bed in my apartment with central heating and, I don’t know, electricity.” Richie snaps and then seems to replay the words in his head. “I mean that’s where I want to spend the night. Myself.”

He puts his head in his hands and groans, swearing in a muffled kind of way.

“Fine.” Eddies says, too tired to think anymore. “But if I see a rat, I’m jumping out the window.”

They find a small office that looks like it was once used for administration which Eddie votes for on the basis it’s the furthest removed room from any medical shit. If he’s going to be spending the night on the floor, then he at least wants to make sure he won’t accidentally stick himself with any dirty needles.

They move the desk in front of the door and then it’s just the two of them sitting hunched up against the wall. Eddie feels like a walking corpse, and now they aren’t moving anymore the chill is spreading up from the concrete against his back. He doesn’t realize he’s shivering till Richie slides up closer and puts his arm tentatively over Eddie’s shoulder.

“I am kind of glad you made me buy this jacket.” Richie admits and Eddie snorts and leans into the warmth of him, wishing that he could just enjoy this, just wishing in general.
They can touch like this, but Eddie only allows himself the luxury under very special circumstances. He had allowed it when Richie had been half-carrying him back to the car after he had fallen down the hill. He had allowed it once in the basement of a long dead serial killer’s hotel when they had stumbled across an owl trying to sleep.

He had allowed it once, *allowed far too much*, the night after he signed the divorce papers.

He had turned up at Richie’s place already a little drunk; teary eyed and manic, waving the hand now free of a wedding ring. Richie had taken one look at him swaying on the doorstep and gone to the kitchen to crack open a bottle of the good stuff. They had spent the night getting rowdily drunk on Richie’s couch and Eddie had been so giddy with freedom, with *possibilities* that he had been grinning the whole time, loose limbed and sloppy. He had let himself laugh out loud at Richie’s jokes and let their legs get all tangled up between them and it had made him dizzy, the terrible *nearness* of Richie in that moment.

When he looks back, he can’t remember the whole night, just flashes. He had been almost in Richie’s lap by the time the bottle was half empty saying, *There are so many things I want, that I’ve wanted. You can’t imagine.*

*Like what?* Richie had asked him, eyes very dark, hands not quite on Eddie’s legs. *Give me some examples.*

Eddie had leant over, gotten close and then, because he never could hold his liquor, he had thrown up in Richie’s lap.

The next morning, he had woken up in Richie’s bed, wearing his clothes and stumbled out to find Richie snoring on the sofa, surrounded by cleaning supplies.

Mortified and with the worst hangover of his life, Eddie had slunk home and hadn’t picked up the phone for a week.

They had never mentioned it again; Richie just seeming relieved when Eddie finally worked up the guts to return his texts. Maybe he thinks that Eddie didn’t remember. Maybe he thinks Eddie was just drunk and looking to explore his brand-new sexuality with the nearest male body. Maybe he knew all about Eddie’s little crush and thought it kinder to let him down easy.
Mostly, Eddie has no idea what Richie thinks.

“So if this isn’t a ghost thing what is it?” Richie asks him quietly. “What’s the playbook here?”

Eddie looks down at the folder still clutched in his hands and tries to think. He’s afraid to open it.

“Could it be we’re seeing something that happened? You said you grew up near here….” A horrifying thought occurs to Eddie and he’s suddenly very aware of how close Richie is. “Could you have, fuck I don’t know, been treated here and repressed the memory somehow?”

“Oh my god, I never had TB.” Richie sighs out, frustrated. “Memory doesn’t work like that, I wouldn’t just forget everything, this isn’t a soap opera. And that doesn’t make any sense- Stan looked the same age as he is now and so did the me you saw right?”

“Yeah.” Eddie admits and then, more quietly. “I found this. It has your name on it.”

Richie takes the file like he’s picking up a live tarantula, and when he blows the dust off, a great cloud comes up, making Eddie wish he hadn’t lost his mask.

They put the file between them to read; there’s only a few papers but a photograph falls out from between them and Eddie catches it before it falls to the ground.

“So, um.” He tries to say, and then stops because he doesn’t know how to finish.

“Is that a fucking mug-shot?” Richie asks beside him, sounding more than confused than horrified.

“When was this taken? You never told me you were arrested.” Eddie asks, pulling the photo up close to peer at it.
The Richie in the photo looks a mess; there’s no other way of putting it, big dark shadows under his eyes, gaunt and somehow hollowed out. He’s not smiling and that’s somehow the strangest part because for the entire time that Eddie has known Richie he’s associated him with that sharp bright flash of teeth.

“Because I fucking wasn’t.” Richie says, grabbing the photo away and glaring at as if he has laser vision. “I mean once, nearly in college but that was just for smoking weed in the wrong place. This is edited. This is a fucking smear campaign.”

Eddie is looking at the file reading, Patient: Richie Tozier (41) court mandated admittance for substance abuse, October 2017.

“Overlook Rehabilitation Centre, Maine. 2017.” He reads out loud. “I thought you said this place was abandoned in the nineties?”

“It was.” Richie says, craning over to read the folder, eyes flicking down the page. “This is all wrong. I mean, I read somewhere that there was an attempt to use it for some kind of rehab but it never got off the ground.”

“It says here you were involved in a car accident.” Eddie says, feeling sick. “Drunk driving. You’ve been here for three years.”

Richie reaches out and closes the folder with a snap, tossing it onto the floor.

“No.” He snaps. “No, I haven’t, I’ve been in New York, with you. This is all bullshit Eddie, we shouldn’t even be looking at it. That’s what it wants.”

“What the folder wants?” Eddie asks, making a face.

“What the fucking, building wants, whatever it is messing with us. It’s all just made up!” Richie explodes and Eddie has to lean away so he doesn’t get accidently elbowed.

“There must be some sense to it though, it must be trying to show us something, it can’t all just be random…”
“It is fucking random!” Richie says, “Life is just random shit that happens to you and then you die! There’s no message here, none of this makes sense, it never happened, it’s not gonna happen and it’s not fucking happening now.”

“Except it is.” Eddie insists. “It’s happening right now to us here. Whatever, I don’t fucking know, alternate universe where you’re in rehab and Stan is dead and I’m still married to Myra, that’s somehow crashing into us, it’s all mixed together. We have to understand it, or we’ll never escape.”

“It’s just fear.” Richie says, muffled into his hands. “It’s just my stupid nightmares reflected back. That’s all it is. Stan dead. My drinking. Being stuck here, in Maine, all over again. You said I wanted to be scared- maybe this is just the universe giving it to me. It’s a big sick joke.”

Eddie wants to ask how the messages from Myra fit into this theory but he’s too scared to hear the answer.

“You’re such a narcissist.” Eddie tells him instead. “Why does it all have to be about you? You think I don’t hate this too? You think I don’t want to get out?”

Richie looks at him, mouth twisting like he’s almost able to hold himself back but he can’t quite manage.

“I know you want to get out Eddie.” He says, the words coming out raw and hurt. “This seals the deal, right? If you weren’t going to take that job before you will now. Bad enough when it was a stupid little show going nowhere but now there’s something to actually be scared of.”

Eddie sucks in a sharp breath. “How do you know about that? Who told you?”

Richie looks angry now, as if he had hoped Eddie would deny it. “No one told me asshole, you left the email open on your laptop when we were going over the edits. I’m not a fucking snoop.”

Eddie opens his mouth and shuts it. He can barely think over the loud voice in his head calling him an idiot.

He had been offered the job on the documentary crew nearly a week ago now and the email had
sat in his inbox the entire time while Eddie had tried to work up the will to reply. Richie must have
known for almost that long, that Eddie was thinking about leaving. It was a good offer; well payed
and important work, something almost like a career.

He would be working in an actual office with co-workers who he didn’t constantly sexually
fantasise about, who he wasn’t awfully, tragically and stupidly in love with. It was essentially, the
smart choice.

“I was going to tell you.” He starts and he can feel Richie tense beside him.

“Here I was thinking I would learn it from the resignation letter.” Richie scoffs but Eddie is pissed
now too.

“Let me fucking finish dickweed. I was going to tell you that I was offered it. I haven’t fucking quit
anything. This is still my show.”

“You haven’t quit yet. And this is my show. I’m the star and I know you hate it anyway. You think
it’s stupid, you always have.”

“I don’t hate it!” Eddie protests. “And I started it too, I’ve been there from the beginning, back
when you kept pausing for the canned laughter and kept notes on the back of your hand! You’re
the one who wanted it to be our thing, so don’t take that away now just because I’m keeping my
options open!”

Richie give a horrible humourless laugh.

“You’re always keeping your options open.” Richie says and Eddie draws in a short sharp breath.
“Don’t you ever get bored of playing it so fucking safe? Yeah, I wanted it to be our show, I wanted
a lot of things but I’m tired of fighting you for every inch. You want to keep the world at arm’s
length, go ahead. Leave. Because I can’t keep playing this game with you forever, I’m so fucking
tired Eddie.”

When he stops talking Richie stares at him, breathing hard and Eddie can’t bite back, can’t even
think of the words.

Who’s playing games? He wants to say. Who’s keeping who at a distance?
Richie is watching him, wide eyed, and already Eddie can see the regret on his face. If Eddie snapped back, said something worse or at least louder this could be just another fight. They would yell and then make up a little later and all of the parts in between would be forgotten. But Richie is right; this game isn’t working anymore.

Eddie is tired too. It’s been five years after all.

“We can talk about this later.” He says in a small clipped voice. “Tomorrow. After we get out.”

Richie looks like he wants to protest but he’s caught off-kilter, disarmed. He doesn’t have a playbook for this either.

A horrible silence falls between them, worse because they’re never silent like this, ever. They’re still sitting against the wall but now there’s an arm’s length between them and Eddie feels cold without Richie’s arm over his shoulder, but colder still because somehow this situation has gone from bad to fucking abysmal.

Eddie closes his eyes and pretends to sleep when he can’t stand it anymore, wrapping his arms around his legs and resting his head on his knees.

All this time and he had thought it was Richie setting the pace and Eddie was just jogging to keep up. Richie had found him for the job, Richie was the one who flirted constantly and pushed his way into the empty gaps and corners of Eddie’s world. Eddie had always thought of himself as just along for the ride, happy to go wherever and as far as Richie would take him.

But now a horrible thought is starting to bubble up, the awful possibility emerging that maybe Eddie’s always had a little more control than he thought. Richie pushed and Eddie pulled; that’s how it had always gone, that had felt normal, safe.

Now Eddie remembers or rather recalls things that he’s always known but never looked at too closely.

Like the fact that Richie had used to date people before Eddie’s divorce. The way he drove across town to bring Eddie Vietnamese food from the one place Eddie really liked. The way he stayed late at Eddie’s flat, pretending to help him edit, even when Eddie insisted he worked quicker alone. The way he looked the first time Eddie had mentioned the new guy he was interested in, the way he
had tried to smile and say, *hey that’s great, get your groove on Kraspbak*.

When Eddie had fallen down the hill Richie had kept his hand on Eddie’s arm all the way to the hospital, even though he had been driving, even though they had nearly crashed the car. *Twice.*

What if all this time it hadn’t been circumstance or timing or Richie holding them back but *Eddie*? Just Eddie, not letting himself get the happy ending.

What if he’s already too late to change anything?

It’s around this point that Eddie’s thoughts get muddled and circular and then he’s asleep and dreaming of cold tunnels, dripping in the dark.

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When he wakes up he’s warm all along his side and when he opens his eyes he realises that at some point in the night he and Richie had fallen together again. Richie’s head is slumped at an awkward angle onto Eddie’s shoulder and he’s breathing softly into Eddie’s neck.

Golden daylight is spilling from under the door and Eddie thinks with a savage kind of joy, *Dawn*.

“Rich, Richie, wake up.” Eddie says, shaking him awake.

Richie wakes up with a sort of snort and sits bolt upright, blinking, saying, “Oh shit-so this is still happening then.”

“C’mon, look, look.” Eddie says, scrambling to his feet and hauling Richie up after him. “Daylight, the sun’s come up, we’re getting out of here.”

“Aw, just when I was getting settled in.” Richie says but he grins when they open the door and see the sunlight bathing the corridor. The tension between them has fallen away in the joy of the new morning and Eddie thinks, *when we leave, the minute we get out here I’m saying something, if I*
live through this then I’m going to start living for real.

He looks down and sees the folder at his feet, with Richie’s photo mugshot still poking out of its edges and on impulse picks it up, stashes it inside his jacket. They’ll need the evidence when this is all over.

The corridor is lined with windows and awash in yellow light and Eddie wipes away the dirt on the glass and looks through to the dusty driveway and overgrown grounds and beyond it the sea, a distant line of blue. He can almost feel the wind on his face and he can hear something in the distance like waves but no, it’s getting closer, a rumble, the sound of a car.

“Someone’s coming!” Eddie says, rubbing harder at the glass and beside him Richie actually whoops and punches the air.

“Thank fucking god for ghost tourism!” Richie crows. “If it’s Bill I’ll kiss him. I’ll kiss anyone; I’ll kiss a fucking cop at this point.”

“You’ll get shot.” Eddie tells him but he’s grinning back until he sees the vehicle trundling into view and suddenly it’s as if his blood has turned to ice.

It’s a dark van and the windows are tinted but Eddie can read the license plate even from the second floor. He can see the scratches along the side from when Richie had tried to parallel park and the stupid Baby on Board sticker on the side, the same one they picked up in a gas station three years ago.

Eddie realises that the sun is in the wrong place. It isn’t rising at all, it’s setting, and he looks down at his watch and sees, 7:45.

“No, no, no.” He whispers in rising horror and Richie looks at him in confusion.

“What’s wrong? Are we getting a parking ticket?” He asks and Eddie just points at the window.

Outside, two people are getting out of the van, one tall and lanky, the other one short and nervous, glancing up at the house.

“Fuck, fuck, that’s me.” Richie says, staring out of the window, slack jawed, “That’s you Eddie.”
Eddie can’t even speak, the seasick lurching feeling hitting him all at once, crushing down on him, leaving him breathless.

“Eddie.” Richie says and he’s talking to the figure outside the window craning his head up to look up at the house, squinting against the dying light. “EDDIE! HEY, EDDIE!”

“They can’t come in. If they come in this all starts over again.” Eddie hears himself say, as if distantly, from down a tunnel and then he’s turning and sprinting down the hall, skidding around the corner.

He can hear Richie shouting after him, but he can’t stop, he can’t let them come in, if they go through the door it’s all over. He takes the stairs two at a time, nearly falling before he grabs the bannister. It’s very dark in the stairwell, there are no windows here, but his feet remember the way.

It takes nearly five flights of stairs before he realises that something is wrong, that he should have reached the ground floor by now. Ten more flights and he’s slowed down to nearly a crawl. He can’t hear Richie’s voice behind him anymore. He can’t hear anything except his footsteps.

When it’s clear he’ll never reach the bottom, he turns around and starts to climb, counting the steps in his head. He reaches seventy and the stairway still extends in front of him, wrapping around like a snake.

Eddie stops and grasps the banister tight and drags on his inhaler. The sound is loud and rasping in the dark and he suddenly realises just how truly *fucked* he is. No light, no way up or down or out. No Richie.

He keeps going anyway, at first quickly and determined, expecting at any moment to burst out onto the second floor. Then his pace slows as his energy begins to sap and then for a while Eddie thinks he’ll go insane from the endless motion; the mechanic plodding steps.

Then he tries to out-think it somehow, trick the staircase by doubling back quickly and without warning. He takes five steps up and then scurries down and around the bend. It doesn’t work but he keeps going down anyway because it's less tiring, trying not to think of hamsters in the wheel and the shadowy figures in Escher paintings.

Finally, after hours or maybe minutes or days, he stops; exhausted, hunched up on a step.
Eddie sees all at once, a life here on this eternal staircase, walking up and down these endless steps, going nowhere.

Something flutters from his jacket pocket; Richie’s mugshot and Eddie peers at it in the gloom and laughs despite himself, even though his throat is raw from shouting Richie’s name.

He wonders if Richie is looking for him, cursing at him, calling him an idiot. He wonders if Richie is frightened and trapped, just like Eddie.

*What do you call a ghost comedian?* He remembers Richie saying, maybe in this exact spot. *Dead funny!*

Jazz hands.

Eddie wonders if maybe Richie is dead, if maybe they both are. Maybe they crashed on the motorway on the way over here and this is just purgatory. In which case, it’s not so bad really; or it wouldn’t be if Eddie wasn’t so alone.

Eddie looks at the Richie in the photograph, the gaunt empty face and wonders what happened to make him look like that.

He pulls out the folder and it’s too dark to read so he gets out the camera and uses the light to read. He’s at maybe 20 percent battery now. Not long but Eddie’s always been a fast reader.

There’s a patient intake form which is very basic; a barebones account of Richie’s health, the date of his admittance, the reason. A note scrawled at the bottom reads, *Appears to be experiencing some form of Post-Traumatic Stress. Ask about the nightmares*, and then bizarrely, as in in afterthought, *Clown?*

It’s signed off; *Attending, A.Wilkes.*

There’s a short newspaper clipping: *LA Comedian Richie ‘Trashmouth’ Tozier In Rehab After Drunk Driving Crash.* This doesn’t say much but the dates are all wrong; if this was true then Richie would have never quit comedy when he did, never have come out.
The only thing left in the folder is a single sheet of paper, torn at the edges, as if ripped from some larger notebook.

Eddie squints at it and it’s some kind of transcript, incomplete but still legible. He squints in the light and reads;

A.W: So tell me about these dreams again. You say you’ve been having them for a year now.

R.T: Ever since Derry. Has it been a year? Who gives a shit anyway? What do dreams have to do with my drinking?

A.W: I’ll thank you not to use that kind of language Mr Tozier. It’s not polite. And I think it’s important to understand the root of your problem. We’re all about that here at the Overlook.

R.T: Look. I’m just another celebrity who went off the rails. It’s the rock and roll lifestyle. I made a mistake, now I’m paying for it, simple as that. I don’t need psychoanalyzing. Can’t you just tell me it’s all my parents fault and we’ll call it even?

A.W: I’m not a psychoanalyst, I’m a therapist. And I disagree, Mr Tozier. You’re no celebrity.

R.T: Ouch.

A.W: You’re no celebrity off the rails, I was going to say. I believe that your problem runs much deeper. Tell me, you grew up in the town of Derry correct?

R.T: Born and raised in that shithole. What about it?

A.W: Language. I’ve been doing some research. You say you were raised in Derry and returned there last year correct. For a reunion. That’s correct isn’t it?

R.T: It’s not important. It’s got nothing to do with the crash.

A.W: That’s not what you told the first responders. You were quite talkative when you were pulled
out of the car I understand. Though that may have been the alcohol, I suppose. Or perhaps the pills.

R.T: What is this? I thought you would be giving me the twelve steps and telling me to try meditation or something.

A.W: Are you aware of the disappearances last year in Derry? It’s not far from here you know. Quite a few children. A mental patient. Bowers I think was the name.

R.T: What you think I killed them? You think I’m a secret serial killer and I couldn’t live with the guilt?

A.W: Do you know anyone by the name of Edward Kaspbrak? He was last seen in Derry a year ago- his wife is still looking for him. Did you know that?

R.T: No.

A.W: No you didn’t know that or no you didn’t know him?

R. T: No as in this bullshit interview is done. I’m done. Turn off the tape.

A.W: I only ask Mr Tozier because of the name you keep calling in your sleep. We do keep notes you know. Did you know Mr Kaspbrak was in Derry last year? Were you acquainted? Did you know he was missing?

R.T: Eddie isn’t missing he’s fucking dead, he’s dead. Turn the tape off, this is over.

A.W: There’s no need to shout. If you-

R.T: Turn the fucking tape off.

Recording Ends Here.
In the stairwell Eddie sits and thinks, wondering vaguely how he died; in a way it doesn’t seem important.

In another world he’s dead in Richie’s hometown. He’s dead and Richie ends up here.

In this world Eddie is alive but Richie’s still alone in this fucking place, still searching.

Another world, another life and it’s still just a big tragedy. It’s not fair, it’s not right but it can still change. The cycle can be broken. It has to be. There has to be a way. Or the two of them will keep running in circles forever, parallel lines that never quite meet.

Unless. Unless….

There’s still enough power in the camera so Eddie takes a breath and finally, after all this time, turns it around and puts himself in the frame. He hits the record button and then it’s just him, talking to the unblinking eye.

“So. If you find this, things probably aren’t great.” He begins and then tries to think of where the fuck to go from there.

“I might be dead. Or just missing. Or you might be dead but I guess you won’t be watching then. I hope you get out. I mean, I hope we both get out but in case we don’t and this is all you find of me, I want you to know…” Eddies says and then winces because he hates that he’s doing this to a camera and not Richie’s face.

“I know you’re gonna think this is a Blair Witch project rip off. But I was never good at telling the truth. Not to you anyway. Not to your face.” Eddie says and then takes a breath. “I don’t think I have asthma. I’m proud of the show- it’s the best thing I’ve done with my life. Also, I love you- so that’s three truths right there. I was thinking about the job offer but only because I couldn’t stand it anymore, being around you every day and not being with you. You make me so angry Rich; I get so pissed off by you but I also think maybe you make me feel more alive than anything else ever
has. That’s all, I guess. I’m sorry I’m such a coward. I should have told you. So that’s what this is; a confession. I’m in love with you asshole. It’s been a long time now. Maybe ever since I met you. Maybe before that. So yeah. Sorry.”

He stops and looks into the camera and can’t think of anything else to say.

It’s funny, the truth isn’t that complicated after all. It feels like exhaling.

He turns off the camera and tucks it back in the case around his neck. Maybe they’ll find it on his body and play the tape at the police station. That would be embarrassing but at least they might show it to Richie.

Eddie stands up and looks down the hole in the centre of the stairwell.

He’s been circling around it, up and down for what feels like forever. Now he clambers up onto the bannister and looks down, into the gaping black hole. He could fall forever. He could fall for three stories and break his back. Either way, he has to do something.

Eddie steps forward into empty space and-

*Onto the floorboards.*

They’re solid under his feet but around him there’s nothing, just darkness in every direction, stretching out forever. Except…Except not just nothing because ahead of him is a door, floating in the black.

Eddie walks towards it, and the floorboards are always there under his feet, but he can’t hear the sound of his own footsteps; he can’t even hear himself breathing.

The only noise comes from beyond the door, soft muffled sounds like pain, like broken loss.

“Richie.” Eddie tries to call but his lips form the word soundlessly, everything is silent here, so he holds out his hand and pushes open the door.
The wood feels rough and grainy under his hands, it feels solid and real and it swings open for him and Eddie steps through, into a room he recognizes. It’s the same rusted bedframe, the same broken window and beyond it the same rusted bathtub. There’s something on the bed now, a huddled shape under a white sheet and next to it, sitting on the dirty floor with his head in his hands is Richie.

“Hey Rich.” Eddie says softly.

Richie jerks up at the sound of his voice and then stares at him wildly from behind his glasses. His mouth falls open and a strange, shocked noise comes out, almost a whimper.

For a horrible moment Eddie thinks that maybe he’s come back wrong, maybe he’s a decaying corpse or translucent or something and he looks down at his body but it’s just him, dirty and cold but solid.

“Do I look that gross?” He asks, “What’s under the sheet?”

He takes a step forward, reaching out and then Richie is hauling himself up, making a strange strangled noise and grabbing onto Eddie’s hands, pulling him in close. Richie almost falls and Eddie catches him and then they’re swaying for balance, bound together, as if in some kind of fucked up dance.

“Don’t look, don’t look at it Eds.” Richie says insistently and this close Eddie can see the wetness in his eyes, the ragged look on his face.

“Richie…” Eddie tries to say, staring past his shoulder, at the thing on the bed. It’s hunched and human sized and there are dark stains on the white sheet, a blossoming rose of blood in the centre.

“It’s not real, I thought it was but it’s not, you’re here now, it was just a trick.” Richie tells him and Eddie reaches out a shaking hand and rips the sheet away, even as Richie tries to stop him.

Underneath there is nothing, just an empty bed frame and Eddie drops the damp soiled sheet onto the floor where it crumples up into a puddle of fabric, a sad empty little ghost.
“I said don’t look you asshole.” Richie says but he looks horribly relieved. “Fuck, can you not just listen to me for once in your life?”

“What was it? What was there?”

“Nothing, it’s nothing, it wasn’t real.” Richie says and he still hasn’t let go, he’s holding on so tightly. “Can you take off your shirt?”

“Um.” Eddie says, stepping back. “What?”

He’s had a lot of fantasies that start a lot like this, but he’s never imagined Richie looking so frightened before.

“I know this sounds creepy especially because I’m technically your boss but please.” Richie says, stuttering, “I just need- I just need to see that-“

“Fine! Fine, Jesus.” Eddie says because Richie looks on the verge of tears. “Also, you’re not my boss.”

“I employed you so…” Richie counters but his heart obviously isn’t in it, he’s staring with a ferocious intensity at Eddie’s hands fumbling over the buttons.

When the last button falls away Eddie is left shivering in the cold and then stops breathing altogether as Richie puts a shaking hand up and touches him, as if checking he’s real.

“Sorry, sorry.” Richie mutters, as if he can’t help himself and his hands are large and warm on Eddie’s skin. “It’s just I, I saw you. I saw you fucking dead Eds, lying on that bed with all this fucking mincemeat in your chest, you weren’t talking, you were so cold and I-I…”

Eddie thinks about dying, about Richie left alone, again and again and again, the same cycle repeating forever. This place, whatever dark force inside it, has them trapped in circles, endlessly making the same mistakes.

*Rats on a wheel*, Eddie thinks and remembers Richie shrugging and saying, *Sometimes you just*
Eddie doesn’t want to make the same mistake anymore and Richie is so close now, he might never be this close again. He must feel how hard Eddie’s rabbit heart is beating under his palm.

Eddie goes up on his tiptoes to kiss him, just the lightest brush of dry lips but it feels like touching a live wire.

Richie freezes against him and for an awful moment Eddie thinks he’s misjudged this somehow, read this situation and the last five years, drastically, disastrously wrong. He’s pulling away to apologise when Richie chases his lips, one hand circling Eddie’s waist to pull him back. When they kiss again it’s hungry, Richie’s stubble rasping against his cheek and Eddie reaches up to bury his hands in Richie’s hair.

Eddie is dizzy from the maddening closeness of it all but it’s not enough, he wants more, so he presses their bodies together, feeling a full body shiver when Richie groans low into his mouth. Richie’s hands are still on Eddie’s skin but they’re slipping lower, tracing hot lines on his stomach and Eddie suddenly realises just how hard he is, just from this.

“Eddie, wait, what…” Richie says, pulling away, lips reddened, eyes dark. “You aren’t like a fucking dream or anthing, right, this isn’t a trick? This is real?”

“This is real.” Eddie says roughly and pulls him back down again, feeling Richie’s glasses getting in the way and the slight edge of pain when their teeth clash and thinking this is everything he ever wanted.

Richie’s hands are everywhere, inside Eddie’s shirt and skimming up his ribs and Eddie needs to make it even so he unzips Richie’s jacket, cursing into Richie’s mouth when it gets stuck, the other hand wrapped tight around the nape of Richie’s neck like he’s holding on for dear life. When he finally works his hands under Richie’s shirt the warmth of his bare skin makes Eddie feel unhinged, desperate for more. He has his leg between Richie’s thighs before he knows what he’s doing, licking his way into Richie’s mouth.

“Whoa, I’m not complaining but you want to do this here?” Richie asks, sounding like it hurts to use his mouth for anything other than kissing. “In this place? You want that?”

“You want to wait another five years?” Eddie growls and then he’s pushing Richie back against
the bedframe and sinking down onto his knees in front of him, because he needs to prove it somehow, how much he wants this, how much he wants Richie, even if the floor is filthy and he’s too fucking old for this.

“Eddie, Eddie, Eddie.” Richie says above him, almost a question, wide eyed and shocked. He still puts his shaking hands in Eddie’s hair when Eddie unzips his jeans, swearing under his breath.

“God, Eddie, fuck, this is crazy, I’ve thought about this so much, you have no idea.” Richie’s rambling and then almost yelps when Eddie reaches into his underwear and takes out his dick.

“God you’re so loud.” Eddie tell him and then grins up at Richie’s dazed expression because he had hoped it would be like this, he had dreamed of it.

Not the setting obviously and preferably with less supernatural intervention but hey, Eddie will take what he can get just as long as Richie keeps making those noises.

“You love it.” Richie says and then, wildly. “I love-“

Eddie takes him into his mouth then, just to shut him up. He can’t hear that, not now or he really will fall apart. And he really, really wants to get off first.

Richie’s dick is a lot bigger than Eddie had let himself imagine, even in his horniest late night jerk off sessions, and Eddie jaw is aching but it feels so good he doesn’t care, if anything it makes him harder and he pushes down the heel of his hand to stave off coming too soon, having this all be over too quick. Richie is whimpering above him, his big hands messing up Eddie’s hair, hips twitching under Eddie’s hands.

Eddie takes it slowly, trying to get the angle right. He’s done this before but never with Richie (and never without a condom, a little voice is screeching at the back of his head, but he can’t even bring himself to care). His mouth is fucking watering from how much he wants it and that helps, makes it easier to tentatively bob his head up and down.

Richie is babbling above him saying, “Oh Jesus, oh fuck, oh shit, you look so good, I can’t believe this is happening, why are we not doing this all the time, you’re so good at it.”

Eddie laughs a little bit, even though he might choke, because he’s definitely not fucking good at it.
and Richie somehow gets harder.

“Eddie, Eddie wait, stop.” Richie says and then curses again when Eddie looks up at him with his mouth still full and stretched.

Eddie pulls off and pants, “What? Is this okay?”

“It’s more than okay, it’s fucking outstanding, I don’t even have the words for it but I’m going to come if you keep going.” Richie says, and Eddie raises an eyebrow at him.

“That’s the point genius.”

“No, I don’t want to, so soon, I mean, I want to see you.” Richie says and then he’s sliding awkwardly down to join Eddie on the floor, which can’t be easy with a dick that hard. “I want to get you off.”

Richie half pulls Eddie onto him until Eddie is basically in his lap, straddling his leg and then he’s got his hands on either side of Eddie’s face, cradling it as he kisses him, wild and messy.

“Wait, gross, I just had your dick in my mouth.” Eddie protests.

“Who cares, it’s my dick.” Richie says in between kissing Eddie’s cheeks, his jawline, biting at his neck.

It’s not painful but it’s going to leave a mark and the thought of wearing Richie’s love bites like a fucking choker, like they’re both teenagers, is so disturbingly hot that Eddie whines in the back of his throat and rubs up against Richie’s leg.

“You need to touch me, Rich, I’m begging you.” He gasps and something in Richie’s expression is almost wolflike at that, like he’s been waiting to hear it.

“I like that, you begging me for it.” Richie says and the line is so porny that Eddie would laugh if it wasn’t so fucking sexy.
“I’m not ah! Begging.” Eddie says and then can’t finish because Richie has his hands in Eddie pants, wrapped around the length of him.

“No? So you don’t care if I stop?” Richie asks and Eddie can just whine into the sweat of Richie’s neck, trying to hide his face.

He’s no virgin, he’s had sex with quite a lot of people at this point, especially in the heady first year after the divorce but something about this makes him feel strung out and untouched, ready to go off like a pop-rocket at the feeling of just Richie’s hand.

“Just, just keep going, just like that.” Eddie gasps, feeling his whole body shaking. “Please.”

“You’re so good, you’re doing so good.” Richie tells him, sounding wrecked. “It’s been so long, I wanted to do this the first time I fucking saw you, I couldn’t stop thinking about your loud fucking mouth-“

Eddie comes abruptly, without warning, crying out into Richie’s shoulder and Richie pets him through the aftershocks, kissing Eddie’s slack mouth until Richie is shuddering apart too, hips lifting off the floor.

For a moment they just lie there, both of them trying to breathe and Eddie suddenly becomes aware of the cold sticky mess between his legs, how hard the floor is, the fact that both of them are basically fully clothed.

Richie’s hands are still on Eddie’s waist, thumb smoothing over the soreness that Eddie realises might just be bruises. The thought suddenly occurs to him that Richie had gotten off untouched, just from grinding up against Eddie’s body and it makes him half crazy, knowing that someone wants him that much.

“I can’t believe we just had sex next to your fucking corpse bed.” Richie says, voice cracking. He’s looking up at Eddie through his glasses as if he’s having an out of body experience, as if he’s still not sure this is real.

“My corpse wasn’t in it when we had sex.” Eddie says and leans down to kiss him again gently, without the desperation, making it count.
Richie kisses back hesitantly, almost sweetly.

“Why now Eddie? After all this time, why here of all fucking places?” Richie asks him, almost whispering.

Eddie leans back, his knees on either side of Richie’s body, to look at him properly. He opens his mouth to answer and then suddenly realises that he can actually see Richie now, even though the flashlight had fallen to the side somewhere during their impromptu make out session.

Somewhere along the way a soft light has filled the room and Eddie’s head snaps up to look at the broken window. For the first time since they entered the house, he can hear the sea.

“It worked.” He says and then he’s grinning down at Richie’s look of confusion. “It fucking worked! We broke the cycle Rich!”

“What the fuck are you talking about?” Richie asks but Eddie is so happy he leans down to kiss him, a victory kiss because they’ve beaten this shitty thing, Eddie can fucking feel it.

“Get up, get up, c’mon.” Eddie says, hauling himself up and over to the window. There’s a plank nailed over it, but it comes away easily under Eddie’s hands, crumbling and dropping bugs.

Eddie doesn’t care though, he’s too fucking ecstatic because there’s of all things, a metal fire escape just outside, one that he knows for sure wasn’t there before but who cares because it’s a way out.

“Holy shit.” Richie says by his ear, still zipping up his fly. “Do you think that thing can support our weight?”

“Who cares?” Eddie says happily. “Let’s fucking try it at least. We die, we die.”

Richie gives him a weird indecipherable look. “Are you sure you haven’t been body-swapped or something?”
Eddie goes first, against Richie’s protests, on the basis that he’s lighter.

“You’ve already fallen, this is my turn.” Eddie tells him and then freezes up when the metal shrieks underneath him and fuck they’re a long way up. He looks back at Richie through the window who looks sickly pale and then give him a tentative thumbs up.

“All good.”

“Yeah okay, don’t jinx it.” Richie frets and then watches, leaning out of the window, until Eddie climbs all the way down and finally jumps the last few metres, landing hard in the scrubby grass.

The feeling of the ground under his fingertips is like a religious experience and Eddie thinks, *Maybe I had it wrong all these years, maybe dirt is fucking amazing.*

Then he shakes off his jacket and a spider falls out of his sleeve and he immediately changes his mind again thinking, *actually no, hot showers are better, hot showers are the fucking best.*

“Yo, are you dead?” Richie calls down, sounding genuinely concerned and Eddie squints up at his head poking out of the distant window.

“I don’t think so- come down already!”

A minute later Richie drops to the ground and handles the recovery much better with his long legs, looking equally gobsmacked to be alive and outside.

“I swear to god if this is some fucked up illusion.” Richie says, staring up at the Sanatorium. “If we drive all the way back to New York and I open my apartment and find I’m back in that fucking room…”
“That won’t happen. This is over.” Eddie says firmly and hopes it’s true. It feels true.

The sky is pink by the time they work their way back to the van and Eddie feels something unlock in his chest at the sight of it. It’s dirtier than it should be, as if it’s been left for weeks not one night and part of Eddie is scared to find out how long they’ve been there for. It starts up alright though and that’s all that really matters.

When Richie climbs into the passenger seat Eddie looks over at him, looking for extra wrinkles, grey hairs, anything to indicate that years had somehow fallen away but he looks the same, normal and somehow perfect.

Richie catches him looking and raises an eyebrow, but Eddie avoids his gaze and starts up the car, trying not to think about the fact he still has Richie’s come on his clothes. He can think about that later, the strange dizzying implications of this new thing between them.

He’s driving too fast he knows but he can’t wait for the Sanatorium to get smaller in his rear window, dwindle down to nothing at all.

They’re both silent until they hit the main road; the minute they see another car they both exhale and Eddie wonders if Richie was as frightened as he was, waiting for the other shoe to drop.

“My watch has started again.” Richie says and then a moment later, “Oh thank fuck I have a connection. Holy shit Eddie it’s Tuesday.”

“What month?” Eddie asks, trying to stay calm and keep his eyes on the road. “What year?”

“Oh my god.” Richie says. “It says here it’s, no this can’t be right…2089?”

“What!” Eddie almost shouts and then he sees Richie’s smirk. “Oh, fuck you. No, actually fuck you, I’m driving.”

“It’s just been three days.” Richie laughs and then sobers up as if hearing himself. “Three whole days. Fuck.”
“It could have been longer. We’re lucky.”

There’s a weird silence from Richie and when Eddie looks over, he’s staring out the window, his knee bouncing in the footwell with a nervous kind of energy.

“About that. How did we get out?” Richie asks. “Was it because we… you know. I mean it happened right after that. What did you mean when you said we broke the cycle?”

Eddie pauses, trying to think how he could possibly explain. It had all seemed so logical in there but now, outside in the sunlight in the safe, normal cradle of their van it was rapidly making less sense.

“I don’t know.” He says. “We needed to do something different, something to break the pattern. I don’t know, Richie, it’s sex magic.”

“Sex magic.” Richie echoes after a pause. He sounds unimpressed. “Was that why you said it worked? Was that the plan all along? That we would fuck our way out?”

He sounds almost angry and Eddie can’t look at him, just clench his hands around the wheel and stare straight ahead at the road.

“I mean it did work didn’t it? We escaped.” He says and then, in a panicked rush. “Look this whole fucking nightmare has just been so fucked up, let’s just say things got weird back there and move on. I don’t want to talk about it anymore. Maybe ever.”

There’s a horrible stretched out silence from the other side of the car and Eddie can’t fucking look at Richie’s face, he can’t, this is all too fucking messy.

“Okay. If that’s what you want.” Richie says in a tightly controlled voice and Eddie realizes with a sickening lurch that he isn’t just talking about all the supernatural bullshit.

The silence after that is so fucking oppressive that eventually Eddie snaps and turns on the radio on just to drown it out. To his intense horror it’s Whitney Houston again, this time singing about how she just wants to dance with somebody, she wants to feel the heat with somebody and it’s so upbeat and out of odds with the atmosphere that Eddie wants to drive into oncoming traffic just to end the moment.
I need a man who’ll take a chance, she croons, and it’s with a sense of massive relief that Eddie sees the gas station sign coming up.

When they pull up Eddie nearly falls out of the van in his haste to escape, muttering something about using the washroom.

Inside he takes maybe the longest piss of his life, enough time to really ponder the logistics of three days without using the bathroom. Then he stands in front of the mirror, examining himself in the dingy truck-stop lighting, thinking, you dipshit, you massive fucking coward.

He splashes his face with cold water and when he looks up, he can see the bruises on his neck from Richie’s mouth. It’s almost enough to make him cry but he still has a full day of driving left. After that Richie will leave and Eddie will have the rest of his life to sit and call himself an idiot.

The thought is almost comforting.

Outside it’s cold and grey and the gas station looks very bleak with just their van parked off to the side. It must have rained last night because in the early morning light the neon signs are reflected in the puddles, strange pools of colour in all the concrete. Eddie shivers as he picks his way across them, feeling small and dirty and old. He’s aware that Richie might be watching him through the tinted windows, and it makes him self conscious.

It occurs to him that maybe the whole of their relationship is somehow present in this moment, five years of watching each other from behind a layer of glass.

He’s almost disappointed when he opens the car door and sees that Richie’s attention isn’t on
Eddie at all, that he absorbed by something in his lap.

The camera.

Eddie had held onto it, all that time, tossed it casually aside the minute they had made their escape. It must have had just a little charge left, just enough for Richie to watch back.

Eddie realises what’s happening at the same moment that Richie looks up at him, white faced and trembling.

“Richie…” Eddie begins uncertainly, still standing outside the van in the cold.

“Get in.” Richie says in this weird clipped voice. “Close the door.”

Eddie does so, wondering if this is how he dies after all, at a pit stop in the middle of nowhere.

“Listen- “, he tries to say but Richie cuts him off, cradling the camera in his hand like it’s something precious.

“You’re a massive asshole.” Richie says and Eddie considers this and nods slowly.

“Is that it?” He asks and Richie’s hands twitch around the camera.

“No, that’s not fucking it.” Richie says. “You’re an asshole and I love you and I can’t believe you gave me a blowjob in a haunted house before admitting you have fucking feelings.”

Eddie stays very, very still, barely breathing.

“You watched it all?” He asks but he knows the answer from Richie’s face.

“You’re in love with me?” Richie counters and his voice is wobbly, like he can hardly say it out
loud. “How long?”

“You know how long. You watched the tape.”

“You said since we met. But that’s not right, you were married then. We didn’t even know each other.”

Eddi shrugs helplessly and wishes Richie wouldn’t rub it in.

“I don’t know what you want me to fucking say. I move fast.” He says and Richie looks like he’s been hit over the head with a bat.

“You don’t.” He chokes out. “You don’t move fucking fast you dick.”

Then he leans over the space between them and pulls Eddie into him, muttering, you stubborn dumbass, all this time in between hot kisses. It’s all Eddie can do just to hold onto him and try to keep up, try not to pass out from the intensity and kiss him back.

“You never made a move either.” He accuses when they both need to breathe.

“Eddie, Eds, “Richie says despairingly, holding Eddie’s face between his hands and looking into his eyes. “I flirt with you constantly. I spend all my time with you. I spent years getting hard whenever our knees fucking brushed.”

“I thought you were just like that.”

Richie laughs low and their foreheads bump slightly. “Do you see me flirting with Bill? Stan?”

“Stan’s married.”

“So were you, dickhead.” Richie says and it sounds like the sweetest of pet names in that tone.
“Not for years!” Eddie protests. “I’m just saying, you had a window of opportunity.”

“We nearly made out one time and you didn’t talk to me for a week.” Richie points out and now Eddie hears him say it that is kind of incriminating. “And then you were dating other people, what was I supposed to do?”

“So you liked me back then? I wasn’t imagining it?” Eddie asks and is annoyed by how almost shy he sounds.

“I liked you for a long time before that.” Richie says. “Since you told me we had to keep it professional. Another red flag by the way.”

Eddie blinks and then kisses him again because he’ll have time to digest the huge scale of this miscommunication at some point but later, after he’s had a chance to enjoy the feeling of Richie’s touching him a little longer.

“So do I still have a chance? Have I missed the boat?” He asks later, when the windows are all fogged up and he’s practically sharing Richie’s seat.

This is very sleazy, making out in a van at a nearly empty gas station; it’s not even 10 AM yet but Eddie feels like they could be in the fucking Ritz for how good he feels. They could be in Tahiti on the beach.

“I don’t know.” Richie says, pulling away from where he’s been adding to Eddie’s now impressive collection of hickies. “We do work together. I don’t want it getting messy.”

“That’s a shame, “Eddie says matching his serious tone. “Because I’m not planning on quitting anytime soon.”

“Yeah?” Richie says and then his face lights up. “The fans are gonna have a field day. Can I kiss you on camera?”

Eddie tries to make a face because that is never happening, not ever, but he’s too happy to scowl properly.
“They should be more concerned with the fact we actually found evidence of the paranormal.”

Richie winces. “Actually, we didn’t. Or at least we don’t have the evidence. That’s what I was looking for when I found your uh, love note. It’s all just static. We got nothing, nada, zip.”

Eddie sits back in Richie’s lap, briefly distracted by the little gasp Richie makes at the movement.

“All of that for nothing?” Eddie says, aghast. “No endless staircase, no mug shot of you, no corpse me?”

Richie shudders. “Yeah I’m not too sad about that last part. It’s okay though, I mean I wouldn’t say we got nothing out of it.”

He illustrates this by grabbing at Eddie’s ass and Eddie rolls his eyes but gets turned on despite himself.

“I wonder what happened to them. The other you and me.” He wonders out loud. “I never found out how I died.”

“It doesn’t matter.” Richie says fiercely. “It doesn’t matter because it didn’t happen. Not to us. You’re alive and I’m not in fucking rehab and Stan is at home probably trying to get Patsy to watch the spelling bee. And we’re together. Here.”

Eddie thinks about it, the things he had seen in the Sanatorium and maybe it will bother him for the rest of his life, the *whys* and *hows* and *whats* of it all. But in the end Richie’s right. It didn’t end up that way. And it wouldn’t, not now, not when they had the rest of their lives.

“Is that worth more than solid evidence of paranormal activity?” He asks.

He’s joking but Richie doesn’t laugh, just kisses him hard and says, “Yeah. Yeah, I fucking think so.”

So maybe that’s alright then. For once, Eddie doesn’t particularly want to understand or analyse, he just wants to sit here in a car, making out. He might just do that for the rest of his life.
Fuck off ghosts, he thinks and gets back to the kissing.

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