those pieces of you it feels the easiest to lose

by quixoticquest

Summary

Bill Denbrough gets accosted by Stan Uris on his summer book tour, who's supposed to be dead going on a year. Richie Tozier encounters some rando on a dating site who looks an awful lot like Eddie Kasprak, right down to the scar on his cheek. Beverly Marsh is just trying to enjoy her new life with Ben Hanscom without any bloody accidents, or their freshly unclesed best friend tagging along. Mike Hanlon, desperate to prove he's not a madman, can't let go of Derry or the friends he had to bury along the way.

And so the Losers Club converges on Derry again to find some more tokens and make sure that fucking clown stays fucking dead once and for all.

Alternatively titled, IT: The Final Chapter

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
Summer, 2017

Miami proved outmatched in terms of heat and humidity, a whole month before summer proper, bound to get worse as May ended and June began. Starting in the southeastern United States while it was still spring, and certain media outlets were willing to pay more for first grab interviews, had seemed like a harmless idea right up until Bill landed at Louis Armstrong International in New Orleans, where the walk down the jet bridge gave the first taste of the sweltering soup beyond the air-conditioned airport. It had been like for a bit more than a week; Bill could hardly stand it. The thick air and languid heat didn't suit his New England blood.

The post-modern coffee shop he'd been given directions to was just cool enough to count as a reprieve from the weather, drinking his cold brew from a glorified sippy cup since straws had been outlawed (save the turtles and all that), a newspaper spread out flat in front of him. Bill was making an attempt to keep from writing for a while, and his laptop proved only to be a trigger. Technically, it was his first self-inflicted break in years. Getting into the mindset required to dig up some morbid story for the general public to consume was a lot harder with the knowledge that some of that stuff wasn't always a product of the imagination.

The chime on the door rang, and Bill glanced up, as he had for the last three or four customers. Instead of glancing back down into his paper, though, he stood to his full height, leaping out of his seat to meet a grinning Mike Hanlon.

"I was just reading about you," Bill teased, holding up his newspaper with the article he had dog-eared ten minutes ago: "Florida man arrested for tossing gator into Wendy's".

Mike laughed and played along. "In my defense, he really wanted a Frosty."

Before he could even retort, Bill was scooped up and yanked into a Hanlon bear hug that left him warm and pleasant and in no desperate need for a chiropractor. It had been months since Bill last saw any of his friends and somehow, miles and miles away in a sea salt city, Mike still smelled like home. Which was a lot different from smelling like Derry, for that matter.

They exchanged proper hi-how-are-yous and paused for Mike to get a cup of coffee and settle in. He was wearing a salmon-colored shirt with short sleeves and turquoise feather patterns that might have been ridiculous if they weren't in Miami, but was still a little ridiculous given the cream and beige colors Bill was used to. Looked more like it had come out of Richie Tozier's wardrobe. At the very least, Mike looked more comfortable than Bill felt, still in his starched button down from his interview that morning (though he had ditched the jacket and rolled up his sleeves).

"I saw you on TV this morning," Mike said just as Bill was thinking about it. "Everyone loves the new book, huh."
"So the talk show hosts are paid to say," Bill clarified, rolling his eyes as he sipped his coffee. "But my publicist said everyone’s liking the ending, at least."

He griped good-naturedly about the interview and the book tour so far before the inevitable question came up:

"Are you doing okay, Big Bill?"

He of course knew Mike didn't mean in general, but about the questions on every TV personality’s tongue, news plastered across every tabloid in America since he signed the divorce papers. The only reason it was such a media explosion was because of Audra and her A-list star status.

"I'm fine, really," Bill answered. "It went down a lot easier than they're saying it did. We just sort of realized we wanted different things."

It was the truth in most aspects, but he wasn't sure at this point whether all the *Ever since Derry you've been different* he'd heard from his now ex-wife over the last six months he spent with her was worth sharing or specifying yet. Not until he was absolutely sure Mike wouldn't take pity on him.

"Besides, both our careers got a little boost, so no worries," he added pleasantly enough, twiddling with his cup since all that's left was ice and diluted coffee.

"When does your tour end?" Mike asked.

Bill thought a moment to remember the details he was mostly letting his publicist worry about. "End of the summer. I'm working up the east coast next and then taking a break before I get to the Midwest and west coast."

"So you'll be free, then?"

"Maybe. Why do you ask?"

"I've just - well I've been thinking." Mike's fingers worried over the lip of his lid. He seemed a little tense, in a way that made Bill worry for a moment that something might be wrong. "Just thinking, wondering, really. That if you had time you would want to explore something with me."

Then, leaning close as if they ought not to be overheard, Mike murmured, "It's about the ritual."

Bill, who thought he wouldn't have to hear about this ever again nine months since *the incident*, sighed. "Mike."

"I know! Just hear me out. I've been thinking," he said again. "I don't think it’s just designed to fail. That doesn't make sense! Why would it even exist if it's not going to work?"

"Maybe you just misunderstood the purpose of it." Bill shrugged. He didn't want this conversation to go on very long. Sometimes those images, of crows and comets and creatures, still kept him up at night in his lonely post-divorce apartment.

"I don't think I did though. Look. I know it was supposed to work. I know we believed hard enough. It had to be something else. I think it was the artifacts, Bill. They might have been wrong."

Bill didn't respond immediately, caught between reluctance and consideration. In an effort to keep his hands busy he fiddled with his newspaper. His thumb, damp with condensation from his cup, printed dark ovals along the edge of the gray paper.
Mike went on. "It's just a theory. I'm not sure if everyone found the right token, but there is one thing we can say for certain; one of us wasn't able to go out and search on their own."

Bill wracked his brain - Mike, himself, Beverly, Ben, Richie, Eddie. They all did exactly as Mike told them, and followed through exactly as Mike said. What minutia detail could someone have forgotten?

Unless it wasn't a minutia. And he was forgetting someone. "You mean Stanley," Bill uttered.

"I know I said I think he led us to his token but I'm not so sure anymore. If he couldn't be there physically to find it then we never could have guaranteed it would work. It wasn't enough to feel Stan with us, he had to be there."

"Well then it was out of your control," Bill replied, easing back in his seat. "If Stan couldn't be there, then it could never have worked the way you intended in the first place."

"I know," Mike answered hastily. "But I'm wondering, if Stan's token is still in Derry-"

"It doesn't matter, Mike. Stan's dead."

It wasn't until after it left Bill's mouth that he feels a curl of guilt in the pit of his stomach. He can't help but think, he sounded just like his dad.

Mike schooled himself well enough but there's a twitch in his brow that betrayed everything. Bill had been quickly and quietly shutting down conversations like this over the phone for the last several months. He wished he had shut this one down a little sooner, with Mike and the dark regret swimming in his eyes that Bill related so painfully to. Simply speaking, Mike had lured his friends into a fatal situation and two of them hadn't come out alive. You didn't need a psychology degree (or even a taste of the blame) to know how he felt about what had happened. Who was at fault.

All it would have taken was for Bill, or Richie, or anyone to say It's not your fault. But whenever the thought struck Bill, his tongue stuck behind his teeth. As if invoking the actual tragedies would have him despairing all over again.

"I know," Mike admitted. He took a deep, even breath. "I know, Bill. But, if we were to go back to Derry, and find it. Just burn it and lay the whole thing to rest. Maybe even in effigy."

The last thing Bill wanted to do was go back to Derry. He was surprised he didn't have to convince his publicist to steer clear for the book tour, and had landed a cozy magazine interview and book signing in Portland two hours away instead. He wasn't sure he could make an exception, even for Mike (or Stanley, for that matter).

"It's just," Mike tried, shrugging a little. He seemed to be consciously reining in his volume, trying not to seem eager (obsessive, mad), "something I've been thinking about."

"I understand; but it doesn't matter," Bill said. He clutches his cup in his hands, prepared to grab another serving to lengthen this conversation and drag it out of the miserable ditch it had rolled into. He wanted to know where Mike was working and how he liked Miami and where he had gotten that funky shirt.

"It just doesn't matter, you know? We defeated IT, and set everything right. A happy ending with a few lost causes but that's the most any of us can ask for in real life, you know? Besides, there's only one person who could possibly remember all the important little objects in Stan's life, and it's not you, or me. It's Stan."
Theological afterlife hypotheses aside, the last thing Stanley Uris had ever expected, when he set his cheek against warmed porcelain, was to come to in a frozen repository. For a moment, he did not recognize the sensation of existence. The darkness was absolute, cloying, tangible. A conscious breath dragged jagged shards of ice into his permafrost core, caught on and impaling every edge and outcrop and crag, a brisk breeze plucking at dried grass. His body seemed to inflate, limbs responding to cognizant commands in staccato procession until a half panicked stretch of his hands above his head popped the lid free.

A stifling silence was broken by a burst of air grating past his vocal chords, various humming tones, and the whisper of air vents, with an occasional chirp striking his ear drums with all the precision and force of a needle taped to the end of a baseball bat. The sudden absence of a barrier offered escape and a change in gravitational pull, to which Stan fell victim the moment his kicking and wriggling carried him over the edge, and thus backwards onto his elbows and shoulder.

He landed like a string of garlic on the hard tile floor and laid there for a long moment, remembering how to process sensory input. Pain was a quick and easily absorbed memory, radiating from his blunted corners as he rolled onto his back to stare at the ceiling, contemplating the implications of his peripheral surroundings. Chilled as he was, it took a startlingly long time to realize that he was naked, and Stan fought a disobedient vessel literally tooth and nail to get upright, rifling through various drawers and cabinets in search of anything.

Sheets, gloves, various tools and utensils the purpose of which he lacked the time and emotional energy to contemplate. Too much of him was already occupied by the paramount task at hand, and every passing moment was one less moment he had to accomplish everything. Footsteps sounded on the far side of stainless double doors and just as a shadow fell across the frosted windows, Stan ducked down behind a rolling cabinet.

"Doctor Tane's not in 'til tomorrow," a feminine voice sounded outside the door, while the brunet's heart bounded in his chest, seeming to vibrate his ribs even as it tried to close up his throat.

"Where the fuck's Dave?" The swinging door stopped short of actually opening, and Stan leaned forward enough to see around his cabinet. Only one silhouette was visible, the profile turned over his shoulder to speak to the other.

"Called in, Lynn's in the lab but we're waiting to hear back about a loaner from Zone 2." The answer earned an impatient snort, and the silhouette vanished back the way it had arrived, words echoing back toward him without any sense of the individual words. Heart still hammering, Stan shuffled on his hands and feet toward the wall and stood, keeping himself as out of sight as possible as he peeked through the resulting gap in the rubber insulation that lined the doors.

The corridor outside was empty by the time he risked a better look. Floor and ceiling tiles nearly the same shade of not quite white, separated by yellow painted cinder block walls. Stairs at the far end were concrete, the gray lines broken by stripes of black anti-slip tape. Turning over his shoulder, Stan stared down the fluorescent lined hallway to see a red EXIT sign over another set of double doors. By sight alone, he could guess they were much heavier, the windows enforced by diamond pattern wires.

Lips pressed into a thin line, he started toward the EXIT, moving with a certainty that belied the utter and absolute exposure of his naked body. Bare feet made barely a sound on the tile, but he was mindful of every step, his pulse seeming to rise with every time his heel touched the raised, filmy
Voices sounded behind him again and Stan startled forward like a rabbit, kicked into a sprint that slid to a halt as he came across another door. The lever handle folded as his hand hit it and a moment later he was closing it behind him, fighting to control his breathing so he could hear if he had been spotted while the darkness closed around him, broken only by the faint line of yellow that made it around the door's edge.

Slowly backing away from the door, he felt something tangle into his hair and nearly collapsed trying to escape it, his arms rising to defend himself only to realize that it was a pull string. It only took a moment of waving his hands wildly in the dark above his head to locate it again, and pulling it offered a bright white bulb that forced his gaze down, squinting against the glare as he glanced around at the apparent broom closet. Two solitary lockers occupied the back wall, along with a mirror and sink that had seen better days.

There wasn't time to hesitate over the morality of theft and necessity. As he pulled open the lock-less locker, Stan was presented with a blast of musty canvas, reminiscent of his Volvo after spending a hot three day weekend in the Everglades waiting for a towing company that took their insurance to answer the phone. When he pulled the mass of dark fabric out and shook it free, Stan was presented with navy coveralls and a cloud of grainy filth that filled the small space much faster than he could stand. Elbow over his nose and mouth for a moment, he could only heave a pained sigh before he surrendered to the closest thing to an option he had found so far.

They were snug in a way that made being naked beneath them extremely uncomfortable, surrounded by the stink of another man's accumulated sweat and many other things. Doing his best not to focus on whether the discoloration was bleach splatter or dried surface crust, he shoved his feet into a pair of black galoshes just inside the door and emerged into the hallway once more, his hand brushing his nose idly.

"Did the power go out?" someone asked, the voice far too close for Stan to hide now as his head twitched up to find a uniformed officer staring at him.

"Shouldn't have," Stan answered, the sound of his voice foreign to his own ears.

"Check the breakers for me? Security says the cameras went out for a couple minutes." An answering nod sent the officer on his way into the morgue, doors swinging behind him, and Stan turned on a heel, heading for the EXIT sign once more. There was no sign warning of an alarm should he break the seal of the doors, though he took a moment to make sure that the heavy latch was the only barrier before opening it and slipping out into a back alley. An ambulance was parked between two squad cars and a dumpster but he was unfettered making his way to the street and then down the sidewalk.

Atlanta sprawled around him in a cacophonous din that he had almost had time to forget. Hazy memories of a cosmic dream he barely recalled having drove his feet forward, the need to travel north like an itch beneath his skin that was only barely kept at bay by action. Without his wallet, his phone, his car, unable to run home to retrieve any of them, Stan wasn't sure that there was room for a plan, but as he turned down Peachtree Street, the train depot caught his attention - the stark contrast of the single story building surrounded on all sides by skyscrapers.

"Fuck," he muttered to himself, and went inside, following the flow of foot traffic down and down and down the stairs until the monochromatic depot opened around him. A massive LED screen offered train departure times and Stan slid his hands into his pockets as he glanced up to read them, regretting it a moment later as he withdrew his hands, lint-lined and slightly sticky.
"Hey, you clockin' in?" a man asked, and it took Stan a moment to realize he was being addressed. Brows risen, he turned to find an older gentleman in an outfit not quite matching his own, mop stick in one hand and an open gate in the other, staring at him expectantly.

"Yeah, you need a hand?" he asked, moving forward to keep the gate from shutting. Much better than trying to shove his way through the fare-gate.

"Nah, I'm almost done. Keys are hung up." Hand lifting in a quick wave, the man shuffled away, pushing his bucket on squeaking wheels. Stan thanked him and let the gate swing shut behind him, glancing around until he found the Maintenance door. A box of lost and found looked promising at first glance, but inside there were more lonely baby shoes than anything else. A wallet with a year-old travel card, a dozen pairs of sunglasses, a pink alligator skin purse with six one dollar bills and an unopened tampon. Nothing to replace his pilfered boots, or rescue him from the scent that was clinging to him, threatening to sink into his flesh.

Well, unless he wanted to blast himself with the Febreze bottle sitting on the metal shelves above him.

Which he did, at the last moment, before finally letting himself out again - bucket, broom, and utility belt of cleaning supplies in hand (cash in the wallet in his pocket). Hoping he didn't look too much like a bad Batman impersonator, Stan snapped the belt into place and kept himself along the walls to avoid interrupting the foot traffic, and headed toward the Northbound platform to wait for his train.

"Northbound Amtrak Crescent Train Number Twenty Boarding Time Ten Minutes Please Proceed to Platform." The automated announcer voice was almost drowned out by the burst of chit-chatting bodies from the opening doors of the recently stopped train. Stan waited like a statue in the park, people parting around him like water around a tree, and when the bulk of them were out of the way, he climbed on as confidently as he could manage. A man in a blue uniform nodded at him, stern expression unchanging, but when it did not result in being asked what he was doing, Stan continued, wandering the length of the train before shutting himself in the bathroom at the end of the last car.

Seating himself on the closed toilet seat, he was surprised to find an Out of Order sign tucked inside the bucket, along with a spray bottle and rag that he had dismissed as part of the image he was presenting, and Stan took a moment to hang it on the outside of the door before turning the lock and settling in for what might be close to a fourteen hour ride.

Efforts to sleep were unsuccessful, jostled by the movement of the train, the turns and curves, the stops and starts as the paused at platform after platform. Over the smell of chemical cleanser and his own stink, Stan caught hints of sea air as they traced the eastern coast. The sign seemed to do the trick. No one bothered him, or even knocked, though footsteps sounded outside the door several times, sometimes accompanied by an impatient sigh or muttered curse. The coveralls became stifling, but with nothing underneath, he was hesitant even to draw the zipper down past his throat. Reaching for the velcro straps at his wrists, Stan paused, his breath held unconsciously while his pulse quickened with the memory of what he might find.

There had been no pain. There was no pain now as Stan unstrapped the wrists and folded the thick sleeves back, and back, until the roll tucked neatly into the crook of his elbow. The wounds were untreated. No stitches, no ointment. Around the edges, his skin had dried and began to crack, but deeper down it remained pink and raw, weeping clear liquid while the blood seemed held at bay by little more than vein membrane. Not exactly something he wanted to find out he had exposed to someone else's body filth for the last few hours.

The first aid kit mounted on the wall above the toilet offered him a chance to cleanse the open gashes, and enough gauze and loose weave bandages to seal them up for now.
It wasn't until they were pulling into the station at Washington DC that Stan realized he needed to switch trains. Number 20 was announced as Southbound the moment the doors opened for passengers, and it was a scramble to get himself out, everything put away, and his out of order sign back in the bucket before jumping off the train. No one spared him a glance as he crossed Union Station, the cathedral ceiling echoing every sound while he rushed to the departure screen searching for the next leg. Most of the trains stopped in Boston as well, but just as he was about to surrender to the necessity of another transfer, Stan spotted the business express, and had to resist sprinting to catch it.

"We're departing," an usher told him two seconds before he set foot on the still open door of the last car.

"They told me to unclog a toilet," Stan answered, his tone stubborn and dry.

"Well, we're departing."

"Well, then we better be home by five. My wife is making a roast."

The usher rolled his eyes and waved him away, and Stan continued forward, his pulse racing loud in his ears as he latched the bathroom door behind him again. This time as he sat on the closed seat, he rubbed his hands through his hair, scraping fingertips down over his face while he fought exhaustion and despair. It was only a few more hours to Portland. But that left the question of how to close the hundred and fifty mile gap from Portland to Derry.

The last place that he ever wanted to go again, and yet Stan could go nowhere else. Taking himself off the board had seemed like the best chance he could offer them, knowing better than to think he might actually survive a second encounter. The scars dotting the edges of his hairline and jaw were reminder enough, even if he had spent a large chunk of his life not quite noticing them, or not caring to recall where he had gotten them. Patricia thought a few of them were mere freckles, and just the thought of her offered a phantom memory of her fingertips tracing them, before she leaned forward to press a warm kiss to his cheek.

What would she think, he wondered, when they phoned to say that his corpse had gone missing? His arms had started to ache, throbbing with the beat of his pulse and stinging with the cleanser residue and ointment. And his eyes stung with moisture while Stan fought to keep his breathing under control.

"Portland at Thompson's Point now unloading. Amtrak wishes our guests a safe and comfortable journey. Please proceed with caution to the platform and have a wonderful day." The tinny voice drew Stan from a nap he had not realized he was taking. Sluggish now, he was slow to gather his things and exit the train long after everyone else had left. Portland's train station was familiar in a way that he had not anticipated, a memory of kissing his mother goodbye on the platform darting across his conscious thoughts as he made his way to the exit. After spending so many hours in a bathroom, he was struck by the sudden necessity to use one, and Stan swore quietly before turning himself toward the restrooms near the front lobby, just beside yet another door marked Maintenance.

At this rate, the word was starting to mean oasis.

Inside there was a row of urinals and two stalls. Stan closed himself inside one and tried not to be additionally annoyed by the booming voice of a man who needed to learn how to hang up the phone before deciding to relieve himself. Worse yet, the stall door beside him opened and shut, with the seat slapping into position as well, all echoing in tandem with his endless talking. He could hardly focus on the words, let alone make them out individually from the snare drum reverb offered by the too-tall ceilings and tin doors. A plastic crinkle joined the din and Stan shook himself to hurry along, zipping
the coveralls back up and slamming open his door.

Only to catch sight of a black zippered garment bag draped hanger first over the other stall's door. Bending a bit, Stan glanced at the shoes underneath, and found them pointed out, the trousers puddled mid-calf. Throat closing for a moment with the quickening of his pulse again, the brunet reached for the hanger's hook, slowly, hesitant.

As his fingers closed around it, Stan yanked, and fled the bathroom entirely - abandoning his bucket and broom. Shouting chased him out the door and he took a hard, hard left, thinking it a miracle that he found the Maintenance door lever unlocked. A moment later, he was inside, his back pressed against the door even as he turned the lock on the knob, and gasping in air like he had just escaped death (again). The shouting came through the wall, and then traveled out front to the far side of the door, before fading into the distance.

Hurried, and desperate to be out of the coveralls, Stan unzipped the bag to see what he had taken before stripping himself. A heavy pocket in the front of the zippered bag dragged it down, revealing a box that contained cufflinks and a watch in matching silver, inlaid with white stones. Whether the man he had robbed was rich enough for them to be diamonds, Stan may never know. The suit was far too big, but the belt was enough to keep the trousers at his waist, the shoulders broad and sleeves long. At best, it might look like he had recently lost some weight, and the brunet tried not to be too hyper aware of the fact that he had not bathed for several days, had been traveling in barely-kempt train bathrooms, wearing an unwashed second hand onesie.

When he worked up the courage to venture out, shaking himself with a deep and thready breath, Stan was quick to cross the station lobby and vanish out the front door into a crowded sidewalk. That crowd dispersed by the time he reached the end of the block and turned a corner. A taxi slowed in the street beside him, the passenger window open so that the driver could shout at him, and the brunet paused just long enough to consider it before he stepped off the curb, bending down to speak through the window.

"Can you take me to Derry?" he asked, his hand unfolding around the watch in offering. A long, uncertain look preceded the man's answer, but when it revealed itself as an excited smile and hurried nod, Stan sagged with relief, and climbed into the back seat before finally handing the thing over.

Two hours. Without even a reason to take the long way, since fare meant nothing on this trip. The passenger wondered idly if the actual cost of the thing would even cover it, whether the driver would be able to monetize it. For a moment, he wondered if he would be abandoned in some cornfield instead of taken to his destination. But as they sailed past the Welcome to Derry sign on the two lane highway, Stan felt a nauseating cocktail of relief and sheer terror.

It was gone. Apparently. A crowd had gathered outside the collapsed Niebolt House, to watch the firefighters search the wreckage. There was no smoldering, only the half settled dust of an aging, abandoned building. The ambulance was empty, the Losers utterly absent, and Stan turned away from the sight - unable to take comfort in it.

"Your Call Could Not Be Completed As Dialed. Please Hang Up The Phone And Tr--" Slamming the pay phone into its cradle, Stan bit back a swear, uncertain whether he was remembering the number he had barely glanced at wrong or it simply wasn't in service anymore. Six people in the world that he needed here to complete his task, to finish this once and for all, and he suddenly didn't know how to find a single one of them.

They were supposed to be here.

It crossed his mind that they might be, yet. With the settled ruins of the Niebolt house offering little
more than a sunken scab over the infection that had fed off of Derry for centuries.

That was merely unacceptable, though. Stan had not removed himself at play only to find out that he was the last piece standing. Something was wrong. Something was off. And if he didn't do something about it, no one would. Main Street carried him past the consignment shop where a single six inch television offered the news in flickering color. Bangor was talking about the house collapse on W-A-B-I, which was enough reason for him to stop, just to see if there was anything more to be heard.

Henry Bowers found dead after escaping his mental institution and murdering an orderly. The only information of relevance, and not even for what he needed, as memories of the psychotic asshole bloomed in his mind.

But it was enough. The phone number may not be right but Stan knew. He had a feeling. The Losers weren't done yet.

Marching with a bit more purpose, he stopped in Androscoggin Bank, approaching the counter with his best smile, intent on reclaiming funds that had been denied to him for five years after a brash and vulgar Bar Mitzvah speech, that he had failed to get ahold of upon turning eighteen after the fog of forget had settled over his memories of childhood.

"Can I make a withdrawal without my debit card?" he asked, the moment the blonde behind the counter had finished her parroted pleasantries.

"Sure, if you have the last five digits of the account number, the last four of your social, and the PIN number." While she spoke, her hands moved behind her desk before setting a withdrawal slip and pen on the counter between them.

"Excellent."

Chapter End Notes

Here's our attempt at a definitive IT fixit, mostly canon compliant in all the right ways. Because this story was written interactively, some chapters will be posted twice from different perspectives to maintain internal monologues and other important information. You can read both, or one or the other. Trigger warnings will be posted per chapter as well. Thanks for reading!
Chapter Two: Bill

Chapter Notes

Bill's POV. Read instead of or in addition to Stan's POV.

There was a particular comfort to the fame associated with being an author, albeit a household name. William Denbrough was recognizable to say the least but since Bill wasn't throwing it around every time he went out in public and he could hardly stand book jacket glamour shots, he was lucky that he came back from most outings unscathed by fan interactions (except when he had been with Audra, but even after all that nonsense got squared away his face was forgettable enough not to dominate public attention).

This wasn't quite possible, with a line out the door of Philly's premiere Barnes and Noble, and his headshot on a big poster that read BOOK SIGNING TODAY.

Which, in a situation where coming up to him was welcome and necessary, was fine by most standards. As long as people were civil he could usually count on taking it easy until about the first fifty people had come through, and his voice started to feel thin.

Bill was good at making an assembly line of himself though. Easy enough to say "Hi, how are you" and "Thanks for coming" and "That's very nice of you", while his mind trailed off in search of something else. Sometimes it was a plot hole in his latest manuscript or a new idea he would forget to write down later, but for the last week or so he hadn't been able to stop thinking about what Mike said in Miami. He hadn't brought it up again, the whole two times they spoke on the phone since. He thought maybe he just felt bad for shutting the guy down, but if he mused too long on Mike's reasoning, a phantom prick of pain would draw Bill's eyes down to his hand, where the skin was bare but for the natural creases cutting across his palm.

Some things don't last forever, Beverly had said. But over the last year they learned better than anybody the sometimes the memory lingered on longer than it was welcome to.

But that was just a tired hypothesis he occupied himself with when it was too soon after his last coffee to be able to go to bed in the evening. Bill had a lot of things to be uncertain of, but what happened in Derry last fall was one thing he wasn't. Couldn't be.

Another copy of his new book dropped onto the table in front of him, jiggling the surface of the cheap card table disguised only by a green tablecloth.

"Hey thanks for coming, how are you?" Bill recited in a voice that basically counted as customer service, flipping open to the first page, Sharpie at the ready. The spine was still stiff and the cover new and glossy - either a gift or an opportunity to make some eBay money.

"Been worse," its owner answered casually. So far (this signing, anyway) Bill hadn't encountered any flippant responses, not like this one, and he squirreled a smirk into the corner of his cheek. There were the entitled mothers complaining about how long they had waited with their kids far too young to be reading the kind of fucked up stuff Bill wrote about, but that was at the other end of the fan spectrum.
"Uhm, Bh-"

Ah, maybe not so casual.

The aborted syllable drew Bill’s gaze up for long enough to count as polite, but not enough to retain, not that there was time to retain faces. Long enough to clock age and mood and maybe socio-economic status if he was feeling kinda judgey. Not really the usual suspect for the kind of guy stuttering back syllables in a thriller novelist’s presence (and oh, the irony), but nervous came in all shapes and sizes.

Bill chuckled awkwardly to fill the silent space between them while the patient murmur of the rest of the queue was just out of earshot. "Who am I making this out to?" he asked, since the man across the table hadn't come out with it yet, like most people would have by now. His hand was beginning to cramp and he wondered how long the line was.

"Stan Uris," the stranger said, and Bill nodded in confirmation.

Only halfway through his mental backlog of kind and noncommittal messages did he actually process what he had heard, what had been said just a second ago, and realize what name he was in the middle of writing on the soft mass market paperback pages. Halfway through the bend in the U, hesitating long enough that the ink had most certainly leaked through a couple layers, bleeding out in a feathered circle. The letters Bill had managed before pausing stared back at him, almost in confirmation.

Bill's mind was blank when he looked up again - task forgotten - moving almost too fast for dread to weigh down his head. Dread? Was that the right word? For the sinking feeling that didn't release its hold on his stomach until he was taking in tight curls and slender bone structure and brown assessing eyes that had not lost that watchful quality in twenty-seven - twenty-eight! - years. He knew immediately.

"Stan," he uttered, question and exclamation and statement all the same. Feeling his mouth open and close and teeth click around the address as if he had not said that name for as long as it had been since he last saw the person it belonged to.

The almost imperceptible shift in expression was enough to have Bill dropping the marker from his hands, which were shaking. "Stan!" Now it was mostly an exclamation, curling past Bill's lips in shock and disbelief as he stood out of his chair so fast it clattered backwards behind him. At full height (though not quite enough to match the man across the table), it was even easier to pick out the long-forgotten features in an aged face.

"Bill," Stan whispered back, receptive and responsive, not at all like a spectre as he huffed a laugh, and flinched at Bill's lunge forward, arms tucking in slightly as his hair bounced. The familiarity of it all rattled Bill’s bones.

"Stanley! It's you! What are you doing here? What, why? How?! Stanley you're supposed to be-!"

"Bill! Take a chill pill, honey." Sarah, his publicist, was at his side in a flash, manifesting from where she had been hiding behind the display with her phone and planner in hand. "What's the problem?"

"I, I-I, I," Bill spluttered, failing at communication entirely, his eyes glued to Stan Uris. Back from the dead. Looks like you've seen a ghost. "He, he's h-he, he-"

"You're fried." She grabbed him by the arm and started hauling him backwards. "You need a break. Let's take five everyone! Sorry, we'll be back in a jiffy!"
"No, hold on!" Bill hip-checked a teen paranormal romance display, upsetting his balance just enough to get pulled after Sarah for good, the hanging book signing poster separating Stan from his line of sight like he might as well have not been there at all.

A moment later he plunked down in a chair in a back room and stared at his boots, hung up on wide brown eyes that had not changed a bit in all these years.

"Take a breather, m'kay," Sarah said in that condescending Midwestern way of hers, shoving a flimsy cup of water into Bill's still trembling hands. "I know this tour has been pretty rigorous but it's not going to look great if a horror writer has a mental breakdown. Think of the press, Bill."

He just glared into middle space, beyond the computer in the office he'd been crammed into for timeout while the fans waited and Stan disappeared from his sights for quite possibly forever. Now that a couple of minutes had gone by he was already starting to wonder if he had imagined the whole thing. But he had seen, heard! Touched if he really wanted to but Bill lost his chance.

Sarah's nails clacked against her phone for a couple rapid heartbeats before pocketing it, hands on her knees to speak to him at the height he was sitting. "Look, I'm going to go tell them you've not been feeling very well and the long hours finally got to you. With the news about your divorce I'm sure they'll understand. We'll do a quick giveaway to nurse any hurt feelings, and in ten minutes I'll come back to get you, and you'll finish up the signing. Does that sound good?"

Before Bill could even open his mouth, his publicist chirped, "Good," echoing only herself as she escaped from the little office. Left to his own devices, Bill gulped down his water, relishing the cold burn on his tongue and throat.

And promptly decided, fuck that. Beyond the office was a hallway lit by grating fluorescent lights, two doors marked with restroom symbols, and one Employees Only, same as the door to the office. Bill knew where to test his luck and promptly pushed open the non-restroom door, greeted by a store room with shelves of boxes of extra inventory. His own fumbling hypothesis proved right when winding through the stacks led him to a blank door heavy enough to lead outside, for dumpster trips and smoke breaks of the like.

It was easy enough to vacate the alley beyond, quick footing around the side of the building, only to stop short and scoot beyond the reach of the tall glass windows spanning the perimeter. The line and recently dwindled enough that it didn't wrap around the street corner, but chances were everyone inside the Barnes and Noble would recognize him. Which was pretty inconvenient, considering the person he was looking for was inside.

"Shit." If he had just gone back he might have been able to confirm what he'd experienced, but Bill knew author etiquette (and Sarah the publicist) would not condone an overly long conversation, not even with best friends once thought to be dead. He would have to wait until the signing was over and he definitely couldn't imagine under any circumstances waiting that long to talk to one of his best friends once thought to be dead!

Caught against the clean brickwork, Bill glared around helplessly - only for all the stars to align when he caught sight of the retreating figure across the street. Posture he found was one thing that so rarely changed.

"Stanley!" he shouted, drawing little attention from the downtown Philadelphia crowds so used to uproar, sprinting to the crosswalk like he might be fled from. An angry horn and the screech of tires alerted him to the taxi cab braking hard on his right, and Bill stumbled and held his arms out in an awkward physical apology (and to avoid being run over) as he crossed the rest of the way just as hastily.
Distance disappeared with each stride and as Stan finally turned to watch him Bill suddenly realized he had no idea what he meant to do. Catching up was one thing - as if he expected a pursuit - but now he was a couple steps away and floundering fast. In some way, he was a little surprised it had been this easy. When were things ever this easy?

Stan advanced faster than he could think to stop and all of a sudden Bill was bracing himself as Stan caught the slightly shorter caught him, gripping elbow and shoulder. Reflexively he steadied himself by grabbing Stan's wrist, his other hand rising to chest level, and it took a blink to realize touching had been that easy. Stan was sturdy and solid and tangible and without a table to separate them Bill could see the slightly raised indents tracking the circumference of his friend's long face.

All Bill could do was stare for a moment. When the reality presented to him maintained its own form right before his very eyes. He toyed with the thought that maybe he had died at some point in the last ten minutes and Stanley was here to see him off into the great beyond. But, after further consideration, Bill decided that couldn't be true. A SEPTA bus screeched by and honestly that racket had no purpose in the next life.

Another thought occurred to him, more horrible and grating than the last. No, it couldn't be, he told himself, searching Stan's face and body for even the slightest hint of something off. An orange pompom. A lazy eye. This far outside of Derry? Impossible! Besides, It was supposed to be dead.

"Bill," Stan said firmly, "we need to talk."

Snapping out of his stupor, Bill didn't hesitate as his hands reached out and found their way along Stan's jawline. He was warm to the touch and the barest trace of stubble from a meticulous shave rubbed at Bill's fingers. Clutching Stanley just firmly enough to tip his head forward, Bill caught flecks of amber in dark eyes.

Then it was midday, and the sun reigned in yellow streaks until all the buildings were gone. Hair much fairer than this caught and captured the wash of light in spirals and coils framing a soft, vulnerable face that betrayed a wisdom well beyond its years.

Bill gasped and shifted his thumb. As soon as he did the visage was gone, but Stan remained, staring at him all the same.

"It is you," he murmured. "You're alive. But Bev said - but your wife said! The letter! Stanley..."

"Yes, I know," Stan replied quietly, pressing his palm against the back of Bill's hand against his cheek. "I have a lot to explain. But the short version is, I was sent back to finish what we started."

"What we started?" Bill asked, brow furrowing as if all thought beyond Stanley had escaped in order to process the fact that he was alive and standing right in front of him. A voice in the back of his mind tried to convince him to stay skeptical (remain sensible!) as his gaze trailed to the fingers clutched around his own, following the faint blue veins in Stan's skin until they disappeared into shadow beneath the sleeve at his wrist. Bill realized what he was looking for, and that he wouldn't find it, and snapped his eyes back up before the chill had time to make it down his back.

"But we already finished it," Bill tried, hopping boxcars on his train of thought in a desperate attempt to reach the unmanned control panel. "It's over, we won. I thought you knew. It's been, months, I-"

A switch flipped and Bill seemed to come to his senses. If there was any relief to be had in finally understanding, it died under the weight of dread that filled his body, sitting heavily in his stomach
and threatening to bubble up into his esophagus.

"It's not over." It wasn't a question. It was an affirmation. The sick feeling winding through his system was palpable enough to be sure of that. Nothing made him feel horror like this did - now, for the third time in his life.

Stan nodded gravely. Suddenly the city was too stifling and too loud and too intrusive. Bill glanced back to the bookstore, and when no one came through the doors right away (and he didn't see his publicist lingering by the windows), he turned in the direction of the garage where he'd parked that morning. It was easy enough taking advantage of the hand curled around his own, and leading Stan half a block up the street.

He looked back over his shoulder a couple times, just to make sure Stan didn't disappear in the meanwhile.

Parking garages were ridiculously big in a way that made Bill feel silly for walking up the ramp he had drove up a couple hours ago, but just being somewhat secluded set him at ease, after the burst of panic and confusion that had been the last five minutes. Remembering his spot on the second level, he veered off toward the elevator, having a very hard time for some reason navigating and listening at the same time. It was like his brain had been shut off and rebooted and now it was taking forever to find all the tabs he'd had open a second ago.

He did realize he was dragging along Stan by the hand, like a child with no sense to follow. As soon as that notion made it to the forefront of Bill's thoughts he let go as an excuse to hit the elevator button and shoved his hands in his pockets self-consciously.

And realized next, Stanley was trying to explain something to him.

"It's still in Derry," Stan went on, voice reverberating against the vast concrete walls. "Just not anymore. I tried to get there in time, but I was naked, and had no money, and everyone was gone by the time I got there. I knew I couldn't do it alone, even if I tried. I don't remember what I need. The ritual isn't done. If we don't fix it, It could come back."

"Naked?" he clarified incredulously, pausing only to enter the elevator and press another damn button (long enough for him to filter out the important information, of which naked definitely was not).

"You were there," Bill processed as he said it, staring at Stanley (again, still, hadn't stopped honestly). "You came after us, to Derry? You've been alive that whole time?" And none of them knew about it.

A ding, and the doors were open. Bill felt like some kind of agent ushering Stan along at a brisk pace until he found his rental car. If only that was as weird as what they were talking about.

Keys in hand, car unlocked, he paused one more time. "How do you know about the ritual?" he went on, only to follow with, "It didn't work, but it wasn't ever going to. It was a bust, Mike said-"

Mike! Mike said it should have worked. He told Bill only weeks ago it should have worked. Bill could hardly handle his own string of logic but he managed to dig his phone out of his pocket, swearing when it skittered across the keys in his hand and onto the cement floor between his car and a white van crowded a hair past the painted white line.

No damage, luckily. "Mike was just talking about this!" Bill grunted as he bent to retrieve his cell, barely registering three texts from Sarah as he pulled up his contacts. "Hold on, I have to talk to him.
He'll know what to do. I'm sorry, I'm being super useless, I just..." All Bill knew to do was gaze at Stan helplessly, but he figured that was explanation enough.

"Hey Bill, what's up?"

"Mike, you will not believe who is in my car right now."
Chapter Two: Stanley

Chapter Notes

Stan's POV. Read instead of or in addition to Bill's POV.

Waiting patiently in line for eight minutes should have been nothing compared to the nine grueling months that Stan had just spent hunting down his childhood friends like the sourceless cryptids that they were, and yet he found himself at the edge of his patience every ticking, tocking moment that he spent, no more than a few paces away from Bill Denbrough, held at bay by no more than social niceties and the debilitating, instinctive, survivalist desire not to draw unwanted attention.

When it was finally his turn, Stan moved forward and practically dropped his book onto the table, his fingers tormenting him with the uncertainty of their grasp while William Denbrough sat before him. In the flesh. Grown. Cheeks faintly darkened by razor scraped murmurs of a beard.

"Hey thanks for coming, how are you?" Bill offered noncommittally, shifting the book around to face him so he could sign the thing for another devoted fan (which Stan was decidedly not).

"Been worse," he answered, and did his best not to hope that Bill would gasp and glance up, recognize him on sight. How could he? Until the moment he heard Mike's voice over the phone - almost a year ago now and not once since - Stan had retained nothing of them. Had forgotten everything from the most powerful fear to the happiest days of his childhood, never mind the strongest friendships to grace his life. Even now, most of what he knew was publicly available. Richie's comedy special. Ben's private company that seemed to do business more often than not without him these days, and Bill's bibliography.

Well, the titles anyway. Stan hadn't been able to stomach finishing any of them yet.

Words piled up behind his teeth, scraped by the hiss of an inhale as he fought the rise of energy and anxiety in his body, which drove his pulse in one direction and his conscious movements in the other. Reaching up to tug on his ear for just a moment, Stan drew a better breath, his chest expanding with it.

"Uhm, Bh-" His voice failed him. Damnit. He was wasting time. There was so much to explain. So much that they had to do. And here he was shuffling like an overwhelmed super fan facing down their idol for the first time. For God's Sake! He knew this man when the two of them were toothpicks held together by spit and denim.

An uncomfortable noise of response from the author (reacting to Stanley being a spazz no doubt), and green eyes flicked up and speared him straight through his core. Even as they darted down again, Stan was a specimen pinned to a wax board, unable to move for long moments that left the two of them sitting - and standing there - uncomfortable and silent. Wondering idly how he had ever managed to forget the sight, the brunet found himself dragged out of the reverie and breathless spiral by a simple question.

"Who am I making this out to?"

It was unusual for Stan to find himself surprised by someone's diction and articulation. There was
nothing particularly impressive about Bill's, he thought, but it struck him as odd and impressive for a few fleeting heartbeats. Stan couldn't quite place, why. He wasn't the only one that fled the state as soon as they were old enough, though that hadn't changed much about his speech patterns. Besides, it didn't sound like an accent change. Though, after making his way to the west coast (met with an empty house and a full mailbox at the Tozier residence) and back again, on top of all his other travels in the last year, Stan wasn't sure he could tell one from another anyway.

His mouth opened reflexively, but nothing came out. Lips and teeth parted and waiting, while he tried to find a place to start his explanation. Make a demand. A plea. Would Bill remember? Could any of them? He had taken himself out of the way. Out of the world. One that hadn't missed him much, yet. Even as the weirdness and the wrongness lingered, like a bad taste in his mouth.

"Stan Uris," he answered suddenly, his lips pressed tightly as he swallowed. How strange that he had become one of those people startled by the sound of their real names.

For the briefest of moments, which somehow managed to feel like a lifetime, Stan feared the worst. If Bill didn't remember him, he didn't know how to make him, and their time was dwindling more rapidly than ever. He had already wasted too much time trying to find his friends.

Mercifully, the answer came rather quickly, offering relief as the twirling coin landed squarely on recognition. Slowly, Bill raised his head to stare at him with a look of utter disbelief, and maybe a little fear - not exactly how you wanted to be regarded by one of your best friends for the first time in years.

"Stan." His name on Bill's tongue released the held breath from his lungs like a shattering dam, and it rushed from him in a gusty sigh.

"Bill," he whispered in response, either lacking the air or the control over it to offer much more volume, though a shuddering, huffed laugh of relief escaped him as Bill shot to his feet. His corporeal form flinched at the first clack of the chair but the sensation did not compare to the elation that had flooded him.

"Stan!" Photographs had been one thing, rare as they could be despite the reach and power of the internet, but as green eyes locked on him more squarely than ever before, Stan was astonished by now much - and by how little - had changed. His eyes raked over softened and sharpened features, the heart shape not quite lost.

"Stanley! It's you! What are you doing here?" Bill cried, alarmed as much as awed. "What, why? How?! Stanley you're supposed to be-!"

As Stan’s mouth opened to answer, they were interrupted. Which was far from unexpected considering the outburst but even quelled by his own rationale, Stan could not resist the impatient glance at the sharply dressed woman who advanced to the author’s side.

"Bill! Take a chill pill, honey. What's the problem?"

Bill's teeth shuddered around wavering syllables, staring back and forth between them. "I, I-I, I, he, he's h-he, he-" Suddenly Stan knew why the smooth cadence had sounded slightly off. His distraction cost him the moment that he needed, though, as the author was bodily hauled away from the table and whisked out of sight behind a display by the interfering woman.

Heart dropping from his throat only to sink into his stomach, Stan closed the open cover of his freshly purchased book and picked it up, turning to excuse himself from the now halted (and glaring) line, and the bookstore entirely. Pausing on the sidewalk, he glanced in either direction, as well as
across the not quite busy street, before huffing another sigh.

There was nowhere to go.

Stan turned to glance over his shoulder, his feet slowly turning to follow as he stared through the glass. The line was mostly undisturbed, if a bit more visually impatient and annoyed. Though that may just as easily be the brunet's imagination. For all the unwanted attention and ire that he had drawn in the last several months, Stan was not growing accustomed to it, even if he had let go of any actual regard for the consequences. However immediate.

There was nothing an aggravated stranger could do that Stan had not survived already. Somewhat against his will.

"Don't block the walkway!" Impact carried him sideways a bit, his shoulder aching with it and the book knocked from his hand. Lacking the cause or desire to even cast a sharp glance at the asshole, Stan stooped down to retrieve it, closing the cover again and tucking it under his arm.

This was a new situation. With the effort and time put into locating physical addresses for two out of the six, one of which had come down to an incidental envelope in a corporate tax filing, both of which had resulted in a week or more of sitting around waiting for the Losers to come home, just the fact that he had met Bill's eyes was far too much progress to give up on now. Besides, there was no next opportunity to try. No next idea or lead to follow. Nearly a year of research and travel, itineraries and tickets and taxis, capped by a last ditch effort.

The worst kind of effort.

But Stan had sat himself on Richie Tozier's front patio for three straight days once, and he could certainly sit under a Starbucks sunbrella on a Philadelphia sidewalk long enough to see if the internationally famous author left through the front door. At the very least, he knew that there was no loitering car with blacked out windows waiting to whisk William Denbrough away in a cloud of anonymity to his secret hotel. Yet.

"Stanley!"

Just as his second foot touched the far curb, Stan stopped short, his attention whipping to the side. At once awash with relief and incredulity. Turning in place, he watched Bill dart across oncoming traffic, looking very much like a frightened father who had just spotted the missing toddler.

As soon as it occurred to him to move, the brunet was off, his strides not quite running or jogging but hurried nonetheless, while he dodged other pedestrians that separated them. In moments, Stan caught the slightly shorter man against him, gripping elbow and shoulder, and grasped in return. Shocked by the sensation, he wondered suddenly if it was the first time he had touched anyone since waking up that first time.

"Bill," he said again, stronger this time, rising to combat the din of the busy street after being stifled by the polite silence of the book store. "We need to talk."

Seconds passed. Bill continued to stare at him, just as shocked as he had been in the store. Stan had to wonder if he had been heard at all. Obviously, it had been long enough since his letters were sent out (if they were received) that his friends had already managed whatever mourning they might need. Not that Stan was ever going to be surprised by their shock and confusion and maybe horror, but his own lack thereof was translating as impatience for the delay.

Suddenly Bill reached out to grab either side of Stan’s face, startling them both to stillness before he
thought to straighten minutely. The brunet relaxed into the grip a moment later, his own grasp gentling even as he was tempted to tighten it. Everything he had been doing since he woke up had lead to this moment, the first tangible, real world sign that he was going to succeed.

While they stared at one another, bright green eyes lit by the glare of the sun, Stan wondered if he would feel this way being reunited with Richie, or Bev, or Mike. Whether it would feel so certain. He remembered relying upon his friends, trusting them, wanting them with him for the toughest moments, but no one quite gave him the confidence that Big Bill could.

"It is you," Bill murmured. "You're alive. But Bev said - but your wife said! The letter! Stanley..."

"Yes, I know," he answered the harried words quietly, a hand rising from the shorter man's shoulder to fold over the hand against his cheek instead. "I have a lot to explain. But the short version is, I was sent back to finish what we started."

"What we started? But we already finished it," Bill tried, sounding stunned and helpless as his face contorted with the same. "It's over, we won. I thought you knew. It's been, months, I-"

Nodding his confirmation, Stan felt his blink slow down as he resisted the urge to simply let his eyes fall closed for a moment. The comfort of a warm palm against his cheek was startling in its effect, soothing and stirring in a way he wasn't quite sure how to face with his eyes open, particularly with Bill searching his face for answers, for information. Considering how new it felt, Stan could not help but recall how striking and sudden and much everything had seemed when he crawled out of his aluminum casket, reminded without mercy or gentility how to use his senses again.

Stan could remember being bumped (four minutes ago? maybe five), shoved, stopped short by the rise of an elbow, or a shoed foot, even brushing hands with strangers over a bank pen - no matter how much effort he put in to avoiding it! But this was altogether different, and instinct seemed to lure him toward turning his head, just enough to brush his lips against the arch of the palm's heel.

But then Bill was speaking, and the impulse vanished, not quite managing to drag the warmth and the comfort it offered with it.

He blinked, still processing, but realization seemed to have set in. “It’s not over.”

Stan had not even opened his mouth to answer, his head bobbing like a dashboard bulldog, by the time Bill turned on a heel to walk away. Only the grip on Stan’s hand and eventual tension in his arm propelling his feet forward kept him from protesting. His gaze turned to their surroundings for a minute, habitually confirming a safety standard he wasn't sure he could support with reason and fact.

At least he could take comfort in Bill Denbrough saying we won. They weren't finished, but there was a great deal of relief and satisfaction to be had in knowing that he had been right - was right. There had never been any doubt in him that It was dead, but his friends were alive and they had won.

If only that were the only issue.

"It's still in Derry," Stan began, struggling to align his thoughts as they finally turned off the busy sidewalk and into a much quieter parking garage. There was an echo that managed to make even the traffic just on the far side of a cinder block wall feel distant and unimportant. "Just not anymore. I tried to get there in time, but I was naked, and no money, and everyone was gone by the time I got there. I knew I couldn't do it alone, even if I tried. I don't remember what I need. The ritual isn't done. If we don’t fix it, It could come back."
"Naked?" Bill clarified incredulously, as they entered a dingy elevator. Stan didn’t know how to respond.

"You were there," Bill went on, which meant Stan needn’t respond at all. "You came after us, to Derry? You've been alive that whole time?"

A ding, and the doors were open. Bill ushered them along to a soft gold sedan in front of a wall, and Stan squeezed by to reach the passenger seat. The sooner they started moving toward Derry, the better (which was usually the opposite, but these were desperate times).

"How do you know about the ritual?" Bill kept going, only to follow with, "It didn't work, but it wasn't ever going to. It was a bust, Mike said-" Suddenly he swore, but since Bill seemed to be comfortable answering his own questions, Stan let himself in to sit shotgun, relishing the simple pleasure of a cushion against his back. “Mike was just talking about this. Hold on, I have to talk to him. He’ll know what to do. I’m sorry, I’m being super useless, I just…” As if Stanley could blame him.

Halfway to dozing off as Bill called to give Mike a taste of his own medicine, Stan couldn’t help but be relieved, even if their task had only just begun.
Chapter Three: Richie

Chapter Notes

For your entertainment, depression beard! Richie

"Richie, honey," Beverly murmured gently, her hand settling lightly on his t-shirt clad shoulder even as his head rolled from one side to the other, dragging a wet bottom lip and bearded chin against her knuckles. Slipping to her knees turned her hand in place, her fingers curving down toward the lip of his rucked up sleeve while her elbow hitched against the armrest, the other hand reaching up to poke his cheek a bit playfully.

"Bev, not while he's sleeping," Ben's voice sounded quietly from the front hallway behind her, anxious in a way that belied his adamance yesterday. Already out of his coat and absent his tablet case and keys, he tried to make himself look busy plucking up the pillows and throw blanket, and Richie's discarded hoodie, which he folded over the chair nearest the door.

"I'm not sleeping," Richie answered raggedly, his words thick with sleep while he snuffled, choked, and coughed in the way only a frequent smoker really could. Pushing himself upright from the couch, not quite shrugging off Bev's touch, his hands swept up his face and then back down, dragging his cheeks in both directions of the drama masks. A twist of his head to each side elicited a string of popping noises as well, and he felt a little more human.

"We need to talk," the ginger continued unfettered, her smile sweet and reassuring and nowhere close to reaching her nervous gaze as Richie straightened his spine, and then his glasses to look at her.

"Finally decided to make me your third, hm?" he asked, excitement rising in his mock tone as he rubbed his hands together, grinning impishly.

"No," Ben answered, a little sharper than the life long trashmouth had been anticipating.

"Easy cowboy, I'm happy to bottom."

"No, Richie!" Bev shook her head with an incredulous laugh, trying to draw the attention back. As Ben moved to settle behind her on the chair, laptop in hand, she stood to sit on Richie's other side, not quite caging him in the generous living room. The look on his face, staring over his glasses as they slipped down his nose, darting his gaze between the two of them, preceded a gusting sigh from the other two, who seemed to fold in all at once.

"We made you a dating profile."

"We think you need to meet new-"

"Ben!"

"I didn't know how you wanted to start!"

"Guys," Richie cut in - a habit of his now, it seemed. "I'll cut back on the drinking, I swear." Hands spreading in surrender, he moved to stand, and Beverly's arm shot out to stop him, hand on his elbow
as she dragged him back down.

"Look, Richie, it's not that we don't like having you around," she started gently.

"Showing up in Guam was a little much," Ben murmured, brows lifted sympathetically.

"I learned to knock!"

"It's just that," Bev continued, shooting them both a warning glance. "We think that you would be happier, in general, if you let yourself get back out there. Explore this part of yourself."

"The gay part?" Richie asked, deadpanned and dry as he leveled a bulbous gaze at her. The veins in the corners of his eyes stood out against the hazy brown, still not getting enough sleep (or enough water).

"Yes," she answered primly, her smile warm even as it teased him, pinned by his own sass. "You owe it to yourself, and Stan, and Eddie, not to waste your life now that you can actually live it."

"Ouch, doc, straight for the chest. Can I get a little novocaine first next time?" Leaning back against the sofa, since that was as close as he could get to escaping without an actual outburst at the moment, Richie crossed his arms over his chest, his shoulders curling toward his ears.

"Yes," Bev said again, almost pleased with herself. "Your novocaine in this case in that we already set up a profile for you, so all you have to do is start answering messages. Low effort, but I expect you to make one. And then when you have a date to bring along, Ben and I will go back to not hiding our reservations from you."

Silence held for as long as Richie held soft blue eyes, Beverly's smile the antithesis of his vivacious pout. Tipping his head to the other side, he found no ally in Ben's resolved expression, and after another moment or two Richie dropped his head back, heaving another full body sigh.

"Fine, but I will not be held responsible for being stood up, drink-faced, or walked out on," he surrendered finally, tone defeated but stubborn, and just as Richie lifted his head, Ben folded open the computer and held it out for him to take.

"It’s geared toward prolifics and entrepreneurs,” Ben explained, and Richie nearly snorted at the thought of himself qualifying. “So you don’t wind up with any weirdos, or people who freak out when they find out who you are. Just those kind of on the same playing field. I have a lot of colleagues who use it.”

The website was already up, showcasing a screenshot from his special last winter as the icon - tilted smile hidden behind a scraggly black mustache and a microphone - next to a row of titled messages under the label of INBOX.

"That was your best option, huh?” Richie asked, monotonous as he scrolled down, and clicked on PROFILE to get himself away from the short list of Hey There s and DTFT s.

Maybe it was dread that siphoned into him the more of his profile the scroll revealed.

"Okay, so what's your ideal meal?" Bev's voice came over the speakers, a bit higher pitched and tinny, compared to his memory of the conversation that Ben had apparently been recording - from the kitchen? Maybe? It was hard to tell at that angle, the camera shaking and dropping only to be righted and then coming to a sudden halt, as if he had braced his elbow or set the camera down entirely.
"Soft shell crab, boiled in butter, angel dust from Burgatory. Hash-cut garlic powder sweet potato fries smothered in melted cream cheese and chives."

"Gross," Ben's voice was much quieter, and yet much louder and clearer, the syllable cut off as Richie continued his scroll down.

"Well, if this is your audition to be my PR team, you're already fired," he told them quietly, clicking through the tabs to look at some other photos, an INFO page listing him as a smoker and cat lover (stretch) along with questions that he had apparently answered - three weeks ago? - before he wound up at the INBOX again.

"You've already got a few interests," Ben put in, leaning forward to look around the front of the screen, only to sit back when Richie tilted his knees to keep it out of sight. The forcefully patient expression reminded him far too much of his father for a moment and Richie looked away, sliding his finger down the touch pad to open the third message in the queue. The first one to look like a person and not a sex-ad spam bot.

Apparently clicking on the circular face wasn't the best way to open the message itself. Instead, Richie was offered a profile much like his own, missing the little pencil icons to show him his editing options in the corners of each section. His gaze shifted over the picture for a moment, dropping down to the About Me almost petulantly before shocked recognition had his attention whipping back up to the simple selfie.

"What, the fuck? " Richie half gasped, choking on his own spit and holding his breath rather than surrendering to the hacking.

"Richie?" Ben asked, concern overtaking his careful excuse for a poker face.

"You can change anything you want, we were just trying to get it-"

"It's not that!" Richie nearly shouted, grabbing the computer by its lid and keyboard to turn it around. "It's Eddie."

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**Paul R:** I spent like a half hour Googling the best way to start a conversation on a dating service but it turns out pick up lines suck so I'll just stick to hi how are you

**Richie T:** well I'm relieved to have my cherry popped by a classic. The Youths advise that nb hbu is an appropriate response but I don't speak l33t fluently.

**Richie T:** That's a neato profile pic you got there. That a professional shot or do you just always look like an anthropology professor?

**Paul R:** Just shot on my perfectly average phone. Anthropology professor? Neato? Am I supposed to be flattered?

**Richie T:** You could try.

**Richie T:** I don't know any anthropology professors so that might be a swear in Italy or something. Those assholes don't even like thumbs ups.

**Paul R:** I'll take it. That means I look smart. And while we're swapping dubious compliments I totally dig the Castaway vibe you've got going on. You're could be Charles Manson's not evil twin.
Richie T: Listen it's not my or Tom Hankses's fault that volley balls are so sexy.

Richie T: but I'll take that too. Not everyday someone tells you they'd probably join a murder cult cuz if your face.

Paul R: Tom Hanks looks like he could be my dad. And who said I'd be a Manson girl? If I join a murder cult it has to be for a good reason.

Richie T: Well I don't usually pull out my dick til the second date.

Paul R: You don't send pics of it three messages in either which is a fucking relief honestly

Richie T: Cancel Upload CANCEL UPLOAD

Richie T: SO, you're from Maine huh? Lived there long?

Paul R: As long as I can remember

Paul R: It's boring as shit though, I bet it's a lot more fun out there in LA Mr. Netflix comedian

Richie T: Oh yeah, tons. Googleplexes. You'll have to fly out some time. I'll show you around. The lobsters sub par though.

Paul R: is that before or after the second date dick reveal?

Richie T: Viewer's choice.

Paul R: I gotta be honest your profile is kind of sketch, dude

Paul R: Even a dumbass would know to steal a selfie from instagram than to rip it from a fucking promo pic, Richie

Paul R: if that is your real name

Richie T: You come into my house.

Richie T: Do I have instagram? I thought that was a myth.

Paul R: You tell me

Paul R: What are you wearing, Jake from Statefarm

Paul R: Richie from Netflix

Richie T: It's gimp suit night with the boys.

Richie T: So obviously, I'm wearing yesterday's t-shirt and last week's jeans.

Richie T: What are you wearing, professor?

Paul R: you're a real charmer, Richie from Netflix

Paul R: I'm basically wearing the same thing as my profile pic but today it's a green sweater because I'm such a fucking wildcard. So I guess we're both drab chic
Richie T: Ooh green sweater. Talk dirty to me.

Paul R: buy me dinner first

Paul R: sorry not to be a stuck subject but why does the vid on your profile pic look like it was caught on a hidden camera for TMZ

Richie T: My friends made it literally behind my back. I'm not hiring them for my next one.

Paul R: that's convenient

Paul R: not to put the brakes on, this has been fun and everything but how do I know you're not a thousand year old weirdo in a basement

Paul R: or a teenage girl who confused a fan account with a dating profile

Richie T: I could ask you the same thing. Thousand years would be an impressive longevity though, gotta be honest.

Richie T: I'd fuck a thousand year old basement dweller just to tell the story.

Richie T: Can't say the same about a confused teenage girl.

Paul R: Trust me if I was faking it I would have chosen someone a little more photogenic than what I'm working with

Richie T: I don't know, it's a pretty good face.

Richie T: Think if I was fishing, I would have at least chosen something hot.

Richie T: Henry Caville and Tom Sellack were made for that lip lint.

Paul R: I don't know who Henry Caville is and Tom Sellack could ALSO be my dad

Paul R: would you mind just sending a pic? Like if you just do something specific like touch your nose or something then I'll know for sure. Yes I know I'm a bummer.

Richie T: I'll show you mine if you show me yours.

Richie T: Touch your nose or something and I'll mirror?

Paul R: seriously dude? You're the one claiming celebrity

Richie T: This mug costs a minimum of $7. Selfie for selfie is a steal.

Paul R: what a fucking racket. Maybe you are a real celebrity

Paul R: [Image Desc. Selfie in a modest bedroom with little furniture, lit outside the window by orange sunset light as Paul's left pointer finger touching the tip of his long, straight nose while he looks on grudgingly, mouth flat and taut]

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"It can't- Richie choked on his own tongue, staring at the screen. As his hand lifted to touch his
fingertips to the familiar as fuck face, the touch screen took it as a tap and loaded the photo in its own window, zooming in as he lingered. Dark eyes stared at him, unmoving again.

Where he had seen a bloodied, soiled bandage last, though, he caught the edge of a raised pink scar, not quite disguised by the angle of the brunet's loosely curled fist.

"You gotta send one back," Ben murmured, back handing his shoulder twice while they both stared at the screen. The two of them had been looming over his shoulders since the moment he turned the keyboard back to face him, fingers splayed helplessly over the f and j keys begging his brain for words.

"Quickly, before he thinks you're photoshopping," Beverly added, nearly unseating the laptop trying to find the front camera program.

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Richie T: Tit for Tat

Richie T: [Image Desc. Selfie in front of a floor to ceiling bookcase behind a cream sofa back, Richie's right pointer finger touching the tip of his nose, pallor sheet-white and eyes wide.]

Paul R: fucking finally thank you

Paul R: was it worth it?

Richie T: Yes.

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"I'm going back to Derry," Richie declared, snapping the laptop shut and tossing it aside into Beverly's lap before he stood up, reaching for his phone. The two percent warning flashed on the screen before he swiped it away, opening the Appstore to find the one for this stupid website even as he headed for the door, his hoodie in hand before he thought about it.

"Richie! You can't just Go! This guy thinks you just met!" Beverly chased after him, her hand flying up to slam the front door shut just as Richie pulled it open. His shoulder jerked as he pulled again, her elbow locked against him.

"It's him, Bev! I can't stay here! He saw my face and said nothing! Something is wrong! He needs me."

"And you need to relax," she countered simply. "And to think. He doesn't remember you. He's using a different name. He's living in Derry. What does that tell you?"

Expectant silence stretched between them while Richie's thoughts raced in time with his thoughts. Glancing down at the download bar, he watched the screen go black, the phone dead. Dead.

Dead.
Since his last attempt to end a phone call with Sarah in a civilized manner this trip had turned out miserable, Bill hit the red button while she was mid-shout and tossed his cell into the backseat, landing on his jacket which would absorb each and every nagging vibration. Whether that meant he was in for, at best, a new publicist, or at worst, a lawsuit, when he got back, he wasn’t truly sure. But with a nine months undead Stanley Uris in his passenger seat, Bill figured he had more important things to worry about.

The seven and a half hour trek up to Maine had been permeated with conversation and explanations he still didn’t entirely understand. Why Stan was back and how he had gotten to Philadelphia and what he had been doing the last year. In all honesty, a resurrected friend probably wasn't the weirdest thing Bill had ever dealt with, astonishingly enough, but it took at least half the trip to stop looking at Stan like he was Jesus fucking Christ.

Even his shoddy interpretation of what was apparently a dire situation somewhat beyond his understanding could not prevent Bill’s body from seizing a bit when he abandoned the interstate for the long stretch of flatlands that separated decent civilization from the cesspool that was Derry, Maine. He couldn't even rest easy knowing he had no reason to fear anymore - because apparently, his work was not quite done.

Main Street turned out to be desolate, which was weird for a summer afternoon, sun shining down. Bill couldn't recall if it was a holiday weekend, if people were more likely to be at the beach instead of in this awful town. He had agreed to meet Mike at the corner diner, only to find as he rode up, that the signs were all bleached out, and the windows dark.

Bill parked along the curb and got out to get a better look. Sure enough the diner was closed for good, a bleak, stark landmark in the yellow summer light. Booths were still intact, along with counters and other immovable furniture, but other than that the place was empty. Bill turned to let Stan know so they could figure out a new game plan, only to startle back as a hand clapped across his shoulder.

"I texted you like five times, to meet somewhere else!" Mike exclaimed, spreading his arms out like the biggest inconvenience to him right now was Bill abandoning his cell phone.

"Mike!" Bill gasped. "How are you already here? It's only been-"

"It's a three hour flight. I left right after you called. I mean - you told me yourself. It's urgent."

As Mike began to recount how he got from Florida to Maine and all the research he had done in the interim, Bill had to be a little relieved not to be hearing an I told you so in the midst of it all. Though really, could either of them have ever predicted inability to complete the Ritual of Chud would result in a video game style do-over for one of their dead friends?

"I found a recount of a similar ritual in Tibet," Mike went on, unclipping the messenger bag at his side as Bill tried and failed to inform him that he didn't need to know all the nitty gritty details. "And based on how they described the entity I think it might - be the same..."

Bill watched Mike's gaze trail over his shoulder, following until he was turning on his heel, to find
Stan up and out of the car, looking exhausted and gloomy. Quite the countenance for someone who
got to put their seat back and nod off a couple times, in no desperate need of navigating the vehicle.

"Oh my God," Mike muttered tightly, huffing in disbelief. "I heard the voice over your phone, Bill,
but-"

He didn't finish, but at this point Bill was well accustomed to the speechless wonder (and relief) that
Stan brought with him. It occurred to him briefly that up until this morning, Mike was the only one
who had had any contact with Stanley as an adult.

And what became of that conversation.

Mike stepped down by the bumper of Bill's car to gather Stanley into a tight embrace that swelled his
torso with fervent tension. If he was crushing Stan in his overwhelming relief, he didn't protest.
Instead Stan bent up his arms almost mechanically to clutch Mike in turn, dropping his chin against
the taller man's shoulder.

Suddenly Bill realized he'd completely missed his chance, using it to touch Stan's face like a blind
fool instead. He felt warm in the ears acknowledging to himself that, now, it would just be awkward
to initiate out of the blue.

Just as he was contemplating the logistics of a group hug, though, Mike released Stan and huffed
again, trying to be casual as he rubbed at his moist eyes with the heels of his palms. "It's so good to
see you. Even, well, even under the circumstances."

"It's good to see you, too," Stanley offered quietly, arms crossed close as soon as distance had been
created.

"We can talk in the car," Bill said, knowing they ought not to linger on the sidewalk. He couldn't
think of a single other place in Derry he wanted to sit and eat with this subject matter between them
and the lump in his throat. Certainly not any Chinese restaurants. At least in his car they could hurry
to their next destination if they needed to.

Stan nodded and the three of them began to move. Bill didn't realize until he was back in front of the
steering wheel that Stan and Mike's position made it easiest for them to file into the backseat, leaving
Bill's side empty as he craned to twist over his headrest.

Knowing his own understanding was spotty at best, and abysmal at worst, even with his
recollections of drug-induced hallucinations, Bill set his sights on Stanley. Mike positioned himself
toward the same direction, and Stan was halfway to buckling his seatbelt before he glanced up and
seemed to realize they were waiting on him - and that they weren't moving anytime soon. "Oh,
right."

Settling down, Stan started quietly, licking his lips with some hesitance. "So, all that I know for
certain is something happened, not quite correctly, and as a result," he looked at Mike, then Bill, "It
might be able to come back. Not quite like I did, but back to try again. It sort of exists out of time, so
a past version of itself might try to infringe on our present."

"So not, back from the dead, back," Bill clarified, tasting something sour when he realized his
phrasing. At this point, having had Stan at his side basically all day, it felt wrong, somehow
insensitive to say. He didn't like thinking that that's where Stan had come from.

Regardless - he didn't get it. "But It can, time travel?" he went on, brows screwed together as he
leveled his gaze in Stanley's direction for answers. He'd heard this explanation twice now and still
felt like half the puzzle pieces were missing. To be fair, it seemed like nothing made sense when it
came to Derry and all its complex cosmic bullshit.

"Not quite. It's a lot to get a handle on, Bill," Mike replied instead, somewhat sympathetically, arms
wound around the messenger bag clutched in his lap, as not to infringe on the already narrow
backseat space. "This thing, I tried to show you what it really was, how long It's existed, but it's stuff
I've been learning about for years. You had two days."

Somehow, Mike almost looked confident, or at least resolved as he addressed the occupants of the
car. "I think I know what to do." Then, to Stan. "We had to burn artifacts from our past that signified
our bond to each other. Doing that allowed us to subdue It. Since you weren't physically there we
thought maybe it was the showercaps you got for us, from Ben's clubhouse. But now I think it must
be something else. You have to find it, Stan. That's why you're here."

"Artifacts?" Stanley whispered, having apparently exhausted the length of his knowledge.

"So," Bill tried, practically hunched over the center console at that point, "it wasn't a bust? We just
didn't finish?"

Mike shrugged. "I tried to tell you." Ah, there was the I-told-you-so. "I never thought this would
happen, that Stanley, you'd be here to finish what we started. But I think your token is somewhere in
Derry and you have to find it. Once you burn it like we did it should set things right."

"Do we have time to wander around town like we did though?" Bill glanced out the windows a little
helplessly. Derry had never been all that fun to explore but the empty streets made it look downright
despairing.

"Don't you see? Derry's in decay because we cut off its lifeline," Mike said as he swept a hand
toward the window. "This town thrives off evil, and that evil has ceased to exist. As long as it still
looks like a ghost town out there, I think we have time.

"Start with a memory," Mike continued, turning to Stan, "You might even remember what the token
is. What do you remember about the time you spent here as a kid? What comes to mind?"

Stan's gaze shifted focus over Mike's shoulder, past the window to the empty storefronts. Bill
followed his line of sight. The pharmacy windows down the way were more advertisement than
glass, sales signs and neon tubing, all of it marred by the relentless angle of the late afternoon sun,
bright yellow as it reflected back at him, threatening at any moment to tilt into a blinding spear
between his eyes.

Recalling his own childhood hadn't been an ordeal since, well, since the last time he was in Derry,
and Bill found his patience turning to confusion the longer Stanley sat there thinking.

"The blood pact," Stanley finally uttered with soft solidity, as if remembering a fond dream. His
fingers twitched, legs shifting as if to get more comfortable, only to return to their original position. "I
remember our promise. I remembered making it when you called." He met Mike's gaze a bit
sheepishly, before his attention dropped to his palm, flexed open and smooth, just like Bill’s and the
rest of them.

It wasn't what Bill expected - or needed, he considered, glancing at Mike to fill in the gaps, which he
had so graciously done thus far. He wondered if his own presence was really necessary, or if he was
just along for the ride.

"That's it?" he asked after a couple beats, when Stan didn't elaborate any further. "That's practically
the beginning of the end."

Then, Mike, in sudden awareness, eyes flashing: "Of course - you weren't with us to remember! Bill, don't you remember when your memories started coming back?"

It was when Mike first called. Until he got to Derry there had been very little; he practically had to take Mike's word for it, that they had been friends, and made a promise as children. It wasn't until arriving in town, seeing his friends faces, riding Silver and feeling the wind on his face, that he began to fully comprehend what life had been like when he lived in Derry. To this day, he hadn't forgotten again.

And Stanley hadn't been there for any of it.

Bill sighed, the weight of their responsibility heavy on his shoulders once again. "So we really have to do this from the top, huh?"

"Stan does, at least." With Stanley looking withdrawn and tense, Mike set a comforting hand on his shoulder, and Bill found himself once again lamenting his place in the front of the car. "We made our promise in the Barrens. I think that's a good place to start, we spent a lot of time there."

It was, really, the only place they could start. Whether there was a better option - maybe a place in town, the synagogue, Stan's old house if it was still standing - Bill decided he wouldn't mind starting where Derry couldn't quite reach them, if only just. It wasn't a solid decision, but it was all they had.

Glancing at Stanley one more time, Bill sighed and surrendered his attention front and center. "Barrens it is, then." A whole new day of aimless exploring ahead of them, though the sun was just about ready to kiss the horizon. He shifted out of park and swiveled away from the curb before anyone could even think about calling shotgun.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading this far, feedback is always appreciated!
Chapter Five: Richie, Ben, & Beverly

See the end of the chapter for notes

Richie T: Margarita Fest is next weekend, wanna go with me?

Paul R: Where is that?

Richie T: San Diego.

Paul R: I dunno if I can get all my affairs in order for next week. I'd need two weeks to let my boss know at least

Paul R: and my bank account says no but maybe if we planned like a month in advance I could figure something out

Richie T: City Fest is two weeks out. You got Saturday's off? I could get you on a red eye. Have you home safe by Monday morning.

Paul R: oh yeah real easy to tell me to take planes trains and automobiles. You're not the one with an office job

Richie T: Well I've got the weekend off. Wanna spot me a sofa and show me around?

Richie T: Or I could get us a seedy lil hotel where no one dares complain about the noise.

Paul R: you want to come to Maine?

Paul R: My town isn't that interesting, but like I said a month and I could do California

Paul R: I'm afraid if you see where I live you'll run screaming for the hills

Richie T: Been a while since I was out that way. I could just stop by, passing through. Maybe take you dinner. Jade of the Orient looks interesting.

Richie T: Don't gotta take me home right away, though I wouldn't blame you for being unable to resist.

Paul R: I guess I can't stop you from showing up and I guess I wouldn't be super bummed out if you did.

Paul R: But Jade sucks and just went out of business so you're gonna have to do better than that.

Richie T: It's not entirely beneath me to stand on Maine Street shouting your name.

Paul R: If you promise under no circumstances to do that I will consider being a kind host.

Richie T: I promise under the circumstances of you being a kind host that I will not do that.

Richie T: I make no promises for after bedtime.
Paul R: except not to whip it out until Date number 2

Richie T: Ah! Caught in my own net. The inhumanity.

Richie T: Well if I'm just passing through I'll have to do it again on my way home too.

Paul R: I can't stop you for just passing through but I'm bound to be nicer company if you let me know when you're in town and ETA and stuff like that.

Richie T: How will I maintain my reputation as a man of mystery?

Paul R: I hate mystery so you're better off.

Paul R: Besides Wikipedia has your birthday you already failed.

Richie T: Meddling kids!

Richie T: But alright. I'll let you know when its time to rescue me from all the not very interesting.

Paul R: in that case don't hold me accountable when you realize how fucking awful Derry is

Paul R: and it's a date. I guess.

///

"Why couldn't Richie go alone?" Ben asked quietly, adjusting his legs for the fifth time while the teenager in front of him snored incessantly, face nearly pointed toward him for as far as she twisted in her seat, reclined as far as it would go. He had missed his chance to resist the push, his tray still down and his drink a higher priority than bracing his knee against inconsiderate strangers.

"Derry isn't safe," Beverly answered primly, her head on his shoulder and eyes closed already. There being no direct passage from California to Maine made this their third flight since yesterday morning, but at least the layovers had been minimal - just enough time to get a real lunch and sip some bubbly water while Richie sucked down four cigarettes in the smoker's courtyard so that they didn't have to go through security again.

"For any of us. Least of all him. And sure as he wants to be, there's still a chance that this is a set up of some kind." Shifting lower, Beverly turned her head up to look at him, smiling as chocolate eyes gazed down at her. "Just be glad we talked him into layovers instead of driving."

"He's lucky I love you," Ben mumbled, his arm shifting to settle around her instead.

"Oh please," Bev laughed quietly. "You never would have let him go alone."

///

"You know I literally have to do this alone?" Richie asked, certain that they had gotten separate hotel rooms for a reason at the Holiday Inn by the interstate, despite the fact that there were two losers draped across the horrible floral print bed while he switched shirts again.

"Yes, which is why we're here to remind you that this is a first date with someone who doesn't appear to even wonder if you've met before," Beverly told him sternly, propped up on her elbows and kicking her feet at him like a playground kid trying to slide off a high platform. "Someone that you can't be trying to convince you know better than he does, because that's more likely to upset and frighten him than it is to make anything right."
"Oh right, I totally forgot," Richie answered, the deadpan almost managing to sound sincere, rather than sarcastic.

"Which means, you can't be following him home after a few drinks. If it really is Eddie-" Richie scoffed at the implication, his expression disgusted even as Beverly held her ground, "-you owe him the benefit of a conscious and intentional decision! Even kissing him before he knows who you are is basically lying."

"He's already forgotten me once, Bev," Richie told her, pausing in front of the dresser mirror to rub at his chin, hand sliding up his cheek to watch his eye slant, his nose pulling to the side with the stretch of his lips. Was this really the self that he was going to present? On a first date with Eddie fucking Kaspbrak? Twenty years past his prime. Riddled with cigarette and stress lines. Pock marked by wiry rat pubes and his own pickling, grumpy old man face.

"Forgotten and remembered. He's gonna remember again."

"You hope," she answered, voice soft and just a touch sad even as she tried to drag him back to reality. Meeting her gaze in the mirror for a moment, Richie suddenly turned on a heel, and had shut himself in the bathroom in less than three full strides.

When he emerged again, it was in a cloud of heady mint and evergreen cologne, and with a clean shaven face. After four different shirt attempts (with another six still waiting in his suitcase for him to panic), Richie had settled on a deep crimson. One of the only two solid colors, which felt dishonest in its own way. If only he had known he was going to regret packing every single plant-print short sleeve button up that he owned. At least this one had whole long actual sleeves, with buttons at the ends (which he had rolled half way up his forearms rather than buttoning), like how most adults dressed themselves, let alone for a special occasion. Not that the Thai place they had landed on for their meet cute looked like it had a dress code. At least, he hoped not, because even his best black jeans weren't going to meet anything labeled "a standard".

For a moment, the two on the bed were utterly silent, while Richie stared at them expectantly. The tension became too much in a matter of heart beats and his arms flung apart in silent demand, splayed and then gesturing toward himself from shoulders to knees.

"Can I get a dog whistle, at least?" he asked, voice cracking at the end.

"Looks great," Ben offered, his smile genuine as it finally stretched across his face, as he rolled to put his feet back on the floor, not quite standing.

"Good to see your face again," Bev added, beaming.

Chapter End Notes

So long depression beard, gone but never forgotten.
Chapter Six: Bill

Bill's POV. Read instead of or in addition to Stan's POV.

The glaring summer sun had gone from orange to pink in the time it took to get to the stretch of road running parallel to the Barrens. Which didn’t take very long driving, especially in comparison to all the biking and walking all over town and back again they had accomplished in their youth. Bill found it harder to fit his car close enough to the curb to count as parking than it was to just drop his bike in the grass and go. But since he had seen only one or two cars this whole time, he couldn’t imagine it being a problem anyway.

The grass was tall enough for him to worry more about ticks than he ever had as a child. These days he was in long pants more often than not, so there was at least more protection there than in his mom's reduce-reuse-recycle shorts she whipped up for him with just some scissors, a tape measure, and last winter’s jeans. At some point, Bill imagined, the grass had been hip high, rather than knee.

"What are we looking for?" he asked Mike, who was milling around the field with Stanley, out of reach. So far, just under his shoes, Bill had spotted only plastic bottles and snack wrappers, none of which he could imagine meaning very much to Stan.

"Not we," Mike reminded Bill. "It’s Stanley’s responsibility to find his own artifact, remember?"

Bill had to wonder why he even had to be there then. It wasn't that hard to justify staying close, leading the way. But Mike could manage that just fine; after all, he knew so much more about all of this. He had made that abundantly clear. Bill was there for his car, and because he had been the most convenient to find.

But as both his and Mike’s gazes fell on Stanley, it dawned on him that maybe they were afraid that the next time they looked, he might not be there. Gone without a trace, like he had really been a ghost after all.

"I don't know," Stan said, glancing around the tall grass pensively.

"That's okay," Mike assured him. "Take your time. It doesn't have to come right away."

Enough silent seconds wound by, while they all turned their heads back and forth, to and fro, searching aimlessly. Bill sighed, answered by cicadas, and birds far away. The symphony of summer that signalled impending nightfall.

"I don't remember there being this much fucking litter," he muttered, sliding a beer can along the brush with the toe of his boot. There had been trash, for sure, but Bill remembered beer bottles mostly. Glass in greens and browns, which was its own kind of disgusting, but somehow fuzzy and bittersweet in his mind’s eye. The decor of gentrified city restaurants.

With nothing better to do, he crouched to collect the can, as long as he was touching it anyway. Some chip bags and plastic bottles made their way into his arms in his effort to declutter the Barrens before this version of them became the version he remembered forever.
Bill strained to retrieve a candy wrapper from beneath a wiry shrub, feeling the brambles scratch against his shoulder over his sleeve. Before he could quite reach it though there was an explosion of brown in his face that chirped angrily at the same moment he cried out in panic, and landed square on his ass in a startled heap.

Overhead the bird he had scared out of its hiding spot flapped away indignantly, until it disappeared into the trees at the slope of the woods.

"Oh, s-s-suh-sorry!" Bill called meekly, cringing as a sensation he could only describe as “oops” squeezed his ribs. The suddenly tense line of Stan’s shoulders beneath his starched shirt was enough to glue Bill in place, even as his chucks slipped down the damp earth incline in increments.

"It's fine," Stan yelled back, dropping his big black binoculars away from his face to squint into the afternoon sun. Fine could mean so many different things from Stanley, but when he didn't kill Bill on site with his eyes alone, Bill figured that meant he was at least mostly forgiven, and that it was safe to venture further. By the time he stumbled his way to level ground, Stan had come to meet him sort of halfway.

"What are you doing here?" Stan asked, feet rising high as he stepped out of the taller grasses and up the incline. Khaki shorts rucked up with each hike of his knees, his socks pulled to his shins, brown boots laced up to the tops of his ankles instead of the usual white sneakers.

"R-r-Richie said Eddie p-puh-pr-promised to meet you here, but Eddie s-said it was Richie ins-t-t-stead," Bill explained to the best of his abilities, remembering the stubborn argument that was probably still taking place at Richie’s house in front of the Pong controllers. "S-so I said I'd come but, I didn't mean t-to-to..."

Well, interrupt the one thing Stanley had come here to do. Stan huffed with some disappointment, and Bill wondered if he should have come at all. But the thought of Stan alone in the Barrens stirred a mild anxiety that took some precedent over a stupid video game.

Now, he was feeling anxious for a different reason, though.

"It was in the bushes, I b-buh-bh-bet I can find another one if I'm q-qu-quiet." Bill scooted around Stanley and hunkered down, denim shorts slipping up so his bare knees made contact with the soft ground, yellow grass tickling his skin. Most of the shrubbery in the Barrens was patchy and sparse, and Bill had a feeling if he angled his head just right he could see through the branches and leaves without jostling enough to cause another flightful escape. As little as he knew about bird watching, he couldn’t imagine it being that difficult. Watching was easy enough, and birds were everywhere.

"It's fine, really," Stan said again. "Anything could have scared it off."

"Wuh-w-what did it look like?" Bill asked resolutely. He didn’t mean to ignore Stan, but he wanted to help, and that meant forging on. It was a relief when his friend dropped down into the grass beside him at least, if a surprise to find him so close to the damp dirt.

"I'm not a hundred percent sure," Stan finally offered reluctantly, quietly, "I saw a white belly, and either brown or gray plumage. It was hard to tell in the shadows."

White belly, brown or gray plumage. Bill thought it to himself like a mantra as he ducked around the leaves. The rattled off description somehow left him charmed, listening with some interest in addition to necessity. Where Richie had videogames and Ben had his frequent trips to the library, Stan had taken to this new hobby that so often found him out in the sun this summer, albeit away from the losers. It was actually fascinating, to watch the interest unfold.
"It might have been a dark-eyed junco, I couldn't see the head well enough to tell it apart from a winter wren, though I was sure for a moment that I saw a golden crown so I was-"

Flighty tweeting brought Stan to stillness, his arm lifting to point towards Bill's right. "Do you hear that?" he whispered. "I can't make any sense of the book's call descriptions but I think that's the same one I heard earlier."

Bill hadn't paid enough attention to catch the birdsong (as if he could really identify it), but he followed the line of Stan's arm nonetheless, tucking into an army crawl resolutely. Crooking around a drapey cluster of spiderwebs, Bill peered through the low growing branches, squinting slightly at the light that filtered in. Afraid even breathing would be too loud, his shallow breaths filtered past his parted lips.

"I s-s-suh-see a nest," he murmured quickly, lifting a bit to adjust his perspective. Bill couldn't see any babies from where he was but a bigger bird sat on a slightly higher, spindly branch. It was brown, but all of a sudden he couldn't remember the other colors Stan mentioned.

Stan reached down to take up his binoculars again. Leaning forward allowed him to align the scope with Bill's gaze, hand close enough between them that Bill could feel knuckles against his cheek. Stan's head bobbed slightly, leaning in closer and forward. More than accustomed to his varying degrees of politeness, between excuse mes in the moments when he wasn't concerned with making himself as small of a nuisance as possible, as well as ruthless efforts to budge between friends to secure his spot, Bill tolerated the suddenly cramped space in front of the shrub. He didn't dare move, for fear of startling another bird, and just in case his direction was all that crucial. His mother had just subjected him to scissors and clippers the day before so his bangs weren't long enough to protect his cheek from the tickle of Stan's springy curls that had him biting his tongue to keep from squirreling away.

With the binoculars up to Stanley's face, all was quiet and still for a moment. Terrified of ruining things again, Bill adjusted his focus to meaningless details, things he couldn't fudge up. The black plastic Stan's hands curled around; the tick of his watch just inches away (it was almost two PM, Bill noticed); the scent of ivory soap tinged ever so slightly with clean sweat.

"Another winter wren." Stan finally broke the silence, binoculars tipped down again. "I saw the first one this morning." The put upon note to his breath made Bill purse his mouth in unspoken apology. As if it was his fault that the bird in the bush was not the one they were looking for (though it was definitely his fault the last one had flown away).

Stan opened his book between his hands to a tabbed page. "They must be clustered in this area. I guess the golden crown was a fluke. Or maybe just a junco. They're both fairly common around here but the shrubbery isn't exactly what they look for, at least this early in the season."

Sure enough the picture in Stan's guide matched the bird Bill had pointed out, but as Stan had already catalogued it, it wasn't of much use. Beyond things like color and shape, Bill himself probably wasn't much use either, if he couldn't even be quiet.

"Oh," Bill muttered, not quite understanding, but sympathetic all the same. "Sorry." He moved to sit back on his haunches before the cramp in his neck and wrists got too bad. Angled just a bit further up and away, his eyes trailed over the halo of tight coils on Stan's head, lingering on a small green heart shape caught in the blond thatch.

Without thinking about it very much, Bill plucked the leaf out of Stan's hair and held it out to him, sporting a tilted, encouraging smile. "M-muh-maybe next time. If they're Maine native I'm sh-shuh-sh-sh-shure you'll see one again. We could ask B-b-Bev to keep an eye out in P-p-p-puh-Portland."
Maybe even find one themselves, if they went to visit. But Bill was hesitant to make such a suggestion, when the prospect of going by himself to visit his girlfriend dangled in his thoughts. As if his mom would ever let him take the train out that far on his own.

Stan smiled, and his eyes flickered to the leaf. When he reached for it, their hands brushed together, fingers fumbling with the trade-off.

"Portland is in a good area for golden crowns," Stan murmured, turning away as he shut the book and the leaf disappeared from Bill's sights.

"I should be getting home," he added, tilting his wrist to check his watch. "Thank you, for coming."

Bill's smile slipped into surprised acknowledgement. His fingers, now curled around nothing, fell into his lap. The denim was abrasive on his fingertips as he rubbed along his legs idly, chasing some lost sensation or another.

"Oh, okay," Bill said, trying not to sound disappointed or anything else besides neutral, even as his mind supplied for him that he had barely been there five minutes. Apparently Stan had been there longer, though, and everyone knew Mr. and Mrs. Uris were strict about when to be home.

Still, he couldn't help but think maybe his fuck up was a little bit responsible for the departure.

"S-s-suh-sorry about the bird," he mentioned one more time before Stan got up and left for good. Sighing in an effort to blow all the guilt up and out of his lungs, Bill dropped back onto the grass and let the blue sky and creamy clouds fill his vision.

"You okay?" Mike asked, grinning and stifling laughter as he offered his hand. Blinking, bits and pieces of garbage scattered around him, Bill accepted and their palms clapped together. But he was distracted by a conversation playing back in his mind. Somewhere deep in his chest, his heart was beating fast - from the bird assault, he imagined.

"I remember being here with Stan," he announced with some disbelief after grunting his way to standing, seeking out his second companion until his eyes landed on Stanley's tall form. "But, I didn't before just now. I thought I remembered everything from Derry, but...this was different."

Mike's brows raised over his eyes, no longer trying not to giggle at Bill's expense. "Just now?"

He found Stan next, turning over his shoulder. "Maybe it's because you weren't here with us, that Bill and the others don't remember you outside the group. It's just a theory. Do you remember, though?"

Stan stared at them with sudden knowing. Bill saw it in his eyes.

"I remember being here," Stan answered what Bill already knew, his voice lifted a bit to carry to them, limited though the distance was. "Bill came to join me."

Like sinking below water only to break the surface again, coming back up with the new recollection had been natural, but left Bill with an entirely new sensation. He and Stanley had taken the plunge together. Among several other moments throughout his life he spent in the Barrens, this one solidified itself on his internal timeline. They might have just started high school, maybe earlier.

Not very long after that summer. A slow cold gripped Bill at the thought, the question of how many links might be missing from his memories simply because Stan hadn't physically been in Derry last time slowing his pulse to a crawl.
"How many memories did it take to find your artifacts?" Stan asked suddenly. "Or to figure them out. Did you know already?"

Bill considered last year a moment before he answered. "It just sort of happened," he said, only to realize how unhelpful that was. "It's like, you remember one and it starts to snowball. I found my bike, I rode past my house, and then the storm drain..." A chill slid up his spine, even now. Even after all the ghosts had been laid to rest (though one stood in front of him, and the other threatened to come back).

"Mine was Georgie's boat," he stated. He still hadn't completely let go of that guilt, even if it didn't consume him the way it had before. The things - the important things, he thought, flashes of gold and bronze shining past his mind's eye that he couldn't quite make out - this town made you forget.

"I didn't forget anything though," Mike proclaimed, reminded them, drawing Bill back. “Not a single day. You know what, I think I know where to go next.”

Mike cast a long look around the Barrens (living up to their name), seeming to decide that this place had outlived its usefulness in more ways than one. Besides, the sun was going down. With the dark was coming another unknown infringement on their mystery deadline. Time was ticking on a clock Bill couldn’t see.
Climbing out of the car again, Stan lamented the loss of the air conditioning, even if the early evening offered slowly dropping temperatures, and a light breeze that ruffled his hair against his forehead. Anxious fingers tugged his sleeve cuffs back into place as he moved to catch up to the others.

The road was familiar enough, nondescript and a gentle level of decay that reminded him of too many back routes home from work, just as easily seen on the news as a staple of his childhood. As he marched forward, Stan felt the same about the covered bridge and the swaying grasses that separated the gravel from the tree line, sloping hills toward a sunken stream.

Bill's voice drew his attention back, startled to find he had out paced the sound of his swishing strides. “What are we looking for?”

"Not we," Mike answered diligently. "It's Stanley’s responsibility to find his *own* artifact, remember?"

Stan’s gaze glided along the midpoint of their surroundings, his thoughts returning to Mike's earlier description. Artifact. Token. Something to connect him to Derry, to his childhood. To It.

His eyes fell shut for a moment, a visceral, instinctive disquiet rising to resist the mere thought of It. Stomach turning, Stan opened his eyes again, quite forcefully. A moment of weakness was all It needed - no, all his own mind needed, to convince him of things that he knew were no longer there. The Losers had won, It was dead. And allowing himself to be consumed by fear for a second (or third, or fourth - did he even know?) time was the only thing that could possibly let It come back.

He felt his friends' attention like the blast of an opening oven door - and in the same manner, knew to expect it, even as he dove face first, holiday mitt in place.

And when he looked at them, Stan saw only their faces. Strange in the way that growing old could do - always obvious in hindsight. A baby picture beside an aging face became the obvious transformation. At fourteen, though, he could have never imagined them as they were now. How strange to recognize that which one has never seen.

"I don't know," Stan answered, uncertain if his voice would make it to them over the wind. This wasn't the kind of searching he did. No way to pull up a lead on his phone. Only what he could see, and what he couldn't remember.

"That's okay," Mike assured him. "Take your time. It doesn't have to come right away."

It eventually occurred to Stan, as Mike and Bill started moving, that maybe he should start moving too. That his movement was probably the most pertinent of all. Ducking his chin against his chest to search the ground, he found himself shifting perspective to see down into the grass and bushes.

At some point, Stan lowered to crouch - still eager to keep his clothes from the dirt, though. So far
the stakes didn’t seem high enough to justify sullying his only outfit - since now, it was the only one he owned. It occurred to him rather suddenly, and woefully late, that he had failed to suggest that they stop off at either of their hotels before their seven hour drive. His backpack full of clean underwear and socks, and the mini fridge full of microwave meals, and his bag of oranges on the side table beside his neatly made bed (no doubt already stripped and redone, perhaps even cleared out considering his failure to return). All lost to him now.

A dark mound in a thicket of leafy branches drew his gaze. In retrospect, he wasn’t sure why, because there wasn’t anything immediately notable about it. It could have been a clump of dirt, or an old shoe. Nothing Stanley cared to inspect or even touch, honestly.

It was neither of those things, though. It was an empty nest.

Blinking slowly, Stan pried the branches down precariously to glimpse over the leaves. It was a cluster of twigs all built into a sturdy structure that had at some point held eggs, and hatchlings. A scrap of a blue speckled shell lay curved against the rough cup of the interior. Even small, fractured at the edges, it might have been the most delicate thing he had ever seen.

He might have reached out to lift it with his pinky finger - only for a bird to squawk over his shoulder, catching his attention as he whipped away.

Still as a stone statue in December, Stan adjusted the dial on his double lenses once, infinitesimally, more. Freshly purchased binoculars lacked the wear they would eventually earn, leaving the dial stiff and difficult to adjust with no more than the pressure of his middle finger tip, all while attempting to keep his gaze solidly on the gray and brown tufts. All he needed was for the bird to dip its head down just enough for him to spot the golden crown that marked the kinglet he was after, but just as beak and beady eyes became visible, crouching down, Stan watched it vanish from sight in a flurry of movement.

Attempting to follow its path was impossible the moment it left the frame of his telescoped line of sight, and Stan dropped the binoculars to try following its arc of movement into the sky instead. The sun blinded him as it reached its peak, his eyes squinting and burning as he dropped them, to find Bill standing at the edge of the trees.

"Oh, s-s-suh-sorry!" he called, looking like he might turn around to escape if he wasn't tripping his way down the slope.

"It's fine," Stanley answered, voice a little louder than he might have liked simply because there were still other birds to be seen in the area, and shouting might counter that reassuring truth. Never mind that he had not heard his own voice since arriving in the Barrens, and to no longer be alone so unexpectedly (no matter how unexpected being alone had been) was a little jarring.

"What are you doing here?" Stan asked, his feet rising high as he stepped out of the taller grasses and up the incline where Bill was slipping down. Khaki shorts protected him to his knees, with his socks pulled high to protect his shins, but the brown boots laced up to the tops of his ankles offered little protection from the deep, lingering dew.

"R-r-Richie said Eddie p-puh-pr-promised to meet you here, but Eddie s-said it was Richie ins-t-t-instead," Bill explained with halting detail. "S-so I said I'd come but, I didn't mean t-to-to...

A sigh escaped Stan, lips pressed in a thin, dry smile as he glanced down at his book. Of course, when he had first arrived, it was early enough to expect that Richie was on his way, but a few glances at his watch had changed his mind about waiting. Since then, his focus had been on the silent, distant search of the brush and canopy. By now, there was no surprise left in him to be
applied to the answer of a question he hadn't bothered to ask.

"It was in the bushes, I b-buh-bh-bet I can find another one if I'm q-qu-quiet." Bill scooted around Stanley and hunkered down, all the way to his hands and knees. Stan nearly gasped at the wet earth that spread against the edge of his frayed shorts, just barely catching on the denim.

"It's fine, really," he said again, a little more emphasis now that they were close enough not to be shouting across the swaying grass. "Anything could have scared it off." Setting his binoculars down against his chest, he tucked his book beneath his arm, and wiped a hand through his hair, fingers coming away damp with sweat.

"Wuh-w-what did it look like?" Bill went on, head halfway into the bushes as he flagrantly ignored Stan's statement. Watching him crouch down and start crawling was at least reassuring in its own weird, harrowing sort of way (which was sometimes the best kind of reassuring Bill managed to be). Stan hesitated only a moment longer before moving to follow, one hand out to brace a fall while the other held the book clutched to his chest.

"I'm not a hundred percent sure," he answered quietly, "I saw a white belly, and either brown or gray plumage. It was hard to tell in the shadows." And he had completely failed to see its colors when it hit the sunshine. "It might have been a dark-eyed junco, I couldn't see the head well enough to tell it apart from a winter wren, though I was sure for a moment that I saw a golden crown so I was-" A tittering echo drew Stan's attention for a moment, his arm lifting to point towards Bill's right.

"Do you hear that?" he whispered. "I can't make any sense of the book's call descriptions but I think that's the same one I heard earlier."

"I s-s-suh-see a nest," Bill murmured back, lifting a bit to adjust his perspective. Finally planting his knees into the wet dirt, his socks immediately growing cold against him as they sapped the minimal moisture, Stan reached down to take up his binoculars again. Leaning forward allowed him to align the scope with Bill's gaze, his hand close enough between them to feel the heat of the other's cheek while he focused through silvering spiderwebs. His head bobbed slightly, shifting closer to the direct trajectory, until he felt the press of Bill's hair against his own, crushing curls to the shell of his ear while warm breath fanned over the back of his wrist and across his lips.

Tucking the binoculars down ever so slightly, Stan was able to glance over the black rim of the eye pieces, and spy the nest against the less tightly cross-stitched flora. Despite laying eyes directly upon it, he could not stop his gaze from shifting sidelong, until the slope of Bill's nose came into focus. His nostrils flared with concentration around the round, rosy tip, a tick he had possessed for as long as Stan had known him, almost cute in a-

Another trill of bird call drew him back. The flutter of movement offered enough for him to zero in on the tuft of gray speckles, and as he took in the pattern, Stan breathed a depleting sigh. Triple amplified lenses confirmed it as he lifted them again, the focus just barely off perfect - close enough for him to find a black beak amongst the shadowed foliage.

"Another winter wren," he whispered, not quite disappointed enough to break the spell that their still and silent existence offered to the tense moment. "I saw the first one this morning." Unfolding the book, he flipped behind his bookmark - they were alphabetical in each region, after all - and tilted it over their bent knees for Bill to see his inscription, marked on the glossy page in sharp black lines beside the type font print.

"They must be clustered in this area. I guess the golden crown was a fluke. Or maybe just a junco. They're both fairly common around here but the shrubbery isn't exactly what they look for, at least
this early in the season."

Finally, it took little more than the put upon note to Stan's breath for Bill to purse his mouth in unspoken apology. As if it was his fault that the bird in the bush was not the one they were looking for (though it was definitely his fault the last one had flown away). "Oh," he muttered, not quite understanding, but sympathetic all the same.

"Oh." Bill's full lips twisted apologetically, brow tight and furrowed. "Sorry."

Lips thinning, Stan's cheek pinched with a wry smile, half rolling his eyes to glance at Bill as the other settled back. The sudden chill of the air that replaced him was enough to make the dirty-blond shiver. He felt a bit guilty for letting himself sound so upset about something so trivial.

Just as he opened his mouth to offer more reassurance than a bitter, passive aggressive fine, Stan fell still instead. Bill reached toward him and just as Stan was about to flinch, gentle, unfettered fingers tweaked what might have been a single strand of hair behind his ear - only to present him with a curled, not quite crisp birch leaf.

Bill smiled, all better. "M-muh-maybe next time. If they're Maine native I'm sh-shuh-sh-sure you'll see one again. We could ask B-b-Bev to keep an eye out in P-p-puh-Portland."

Almost on a reflex, Stan reached up to take the offering, his binoculars thumping against his chest as it swung free. The impact couldn't compete with the hammer trying to beat its way out of his rib cage.

Aiming for the short stem, he held his breath as the tips of their fingers overlapped and slid together, certain that he was imagining the sound of it. Like two sheets of paper dragging in opposing directions. And behind that sight, green eyes watching him, doing their damnedest to glimmer in the splintered light that reached them all the way down here. His gaze dipped toward the twice bowed expanse of pink lips.

"Portland is in a good area for golden crowns," Stan murmured, his tone as informative as it was comforted by the suggestion, and he returned the smile only as his face turned away, impulsively tucking the leaf in beside the picture of the winter wren before he folded it closed.

"I should be getting home," he added, checking his watch a moment afterward - as if he were suddenly terrified of being questioned. "Thank you, for coming."

Not even the disappointment that flashed across Bill's face could keep kim from standing, bustling by politely with the guide tucked to his chest. "Oh, okay."

As Stanley absconded once and for all, a final stuttering Sorry followed him out of the Barrens, and he had to fight not to yell back to shut up. With confusing apologies of his own rising in his chest, making him flush and bewildered, Stan could hardly bear to hear them.

“I remember being here with Stan.”

Shocked out of a distant moment by the sound of his name - the voice foreign in its depth despite the familiarity lingering in the sudden, vivid memory - Stan turned to watch Mike haul Bill to his feet, startled to the ground by an angry bird. Considering the sudden and disorienting shift of being absent of existence (which, in hindsight, had blown most of his afterlife expectations right out of the water) to being reborn from a frozen, stainless steel womb (well, tomb ), Stan rather thought that he had peaked on out of body experiences.

That didn't really count, though, did it? Since this was the same body. Stretched and thickened and
marked by age in lines and scars and freckles. He hadn't left. Instead, the experience had been drawn
toward him like a bucket from a well, into which he was terrified by the thought of looking. Still,
much like last time, Stan felt like a stranger to himself under the new circumstances.

"But, I didn't before just now," Bill elaborated to Mike. “I thought I remembered everything from
Derry, but...this was different."

“Just now?” Mike asked, shocked.

As the two of them looked toward Stan, he felt his back straighten under the scrutiny, expression
relaxing half consciously. His cheeks blazed with the sensation that he had been caught doing
something untoward, on the brink of consequence and regret.

"Maybe it's because you weren't here with us, that Bill and the others don't remember you outside the
group," Mike explained. “It's just a theory. Do you remember, though?"

"I remember being here," Stan answered, his voice lifted a bit to carry to them, limited though the
distance was. "Bill came to join me." The way that Bill looked at him then made him hesitate,
wondering if a memory could be shared, wondering what that implied was happening to them.
Wondering if it was the only available method of finding his way back.

"How many memories did it take to find your artifacts?" he asked, "Or to figure them out. Did you
know already?"

"It just sort of happened," Bill said, stunted every few phrases as he seemed to come back to himself.
"It's like, you remember one and it starts to snowball. I found my bike, I rode past my house, and
then the storm drain… Mine was Georgie's boat."

Stan’s mind filled with a young, round face he hadn’t cared to remember in thirty years - his best
friend’s kid brother. The impetus for all their efforts, he realized with mounting dread. The first
disappearance that made everything feel too close to home, his parents and then the town at large
bustling him and his peers home before the sun went down. If he had forgotten that, what else was
lost to him?

They needed to move on. Now, fast. There was no way of knowing how long this would take but
the angle of the sun over trees, purpling the sky, drove a fear of the dark into his bones he had
learned not to remember. As if he could retreat into the comfort of a lit room, though. Stan knew
better. Their task had barely even begun.
Paul Richards’ first memories were of room 3B in Overlook Hospital. That wasn’t a joke about how he could remember the day he was born or some shit, it was the truth. Predawn with a breathing tube shoved down his throat and his bare chest bound in heavy gauze. Not fun, very painful. Forty years old (they estimated), without a clue in the world. So maybe it was like the day he was born, in some fucked up way.

The doctor told him he’d been found in the wreckage of a building collapse in town during the cleanup, and that he was lucky to be alive. Suffered a few broken bones, head trauma; stitches held his cheek together and there was a hole through his chest where he had probably been impaled on a pipe or support beam, if he could just fill them in on the details. It was a miracle he was alive, and that there was no severe damage to his spine. But that was the thing - Paul didn’t know the details. This was all news to him. You’d think you’d remember being impaled.

He had been comatose for most of his recovery, the surgeries and everything. What the doctors told him would be a couple days, maybe a week of memory loss from his head injury, turned into weeks plural. And then a month, and then two months. And then long enough that he had overstayd his welcome and was due to be discharged. Which was fine. Paul hated the hospital with a passion. He didn’t know why. Everyone was mostly nice and helpful even if the food sucked. It was just a gut feeling. All he had were gut feelings. A memory would have been nice in contrast, but none came.

So he gave himself a name and filled out the necessary documents that solidified his new identity, since it seemed the old one wouldn’t be coming back anytime soon. He had a modest room in a local halfway house, where they put struggling aimless people such as himself (crackheads and delinquents if he wanted to feel mean and sorry for himself). He got a temp job in a travel agency - only for that place to go under, and then he got sent to an insurance office, virtually the same job. Filing, answering phone calls, taking coffee orders. He wasn’t meant to be there forever, but as life stretched on for Paul Richards and not whoever the fuck had gotten buried under rubble last year, it seemed like forever was the only option.

Derry was not the kind of town Paul would ever choose to settle down in. All around him businesses fell through and buildings got boarded up and left behind. Houses were sold or foreclosed and families got the hell out of dodge. There was a gray decay to the whole place and he was terrified it might touch him if he didn’t get out soon. He didn’t want to get left behind either. It might have already happened.

He didn’t belong there. That was for certain.

Paul was vaguely sure of a few more certainties. One, that he was absolutely, positively ill-suited to a claustrophobic desk job. Another, that the pharmacy on the corner across from his office gave him the heebie jeebies, and he would walk the extra ten minutes to the gas station convenience store down the street if he could stand it.

A third, that insurance salesman sometimes looked pretty alright with their sleeves rolled up and their
hair slicked back.

“Sorry your computer’s down,” Debbie the receptionist told him, only sounding perfunctory-sorry as she led him into the manager’s office one afternoon. “You can confirm these clients on Evan’s computer while he’s at lunch. You’ve got a little under an hour so be quick about it.”

The hand-holding was getting super annoying but no one seemed to understand that after a couple months he’d learned to fend for himself. An overwhelming majority treated Paullike he was slow in the head which he definitely was not. If anything, everyone around him was. He jiggled the mouse to wake up the monitor before Debbie could waste ten minutes turning the computer off and back on again.

She left him alone and Paul was greeted by his boss’s generic desktop wallpaper. When he opened the internet browser to access the company portal, the first thing that popped up was a dating profile that he probably was absolutely not supposed to see.

But that didn’t stop Paul from seeing a little more.

“All good in here?” Debbie asked five minutes later, peeping in past the door. Paul closed the browser sporadically but by then he had already copied down the web address on a sticky note and shoved it in his pocket.

The desktop in his halfway house was communal, but luckily he found an app and managed to split the time he spent creating his profile between computer and phone. Paul felt pretty clever for propping his phone up against some books to record the mandatory introduction video where he stated his likes and dislikes, a little bit about himself and all that fluff. He talked absolutely too fast and had to record it three different times but eventually he came out with something decent. If he sat in his desk chair parallel to the window in his room then the light came in on his right side and did a pretty good job hiding the puckered scar on his cheek then that was nobody’s business but his own.

Paul didn’t expect results immediately; he was a boring-looking middle-aged man past a prime he didn’t even remember, who had been all kinds of vague about his life and personality. He wasn’t even sure it was a good idea, to jump into dating not even a year into his “new” life. But he was sure of one thing - another certainty, if you will. He wanted out of Derry. This was one way to make that happen.

If he had realized when he first messaged Richie Tozier that he was a fucking Netflix comedian, he probably wouldn’t have bothered. It was probably a universal constant that celebrities just don’t date temps. Not to mention, a full memory bank was probably a prerequisite for talking to famous people. But Paul didn’t realize exactly who he was dealing with until a few messages in and at that point they were both interested and even his own overwhelming embarrassment couldn’t fix that.

He didn’t know why he was interested. Tozier really did look like a castaway, not even in a hipster kinda way - just straight up marooned for days straight. He had a big forehead and from certain angles he could probably play an orc if they ever remade Lord of the Rings. Definitely not the quintessential dream guy of homosexual fantasy (not that Paul could say much better about himself but at least he shaved). It was easy enough to chalk up the interest to he’s funny, when he realized where he had seen Richie from, but even that didn’t really explain the innate draw Paul had experienced when he found Tozier’s profile. Maybe he had just been feeling risky.

And now they were going to meet. In Derry, which wasn’t ideal, but if Paul made a good impression (and some extra cash) then maybe he would have an excuse to fly out to sunny L.A. Maybe he could really enjoy his life as Paul Richards instead of slogging through it. Maybe Richie would find him charming and funny and handsome and all those other nice things.
Paul just looked a lot better over text than in person. He hoped Richie didn’t have his big celebrity hopes up very high.

It probably would have been a good idea to go inside and secure a table just to get the evening off to a smooth start, but instead, Paul loitered outside the restaurant like a vagrant. The idea of sitting alone at a table for two only to glance up every time the door opened turned his stomach a little, but that hadn’t stopped him from being early (a decision he justified as host of this boring Maine adventure). And what if it was the wrong restaurant? The Thai Orchid wasn’t that unique a name. Better to wait outside for the hey-where-are-you-I’ve-been-here-for-half-an-hour message. It was summer anyway, mild and warm, so he was fine.

He balanced his hands against the wall behind him to keep the rough stucco from scraping holes or tufts out of the new polo shirt he’d gotten for just this occasion; white with a navy stripe across the front, which he realized only ten seconds ago made a perfect canvas for stray broths and sauces to stain. But it was too late now, and he thought he looked pretty okay so maybe the night would have mercy on him, because he’d been through a lot recently - lately - as long as he’d known

Clocking movement out of the corner of his eye, Paul turned, like he had every time someone walked past him since he arrived. Only this time he was justified, for once, eyes lighting up and hands raising to greet and get attention as he stepped away from the wall to call out, “Richie!”

Only to surprise himself, that he had recognized the bare, square face immediately. This castaway had been rescued!

“Oh man, you shaved,” he accused incredulously, which was absolutely not the right way under any circumstances at all ever to say hello to a date.

After he looked up, the couple steps it took Richie to approach was apparently plenty of time for the world to stop spinning just long enough for Paul to worry about the image he presented all over again. He didn’t even have convenient interior lights to help inform him whether or not Richie’s expression featured disappointment or indifference, just the stark and spotty street lamps that made the cornflower blue and purple twilight sky behind them seem like deep night by contrast. Things like Is my hair combed okay or is it combed too much or should I have dressed up just a little more I wish I could do something about this stupid scar I look like a weirdo outlaw in a Western flitted across his brain in record time.

But then Richie advanced into a hug and even though Paul flinched for the brief heartbeat when he wasn’t sure what was gonna happen when he stopped, he was (mostly) pleasantly surprised by the affectionate greeting. Blinking up toward the sky, his cheek smushed against a leather shoulder as hands unfurled across his polo shirt.

"Oh, hi," he offered on an awkward breath. It wasn't the strangest thing in the world, being clutched close like that. Kind of nice and flattering actually, and Paul wound his arms under and over to cross over Richie's broad back in a return embrace.

"It's good to see you too," he tried next. The embrace was firm and tight in a way that made him feel like a child, almost protected, like nothing could touch him beyond the circle of arms. Something vulnerable tugged at Paul’s thoughts that he couldn’t quite place, but it was gone as fast as it came, replaced by an almost fluttery proud sensation that he had made this good of an impression online.

Right before Paul might have started to consider whether or not this hug was going on for too long, Richie pulled back, allowing himself to be on (almost) full display. There was a weird pinch to his features, noticeable only if you saw past his big glasses, but as soon as Paul registered it was replaced by a broader, more gleeful expression.
"You look good," Richie breathed, excitement coloring his voice. "Glad to know those Catfished videos were actually going to my head! If I find out the food here looks as good as you do, we might have to see about to-go boxes."

For a moment there was a tightness in Paul’s chest that didn’t dissipate until he was huffing incredulously (and totally not bashfully) at what might have been a compliment, if his ears weren’t deceiving him.

"Don't add that one to your act anytime soon," Paul stated, resisting the urge to rub at or otherwise conceal his left cheek beneath his hand. It wasn't his own best line, especially not in proximity to Richie Tozier, but his thoughts were freezing up and delaying like an old computer with too many tabs open.

Dinner! They were having dinner. This wasn't a fucking stand on the street date, it was a dinner date. Unable to tolerate conversation a moment longer, not until they were seated at least, Paul made sure they made it through the vestibule lobby, and then dining room without fumbling around each other in fits of awkward antics. For all his insistence to others and himself that he was totally capable of handling things on his own over the last nine months, he suddenly felt like one wrong move would render him useless.

The best he could do to stay afloat for now, he figured, was rely on the banter that had made him seem so charming in the first place.

"Not to harp on it but it's a relief to see you have a chin after all," Paul rattled off, pointing at Richie's clean-shaven face with a chopstick he absolutely did not know how to use. "Gotta wonder about the guy who drastically changes his appearance before going on a date with someone he’s never met before. You're lucky I have Netflix and know how to use Google."

"Well, I always try to veer away from the last show," Richie answered with a laugh, scratching at his face until the skin dragged beneath his fingers. "Keeps most people from recognizing me, but I figured you wouldn't be fooled - plus, you look a little straight edge, and you know what they say!" Hands spreading, Richie tipped his head forward, brows lifted over the rim of his glasses. "A gentleman down south, but a bad boy above the mouth."

"Who the fuck is they?" Paul demanded, scoffing as he spread his hands out in inquiry, knocking the wall beside him with his chopstick. "I've never heard anyone say that ever in my entire life, you made it up." Well, probably, Paul couldn't really say for certain about anything before October, but he would bet money that he was right after all.

A fact he had been wary of ever since meeting Richie in real life had become a reality.

"People say it!" Richie countered insistently, hiding his mouth behind his fist as he laughed. Paul beamed back.

So far, so good; they were getting along great, just like they had online. There wasn't the nagging need to ask stupid questions about where you went to high school and what your parents are like because there were so many better things to talk about. But Paul knew that couldn't last forever. Especially not if he had any intention of dragging this little old thing past a first date.

He knew he had to come clean about the amnesia at some point, but even if not knowing about most of his life was a potential deal breaker, it was a downer conversation and that alone made him feel justified in keeping it to himself for a bit longer.

"Now that we've met in person, I have a confession to make," Paul began at one point, pausing only
so their server could deposit their meals on the table, sitting back so the steam from his cashew chicken didn't waft into his face. He figured his best course of action was to keep Richie the key subject of discussion for the evening, which to be honest, wasn't very hard.

"I saw all your comedy specials before we started talking and I really liked them," he finally went on, keeping his voice even so that it didn't qualify as *gushing*. "I didn't want to say so because that's just like, the fastest way to come off like a weirdo fan and turn you off but if there was ever a time I guess it's now. You're really fucking funny, man. I mean - the one from a couple years ago wasn't as good as the newest, but still."

Realizing that probably didn't qualify as very nice at all, Paul shoveled a cashew in his mouth before he got any other ideas about phrasing compliments like an asshole.

Only for Richie to react in the last way Paul expected. "Oh, thank fuck," he sighed, laughing and giggling like Paul had told a joke *himself*.

The surprisingly relieved gratitude had his brows furrowing quizzically as Richie seemed to puddle out for a moment. Maybe he had been a little overly weighty, when he came hurling phrases like *a confession to make* which were almost never good, especially not so when you had been talking to someone online for weeks and could make up anything and everything.

"That's the nicest thing anyone's ever said to me," Richie told him, all of a sudden composed as he touched his hand to his chest and tilted his head, brows scrunching over his glasses.

Paul didn't realize he'd been holding his breath, fork hovering between plate and mouth, until the return compliment left his face softening and ears warming. Even as smug flattery suffused his body, he still couldn't quite believe such a statement, coming from Richie fucking Tozier (but he's take it, either way).

"I guess you don't read the reviews," Paul said, thin lips twitching in an effort not to grin so wide he split his face open - only to decide that was almost *too* nice to follow his last statement up with, and added, "Or you just surround yourself with crotchety assholes."

"Worse," Richie retorted, glancing Paul over, "I attract them."

Suddenly Paul was taken with the urge to touch, but with one hand occupied by his fork and Richie's clutched close, his options looked pretty limited. Feeling brazen in a way he didn't think gray old Derry would ever even allow him to be, Paul dragged his foot along the floor beneath the table, just until it made contact with the firm curve of Richie's shoe (which wasn't too hard with those long legs bent opposite him).

"That's the nicest I get in general so don't take it for granted," he mentioned softly, eye contact a straight and narrow bridge as Richie stared at him wide-eyed. "Just forewarning you."

Just as he seemed to collect himself, Richie's foot turned and pressed against his, and it was all Paul could do to keep his mouth together, hiding behind the curl of his knuckles as his face blazed.

"Joke's on you," Richie huffed. "I like 'em small and mean."

Richie, Paul decided just now, was a lot more attractive in person than pictures or video gave him credit for. He couldn't quite place exactly what it was. Maybe a combination of things. His stupid but good-natured quips had a way of making his eyes glitter, especially behind thick lenses that only proved to magnify them. And that genuine, hands cupped around a reddening face flavor of laughter was so rare, at least to Eddie. How could you disdain something so pure?
There was really no placing the attraction, it was just an honest sort of thing. At the risk of totally jumping the gun, there was something about Richie that made Paul feel like he'd known him his whole life.

"Ha-ha. Lay the fuck off man," Paul retorted, lifting his foot briefly to kick Richie in the shin just enough to get the point across (though it didn't stop him from finding his place again, even advancing enough to feel a warm ankle against his own, layers of sock and pant and all). "Going for my height, low blow - no pun intended!"

Somehow Paul managed to finish off his meal between rambling accounts and responses (since he couldn't justify eating and talking at the same time, no matter what Richie did), his belly hurting from a couple shared bouts of laughter that had definitely drawn the curious and frustrated gazes of other patrons. He was polishing off his glass of water when the dessert menu made its way into his hands (which just happened to be the backside of the regular menu).

"I don't really like matcha, unless I'm sick," Paul complained lightly, though there were a couple more options on the menu than that. He couldn't imagine sitting there three feet away any longer, just to down some ice cream that would leave him chilly and over full.

"I don't like matcha, at all," Richie agreed sagely.

"It sucks about your second date rule," Paul murmured, just this side of dramatic as he set his cheek in his hand (the left one, maybe still a little self-conscious), pulling out this schtick now for the second time (one trick pony), "or I'd suggest one of our places. I guess I still could, if you're into blanket forts and card games before bed."

Eyes flicking up over the menu, Richie was dropping it a second later, leaning across the cleared table to whisper conspiratorially. "Well, there's still time to go on a second date right now. But I made a vow to my ten year old self never to turn down blanket forts and card games before bed."

Suddenly he shot up, for no apparent reason, and Paul startled back. "Do you have adequate supplies or should we go see how many extra pillows the Holiday Inn manager will give me before I start getting convenience charges?"

At that point, it became a race to get their bill paid. Even in their apparent haste, Paul feeling coy and accomplished just knowing why Richie was rushing and who it was for, he stopped to unwrap a fortune cookie, tearing the clear plastic between his fingers. Only for Richie to yank him up by his arm, the whole thing toppling out of his hands.

"I know my fortune," Richie explained, hand planted on Paul’s lower back as they rushed out to the parking lot, snickering together all the while. "I call shotgun."
Chapter Seven: Richie

Chapter Notes

Richie's POV. Read instead of or in addition to Paul's POV.

The further away from the hotel he got, the more certain Richie was that he had fallen asleep on a flight and dreamed everything since then. Half the streets in Derry were desolate, dotted with broken lights and dark windows between the sepia-toned spotlight-lined shop signs. Even just calling a taxi felt like they were surprised and annoyed to be getting business. Hell, the driver hadn't even had the wherewithal to drop him near an entrance, which left Richie sneaking hesitantly around two corners with high windows casting the top of his head in a white glow.

Deciding to wedge himself between the wall and the conifers marking the parking lot's edge was probably a mistake, but fortunately it gave way to sidewalk before Richie could start to feel like he was lost in the damn woods. Or sneaking through his neighbors' yard, drunk, again.

Gaze down, he watched his shoes appear and vanish, over and over, past the bump of his gut and caged by the taut hang of his coat, pockets pulled by the weight of his hands buried deep inside. Exciting as this moment of truth wanted to be, Richie couldn't help the churning in his stomach, not knowing what he would do if it turned out to be exactly as impossible as he feared. Would his career survive jail time for beating a stranger to death - for a second time, technically? Just for stealing the wrong internet selfie?

Stealing the wrong internet selfie couldn't compare to the nagging, confident, suspicion riddled certainty that Richie knew who he was talking to. Even if who he was talking to didn't remember who he was. Memory loss seemed to be a common theme for the Loses club, after all.

“Richie!”

His stride stopped short in the middle of the sidewalk when his voice was called, his chin startled up and eyes wide as he took in the sight. Spotlighted as if on a bar-corner stage, Eddie was hallowed in halogen light, looking almost overwhelmingly like someone named Paul. More importantly, looking very much alive and upright and undamaged, which was valiantly, violently, overzealously different from the last time he had laid eyes on the man.

“Oh man, you shaved,” Eddie called in his wiry voice, as if that was the most important thing he could say at the moment.

In desperate need of confirmation, Richie forced his feet forward, his hands sliding free of his pockets and following through on the motion so strongly that he had no time to resist the swing before his arms were around Eddie's shoulders, just a bit too tight as he drew the shorter man against his chest and buried his face in the crook of his shoulder. He smelled the same, maybe with a different after shave, but Eddie Kaspbrak nonetheless, and Richie wasn't sure that he had the self control necessary to release him.

"Oh, hi," he grunted, the shock not lost on Richie. “It’s good to see you too.”

Keeping his breathing even, much like conscious control over his own damn limbs, was so powerful
a struggle it was not worth the resistance, at first. Each ticking, thrumming, pounding heart beat felt like another strike on a tolling bell, another shovel of dirt over his grave, threatening at any moment to be the moment that Eddie shoved him away, no longer interested in tolerating the cognitive nonsense of a recently mostly sober comedian from across the country.

On the brink of thinking he had crossed a "there he is, officer" line, Richie stopped short of actually managing to release his grip with a half-gasped breath at the mere touch of Eddie's arms, slinking around him in that lines and angles way that the scrawnier man moved. Richie swallowed a lump threatening to split his tonsils in half, and after another few - lingering, self indulgent - moments, he managed to lift his head without needing to sniffle or swipe at unwanted moisture on his face. As if reassuring himself, the taller brunet stared down into bright amber eyes, shining in the yellow light of the buzzing lamps above them, his gaze trailing briefly over the pink mark on one cheek before sweeping down the rest of him.

"You look good," Richie breathed finally, the stretch of his beaming grin difficult to initiate but effortless to follow through with as he stared down at a face he had feared he would never see again. One that would fade from memory all over again. One that he had been too cowardly to even imagine, let alone hope, at one point, to watch grow old and smile at him, die beside him in a home they picked out together.

"Glad to know those Catfished videos were actually going to my head!" he continued, louder, clutching his hands to his chest as he heaved a relieved sigh. "If I find out the food here looks as good as you do, we might have to see about to-go boxes."

"Don't add that one to your act anytime soon," Paul grumbled, hand swiping at his cheek, maybe in an effort to hide his obvious smile.

Better rewrite my fall line up; Saving it for the new millennium, when people will really appreciate me; Anything for you, Eds . A million (or three) retorts running through his mind didn't help when Richie couldn't focus on one well enough to wrap his mouth around it. Instead, he stood there like a hooked fish, mouth open and gasping for air, eyes wide - and, he knew well enough, bugged out like he was staring through the water bowl.

Mercifully, Ed- Paul was happy enough to lead the way inside. The late summer evening made Richie feel a little silly for wearing a jacket, but one could never trust a cab driver to have good taste in air temperature control, and Richie was just as happy to pass it off to the hostess as they made their way to the table.

Drinks, starters, menus gone - it was all Richie could do not to stare incredulously the entire time. Not a damn thing had changed about the man, except his name. And the curious, unknowing gaze that he watched the comedian with, less familiar than even the first moment that they had stared at one another in their adult forms. One moment half-vacant confusion, and the next awash with visions and voices he had been cut off from for years. Lacking even the idle impulse to think about.

"Not to harp on it but it's a relief to see you have a chin after all," Paul rattled off, pointing at Richie's clean-shaven face with a chopstick. "Gotta wonder about the guy who drastically changes his appearance before meeting a date he's never met before. You're lucky I have Netflix and know how to use Google."

"Well, I always try to veer away from the last show," Richie answered with a laugh, his hand rising to rub at his bare chin, even as the touch made him aware of every scrape and nick. "Keeps most people from recognizing me, but I figured you wouldn't be fooled - plus, you look a little straight edge, and you know what they say!" Hands spreading, Richie tipped his head forward, brows lifted over the rim of his glasses while he took on a very factual tone. "A gentleman down south, but a bad
"Who the fuck is they?" Paul demanded, face twisting in Kaspbrak-brand incredulity, which had a very funny way of lighting Richie’s bones on fire. "I've never heard anyone say that ever in my entire life, you made it up."

"People say it!" Richie nearly squealed, laughing behind his fist while he fought not to spew his appetizer. With all the advantage he had on the playing field just then - knowing the guy from childhood, at least - it felt like a familiar video game that he was having to play blindfolded, with only the vibrations of the controller to tell him where to strike and when to dodge. Twenty years made a difference, and there hadn't been time to learn the new minutiae while they were figuring out how to slaughter an alien murder clown.

"Now that we've met in person, I have a confession to make," Paul began at one point, pausing only so their server could deposit their meals on the table. Richie’s blood ran strangely hot and cold at once at the buzzword. A confession. Unable to stop the flash of memory behind his eyes, the wood grain and the perpendicular etching that his thumb ached just to think about. Pressing harder and harder until he could feel the unresisting edge of the steel through the wretched, broken sensation of his rib cage turning to cement and barbed wire around his heart.

While his ears rang with terror and anticipation, though, Ed- Paul offered him perhaps the most innocuous statement possible. "I saw all your comedy specials before we started talking and I really liked them," he stated simply, with the gall to look bashful as he hid bent toward his plate. "I didn't want to say so because that's just like, the fastest way to come off like a weirdo fan and turn you off but if there was ever a time I guess it's now. You're really fucking funny, man. I mean - the one from a couple years ago wasn't as good as the newest, but still."

Richie couldn't help the relieved laugh that broke past his half clenched teeth. "Oh, thank fuck," he burbled, the syllables vibrating with an anxious giggle absolutely unbecoming of a grown man.

*Wasn't as good as the newest.*

*WASN'T AS GOOD AS THE NEWEST.*

Finally, a confession. Eddie Kaspbrak thought that Richie Tozier was well and truly funny, and all it had taken to hear it straight from the horse's mouth was an apparent death, burial, survival, and memory loss so thorough that he picked the name Paul to go by. Thoughts drawn for the briefest of moments back to the towering figure in the park, Richie thrust the image from his mind, and focused on the fact that not only his first attempt at self-produced material but his coming out in public via joke had been able to make Eddie motherfucking Kaspbrak laugh.

"That's the nicest thing anyone's ever said to me," Richie told him, sincere enough that he touched his hand to his chest and tilted his head, adding a little melodrama to the tilt of his lips and eyebrows. Lest he be too transparent.

"I guess you don't read the reviews," Paul said, thin lips twitching in a familiar effort not to smile, "Or you just surround yourself with crotchety assholes."

"Worse," Richie declared with an amused confidence, jabbing a thumb at his own chest while he stared over the rim of his glasses like an ornery librarian. "I attract them."

Just as he went to toss his head and laugh (a small voice in the back of his mind begging him to get it together), he startled at the bump of a hard rubber sole against the tip of his foot. A bump, a bounce, the briefest of contact could be ignored, brushed off, unspoken in the name of preserving them above
the pit of awkward spiral.

Except it wasn't the briefest of contact able to be ignored. Richie's gaze had time to center up and focus on the damn smolder of amber eyes in the soft shadows cast by the overhead lights and the tip of Eddie's chin. Paul's chin. Fuck.

"That's the nicest I get in general," Paul murmured, unfairly calm and collected. Since when?! “So don't take it for granted. Just forewarning you."

Beverly's voice didn't need to echo like a well-timed made-for-TV movie flashback for the message to be recalled in its entirety. By all accounts, every moment Richie spent not calling the man before him Eddie, not talking about their shared supernatural history, not shaking narrow shoulders until everything came rushing back again, was dishonest. A fact which only made anything more than talking they did, monumentally worse.

But Richie had been waiting his entire life for a moment like this, and fucking hell if he was going to miss out on it because the love of his damn life had bonked his head.

"Joke's on you," he huffed, turning the ball of his foot to slide down the curve of the other, offering a succinct pressure - and certain, in some corner of his mind, that this intricate dance was beyond his ken as far as gay signals went. "I like 'em small and mean."

"Ha-ha. Lay the fuck off man," Paul retorted, a kick catching Richie in the shin that left him bouncing in his seat, and giggling. "Going for my height, low blow - no pun intended!"

For as easy, and comfortable, and fraughtless as being here, with him was, Richie could not help the taste of incredulity sitting heavy in the back of his mouth. It seemed no matter how much he ate, or drank, (or smoked, though he had been unable since they sat down to even consider heading out for one), it never seemed to dissipate, or fade. Not a full year ago - recent enough that he could remember vividly, despite the shortcomings of the twenty-seven years they had waited - Richie could not have been convinced at gunpoint that he would be here. Could never have imagined rubbing ankles beneath the table at a public restaurant, with none other than his childhood crush.

Not just a crush, though. Eddie had been everything. A best friend, a playmate, a confidante, a secret rendezvous, a forbidden affection. Richie had never been able to admit it out loud, but he had known it in his heart. Now, it was astonishing, relieving, thrilling to find out that Eddie was still all of that, and suddenly more .

All Richie had to do was figure out how to remind him, without chasing Paul away.

When the remnants of their meals was finally gone, dessert menus in their hands, Paul sniffed and Richie looked up from the ice cream options. "I don't really like matcha, unless I'm sick."

"I don't like matcha, at all," Richie replied, maybe only for the sake of having the same opinion.

"It sucks about your second date rule, or I'd suggest one of our places. I guess I still could, if you're into blanket forts and card games before bed."

Paul was being subtle . Glancing up from the rest of the dessert menu completely, Richie tried not to look too much like a startled squirrel while he endeavored to think up a retort.

"Well, there's still time to go on a second date right now," he exclaimed quietly, half-mumbled, far less confident than he had been so far. A fact which had Richie straightening, intent on not letting this pivotal moment escape his grasp. "But I made a vow to my ten-year-old self never to turn down blanket forts and card games before bed. Do you have adequate supplies or should we go see how
many extra pillows the Holiday Inn manager will give me before I start getting convenience charges?"

At that point, it became a race to get their bill paid, Richie dropping a handful of twenties on the tray - and unwilling to let his fingers get too close to the plastic-wrapped cookies.

"I know my fortune," he added as his hand found Ed-- PAUL’s lower back, guiding as much as he followed to the front door and out into the parking lot. "I call shotgun."

Once more Beverly’s voice filtered toward him, now less a Christmas ghost and more his mom with her stern and aggravated tone, which was arguably scarier. But Bev had her man and they were probably curled up watching Shark Tank and what Richie wouldn’t kill for that with his own hunky brunet (a clown, maybe). Bev, in all her feminine wisdom, could very politely and kindly, go scratch.
Chapter Eight: Mike

Chapter Notes

Mike's POV. Read instead of or in addition to Stan's POV.

It had been a long time since Mike Hanlon had cause to drive, or bike for that matter, down the back roads of Derry to the farm where he spent the majority of his childhood. Not since a last will and testament dragged him back to the property only years ago, made his own in the wake of his grandfather’s passing. Or it had been, until it was repossessed by the bank when his endless scrutiny and study of an eons old evil became the only priority in his life.

With Pennywise long gone, it was easy to question whether it was all worth it, No Trespassing signs marking entryways he’d gone up and down thousands of times as a kid as if he had no right to them now. But Mike knew sacrifices had to be made for the greater good. It was just harder to acknowledge that with the weight of time and regret heavy on his soul, as Bill pulled up to the abandoned farmhouse with its chipped paint and dark, forlorn windows.

"What are we doing here?" Bill asked when they got out - ever inquisitive on the quest for Stan's token, which he had little to do with for all intents and purposes. Mike still appreciated his willingness to help. Big Bill was always there to lend a hand - and, well, with a car. The same had been true in the nineties when they all piled into the Denbrough family minivan.

"You'll see," Mike answered, ushering Bill and Stan along through the untrimmed grass, through a broken wood gate he wound up hopping over as a child more often than he actually opened and passed through. The fencing around it was mostly intact, the wooden beams dark with age and wear. "Well - Stan will see. We'll fill you in."

Using his phone as a flashlight, he led them to what appeared to be a tiny house, built atop tall supports with long walls fenced by wire mesh. It was empty but for a few decaying nests; Mike remembered a time when the coop was full. He could almost hear the clucking, and the cocky rooster who never failed to screech him awake by sunrise.

Turning to Stanley, he grinned as he flashed his phone across the rundown structure. "May, 1991. Remember why I invited you over?"

Stan’s expression tensed in confusion before he finally cast his dark eyes in the direction of the light. Mike only brightened as knowing seemed to settle in Stanley’s face.

I do," he said, gaze traveling up the coop in revelation - recognition. "I was here. To see the chickens."

Perking up at the familiar voice, Mike rose out of his pretzel-style seat on the ground, nudging nosy beaks out of the door he had been opening and closing sporadically over the last hour or so. Beaming, he waved Stan over, heedless of the other chickens that knew better than to stay in the path of treading feet.

"Sorry if I'm late, it look longer than I'd hoped to get out of dinner," Stanley said, stopping just short of the coop and huffing like he had run all the way here. "Can I help?"
“You don’t need to help, they manage okay on their own,” Mike explained as he knelt back down. Patting the grass beside him, Mike opened the hatch again, using his shoulders to make sure no one hopped out into the wild blue yonder.

“It takes a couple days from start to finish, but look! There’s already three.” Three little yellow chicks nodding amongst each other and their unhatched siblings, in varied stages of drying, the mother hen poking around every so often, but mostly roosting indifferently. Reaching in, Mike scooped up the fluffiest, and therefore oldest, into his hand, curling the other around to secure his grip without squeezing too hard just as Stan descended to sit.

The fuzzy baby feathers tickled his skin, flighty tweets emanating from his caged palms as he nudged the door closed with his elbow. Grinning, he offered his handful to Stanley. "He's fluffed up enough to hold, you don't have to if you don't want to, though. Just keep your hands cupped like this.”

He watched on in quiet amusement as Stan's acceptance came not in the form of words, but in his hands curved together like Oliver Twist, rigid and still but for (unless Mike was imagining it) a slight tremble in his arms. It served its purpose though, and Mike passed over the chick with extra care, only insure it got into Stanley's unaccustomed hands without a hitch.

Several springs had come and gone and though Mike had outgrown the excitement of hatching chicks long ago, it sprang anew after he made friends with the other losers - well, with anyone, for that matter. Watching the awe and wonder cross their faces bloomed such a special affection, and maybe even a pride, as if Mike had laid the eggs himself. Really though, how often did you make a friend who let you hold baby chicks?

He had yet to convince Eddie the trip would be worth his while and he would not get mad cow disease or infect the chicks with his human germs, but Bill, Ben, Beverly, and Richie had all been through at one point or another this year or last to see the spring chicks. If Mike had known about Stanley's avian fascination last year, he would have insisted he come sooner. Anticipating the look on his face nearly killed him.

And it was certainly worth the wait. Stan's eyes wide and mouth soft like he was having a religious experience, his hands cradling not an animal but a prayer. Open, exposed, unguarded in a way he so rarely revealed, even to his friends. Mike Hanlon had awed the unawable, enchanted the unenchantable, and he smiled to himself while Stanley was too taken to notice.

"You don't have to freeze up, you can relax, you won't hurt him. Just don't let your grip get too tight." As if Stan didn't possess the power to relax, Mike reached up and curled his hands over his gently, rough and calloused over soft and smooth that got washed or otherwise sanitized almost as often as Eddie's, pushing the downy bundle closer to Stan's chest so it wasn't quite at arm's length.

You'd think Mike had passed off a ticking bomb, for all Stanley's anxiety, despite sounding pretty game on the phone earlier. He wanted to say that the chick was probably more afraid of Stan than Stan was of it, but that rhetoric usually worked better when the smaller thing was actually kind of scary in the first place. Plus, Mike had a feeling Stanley was more afraid than the peeping ball of yellow that had a warm place to nuzzle around.

"Is it true chickens can't smell?' Stan asked suddenly. "My mother says that bush birds won’t feed a chick that smells like humans. I don't know if she's right but all of the references at the library only mention not interfering with a fallen chick because they're meant to be learning to fly, and staying too close can keep the parents from approaching."

"They can smell but they don't care about people smell," Mike explained, not quite able to relax as long as Stan's arms were still bent out awkwardly. "We handle the chicks all the time, and they can’t
fly very well to begin with so you're fine. I promise! Look, he likes you."

Despite Mike's encouragement, the wary sheen in Stanley's brown eyes lasted for long enough that he decided to relieve him of the tiny burden. As he tucked the chick back into the nest, Mike couldn't help but think, if only Stan knew his own gentleness.

"See? He's okay - oh, look." Shifting over so Stan could see into the coop, Mike pointed at an egg that was shattered and splintered all the way around, the flimsy white interior layer broken and twitching in such a way that spiky wet feathers just barely peeked out from inside.

"That's zip, it means the chick is just about ready to come out any minute now." He pointed at another egg for comparison, with a tiny chip toward the top of the smooth brown shell. "That egg is pipped, and it means that baby still has a couple hours to go before he's ready to come out."

Glancing at Stan, he smiled. "It's not as fast as it looks in the movies."

"That's incredible," Stan breathed, leaning forward to peek through the hatch. "Can they breathe in there? What happens if they take too long? Does the hen still sit or is it open air or do you keep it heated?"

"You just gotta let them do their own thing," Mike explained with a casual shrug, glancing sidelong and trying to stifle his laughter at how quickly Stan switched from terrified to amazed. It wasn't a make-fun kind of laugh (no, he would never) but the euphoria was rubbing off and he felt like a proud bird papa - well, more like uncle, or maybe brother, if his grandpa counted in this metaphor. Suddenly the dynamics were too complicated for him to consider for very long.

"You have to be patient. My grandfather says to let nature run its course. If you try to help the shell open the chick might not make it, and you definitely don't want to try helping along an egg that's only pipped. It could take up to a day so you just have to wait it out sometimes." Pausing to breathe, Mike finally added, "And there's a warmer down below the nest we turn on at night." Now he had answered most, if not all, of Stan's questions.

"I'll be right back. Don't worry about the chickens, they won't bother you." Shutting the hatch, Mike stood and climbed over the fence, and hurried into the house. When he returned, he had a glass of sweet tea in either hand, cut with enough ice to have them sweating against both palms, since the pitcher had been left on the table and not in the fridge.

Mike passed Stan his glass and sat again to lift the door, finding the zipped egg straining briefly before settling again. It was chirping up a storm, though. Wouldn't be long now. "Do you want to throw 'em a little feed while we wait for the egg to-"

"Yes!" Stan answered immediately.

Stunned by the excitement in his voice, Mike smothered too big a smile behind the rim of his glass as he took a sip, and couldn't help wondering, maybe for a third time, how on Earth Stan hadn't made it here last year, arguably the person who would care the most about this kind of thing.

"You know, when Beverly and Bill came last spring she spilled the bucket and had chickens all over her so I'd recommend just handfuls at a time."

Stanley laughed. "Then I'm glad I didn't end up joining them."

"You didn't miss much, nothing that you aren't seeing now," Mike said, as if to alleviate any potential sadness. He couldn't help feeling a little guilty that it had taken this long - as if it was his fault their schedules didn't line up with nature's course and baby chicks, that his grandfather didn't like the idea
of seven people at a time in the chicken coop, that Mr. and Mrs. Uris sometimes had the final say over Stanley's excursions.

He set his glass on the highest, flattest surface of the chicken coop, and crossed back to the fence for the feed bucket. "And it was the one time Bev was around in a while so it was just lucky that that hatching lined up with her visit. I felt like a third wheel the whole time though, but that was my fault for inviting Bill too."

He could still hear the half-whispered giggles as they crowded around the coop, leaving Mike standing so he could peer down over two different shades of red hair. There were grosser couples in Derry (if you could even call these two that), but making up for the lost time Beverly spent in Portland came about in all kinds of ways.

"I might be grateful that I missed third-wheeling," Stan murmured in consideration, only for his voice to rise. “It’s exciting being here now, though. Bev said it was a great time and wants to hear about it asap. She’s been sending me pictures of the birds around Portland, when she remembers... Bill said he would report when she called, but he always seems to be talking about leaving messages. I might try writing a letter instead."

Assessing Stan's outfit, Mike realized there was no way the tight tuck of his shirt would allow for a feed pouch, so he folded up his own T-shirt at the hem and spilled handfuls into the little pocket created simply by lifting the worn fabric.

"It could be that Bill is keeping it to himself," Mike suggested, holding out his palmful of feed to deposit into Stanley's, less harrowing than a baby chick by far. The actual chickens seemed to understand the ritual and grew curious and higher in their collective clucking. "Like maybe if she did call, they just talked about each other, and you didn’t come up. I think he is starting to figure out that we kind of check out if he starts gushing about Bev." Mike chuckled and rolled his eyes in a way only Stan, Richie, Eddie, and Ben could understand.

"Doesn't stop him from telling me, I guess," Stan said. Crouching low, he held his hands out, only to be swarmed by hungry chickens. Despite the initial startle of his shoulders, and the frightened attempt at chick-holding earlier, he didn’t seem to mind.

"Just wish he would go to the same lengths to see the rest of us. You’d think at some point she would just admit that Portland is more exciting than the Losers."

The perspective of an outsider had never really gone away, though Mike knew his friends didn’t think of him like that. That he was well and fully immersed in the group. Still, it was easy to look in as if he was on the outside, maybe because his friends were so set in their ways. That first day in the quarry he had been welcomed into a group of people who all had their place in the dynamic, indicated by the first launch of a heavy rock into Henry Bowers's stupid head.

Even then it wasn’t hard to tell everyone was a little tired of Bill's puppy love. Even Mike had felt it. Some people were more vocal about it (Eddie) and some people felt more strongly about it (Ben), but there had definitely been a shift brought on by Bill and Beverly's excuse for a relationship. Mike couldn’t help but roll his eyes at the paltry attempt at long distance sometimes. All the way in Portland, talking about going to the same college years before they ever had to fill out an application.

There had been a time when she was on speaker phone and they all talked to her, ages ago. Mike assumed Bill was hogging her attention a bit, and that was understandable in its own way. But now he wondered if he even knew when the last time any of them, Bill included, had actually had a conversation with Beverly. It might have been before Christmas.
Drawn out of his contemplations by the swarm of chickens at Stan’s ankles, he couldn’t help but smirk at the bobbing bush of feathers pecking at the palm of Stanley’s hand. Something clicked in Mike's mind all of a sudden. Picking up on a reaction to the Bill and Beverly thing he had failed to notice until just this moment.

"You're supposed to spread it, like this," he said lightly, taking a handful from his shirt pouch to scatter across the grass, which a smattering of birds quickly hobbled to catch and pluck up.

"And I don't think there's anything stopping you from calling Beverly yourself," Mike added, aiming for casual as not to scare Stan into denial, like an easily started hen. "Even just in a friendly way. You know? It might be that their thing is fizzling out but that doesn't mean we should have to sacrifice Beverly because she and Bill break up."

Stan rotated his hands apart, and the feed spread out in front of him. When he looked back at Mike, he seemed unsure, brow furrowed in question.

"You think they'll break up?" he asked. "I'm not sure I want to see that... I don't think they would try to make us choose. But it hardly matters. Proximity alone would..."

"I don't think it's about choosing, it's just that he's here and she's not," Mike replied, only to turn to see the look on Stan's face, and realized in a duh moment that he had cut himself off for a reason. No one liked to think about their friends disappearing, least of all Stan (and sometimes, Mike thought, least of all himself, feeling like he barely knew them despite the year or so under his belt and more before them, which sort of paled in comparison to the lifetime just a diploma away).

Distraction tactic. He emptied the rest of the grain in his T-shirt onto the earth, the chickens rushing to gobble it up.

"Beverly cares about us," he told Stan, just in case, nodding surely, maybe a bit to himself. "Distance won't ever change that."

The chirping and clucking filled his ears for a moment. Mike looked over his shoulder. His grandfather was inside, the losers at home or in town. Just Stanley, him, and the chickens who didn't care for small talk. They were preoccupied anyway.

"She's pretty, isn't she?" he whispered to Stan, less a secret and more an encouragement of honesty. "When we first met, and she knocked Bowers on his ass? I was starry-eyed for a while. Not so much anymore, but still."

Remembering the eggs, Mike dropped back to the coop, gasping when he found a little flailing wing split from the zipped egg. "I think he's coming out, Stan!"

But Stanley never came over. “I have to go,” he said all of a sudden, quick as he turned before Mike could get a look at his face, but something nervous in his tone. Mike would sit there for the rest of the afternoon worried that he had embarrassed Stan.

Now, the egg hatch was empty, without even the remnants of shells to remember the long ago birds by. Mike's gaze lingered on the too dark void beyond the door, and finally closed it with a soft click. His flashlight app had gone off. He tried to remember if Stan had ever come back for a spring hatch, but couldn't recall. Only because at some point each spring blended with the next. He had seen so many in Derry. Too many.

Mike returned his attention to his companions, stopping only to turn his light on again. In the bright cast, dim where it reached his friends’ feet, he thought he saw something troubling cross Stan’s face -
wasn't about to shine his light in his eyes to get a better look though.

"Do either of you have contact info for the others?" Stan asked. Obviously this excursion had been unhelpful.

"Of course," Bill said, already a hand on the square lump in his front pocket. "Beverly, Ben, Richie and I all live rather close to each other now. Isn't that crazy?"

"Wait," Mike stated, stepping forward enough that Bill froze, and looked up at him. Mike licked his lips, contemplative, and ultimately decided, "We shouldn't contact them. Not yet. Let's try to resolve it and if we need them, we'll know."

He turned to Stan. "This is your journey, we're just here to help. We all found our tokens on our own. That's just the way it's supposed to be. Besides, I'd rather not worry them until we know things are okay." The thought of dragging his friends back to Derry for another horrible task turned Mike's stomach a little. The air suddenly felt very chilly for a summer evening.

"That's probably a good idea," Bill said, agreeable, at least. If not in charge at the moment. "Should we get out of here?"

Mike hesitated. His childhood home bled into his peripheral vision. "Hold on just a sec." Turning away, he marched through the grass - this time past the chicken coop, to the back door of the farmhouse, looming large and desolate in the dark.

For some reason, this No Trespassing sign kept him at bay, lifting his phone light to look through the frayed screen door and the window beyond, into the empty kitchen. It had never been particularly full or bright to begin with but he remembered coming through this way to find his grandfather bent over the checkered tablecloth, usually with taxes or Mike's homeschool work, which he always took the time to reacquaint himself with since he had to teach it when Mike came back from his chores and errands. Fretting over new math but a little more eager about fiction assignments, when it wasn't quite a lesson and more of a book club because he could have Mike read whatever he wanted. To Kill a Mockingbird had been boring, Mike remembered.

At the time he just wanted to go find his friends in the Barrens or at the quarry, but there was always a couple dozen pages between him and his escape. Mike had been so eager back then to be rid of his superstitious grandfather and ride into a town that hated him, just to be with his losers.

Mike curled his fingers around the handle, but didn't push. Lips pressed down over his teeth. He felt unwelcome for so many reasons beyond a sign from the bank. Behind him, Bill and Stanley murmured to each other in hushed tones.

“This used to be a really beautiful property.”

“I remember. Sheep and cows and everything.”

“Mike inherited the farm, but he couldn't handle it.”

“Too obsessed with It to keep up. For how many years?”

“Couldn't even stop to sell the place to someone more capable.”

“And look what happened.”

“Such a disappointment.”
“A shame, really.”

“I mean what would Mr. Hanlon think? He's probably rolling over in his-”

Mike whipped around, tripping down a rotted step as his phone flashed across the grass. Stan and Bill flinched and shielded their eyes, still lingering by the chicken coop, yards away.

"Jeez! What's wrong?" Bill asked, squinting from under his hand.

Mike tried to speak, but nothing came out for a moment. Tears of shock, betrayal, and something else sour pricked the corners of his vision. "What, what did you say?"

"We were talking about finding a hotel for the night. It's already after dark."

Mike could only stand there for a moment, feeling the pounding of his heart against his ribcage. He became too aware of his breathing. Suddenly the farm, in all its vast open space, was crushing down on him, siphoning away all his oxygen.

"You're right," he finally uttered, agreeing, in spite of the unknown time limit. He had been traveling for hours and hours and hadn't even stopped for dinner yet. Perhaps exhaustion was getting to him. Or hunger.

Or mania.

"We'll get some rest and start fresh tomorrow morning. Let's just - let's just go."

It didn't take long to reach Bill's car again, and while Stan took advantage of the empty passenger side, Mike settled into the backseat. There it was easier to hunker down and block his vision until he felt the tires shift off the rumbling dirt driveway and onto the paved road back to town.

If only it was that easy to push aside and block out.
Chapter Eight: Stanley

Chapter Notes

Stan's POV. Read in addition to or instead of Mike's POV.

As Derry and all its small town domesticity faded around them, trading brick buildings and wood slat houses for open fields and rough cut wood fences, Stan wondered idly what could possibly be waiting for them - him - all the way out in the boonies of Maine. When he got out of the car he was introduced to a choir of insect noises and the stench of animal waste, decay unlike any other, all accompanied by a well and truly set sun that only managed to cast the entire experience into an unnerving darkness. The sight of the familiar Hanlon farm around them only made things marginally better.

"What are we doing here?" Bill asked as he rose out of the driver’s seat.

"You'll see," Mike answered, ushering Bill and Stan along through the untrimmed grass, through a broken wood gate attached to a fence that had definitely seen better days. "Well - Stan will see. We'll fill you in."

With only Mike's phone light for relief, Stanley kept his steps light and careful, and himself as close as he dared to the others - far from interested in being caught out by himself where the light could not reach, or help. When they finally came to a stop, Mike was smiling at him like he had an inside joke to share. He flashed his phone across a battered chicken coop, with ripped netting and chipped paint walls.

"May, 1991. Remember why I invited you over?"

Stan stared at the structure for a moment before making sense of it. "I do - I was here," he said, his gaze rising from where support pillars rose out of the mucky earth, his gaze riding straight lines until it found an aging face instead.

White beard stark against the dark features, brows heavy over kind, fierce eyes. "To see the chickens. Mike said they have started to hatch."

"He's around back," the old man answered, and Stan wondered a moment over how to address his thank you . They had never really been introduced to Mike's grandfather, and while Mr. Hanlon might have served just fine, he hesitated long enough that "Go left, follow the porch," was tacked on, and the door gently closed in his face.

Cheeks burning with the realization that he had been rude in his silence, Stan turned to follow the directions without delay, intent on proving that he was a courteous young man. First impressions came only once, and considering his experience with the pettiness of parents and guardians, Stan didn't want to imagine what might be lost by his absent-mindedness.

Fortunately, the sight of his friend offered the moment he needed to breathe and hurry along.

"Sorry if I'm late, it look longer than I'd hoped to get out of dinner." Puffing a breath - like he had sprinted down a field and not just failed at conversation on the porch - Stan held out his empty hand,
the other angled away from his body but clasping his book fast. "Can I help?"

As Mike came out to meet him, beaming in spite of the sheen of sweat on his brow, the slow bob and step of the round, free roaming chickens startled into tiny, barely contained flurries. Though even the nearest to him veered at an obviously harmless angle away from him, Stan recoiled from the flutter and flail, his hands barely rising to protect his face before he was ducking under nothing and continuing forward. There wasn't a moment to waste being frightened of mere clucking and wings.

"You don't need to help, they manage okay on their own," Mike explained as he knelt back down to the coop, once Stan had joined him. Casting a contemplative, hesitant glance at the ground that the pat of Mike's hand marked for him, he weighed the pros and cons of his options. Legs bowed meant the circle of his lap to contain, though that might be too wishful of thinking. On his knees would keep his trousers clean and sacrifice his laces and socks instead.

With the little latched door already creaking open, though, Stan was out of time for deciding, and oscillated in a silent moment of panic before finally folding his legs in front of him, a mere mimic of Mike's position.

"It takes a couple days from start to finish, but look! There's already three."

When the notion of being able to see - maybe even touch - the fresh hatchlings had been mentioned, Stanley had been mildly annoyed to find that chickens were too domesticated to show up in any of the species references that he had sought out in an effort to make his guidebook a little more thorough in its indexes. Stan knew, reasonably, that there wasn't room in a soft-backed print that fit into his jacket pocket for every species and breed in the known world, but he was sincerely surprised to find that North America did not bother to speak on them. It seemed chickens were the only ground bird American's consumed who didn't occasionally run wild.

Fortunately, a farmer's almanac had offered him a great deal, and he looked in on the little cluster of half-feathered bumble balls with a confidence that he could tell the newest from the eldest. Suddenly Mike reached in, and with all the grace in the world, scooped a chick into his palms like there was nothing to it.

"He's fluffed up enough to hold," he said, glancing at Stan with his arms inching forward in offering. "You don't have to if you don't want to, though. Just keep your hands cupped like this."

Even as a hundred questions began to stack up behind Stanley's teeth, certain that his experienced friend might have the answers, Stan felt stalk still instead. His hands molded together as if preparing to accept a divine elixir - fearful of spilling a drop.

Instead, a drop spilled into him, sharp tiny feet against his palms as it scrabbled for purchase. Every brush of its body against him was startlingly warm and literally downy soft, literally feather light, literally breathtaking.

"You don't have to freeze up, you can relax, you won't hurt him. Just don't let your grip get too tight." At the edge of his attention, Stan absorbed Mike's words, though it seemed there was no working up the courage to glance away from the tiny, fluttering, peeping life that was barely cupped by his bowled fingers. Mike’s firm hands covered his, pressing back, and it wasn't until the chick was clawing at his shirt, its little noises echoing through his ribs instead of through the air, that Stan managed an incredulous glance at his friend.

"Is it true chickens can't smell?" he asked, worried beyond reason that getting his scent all over it would lead the hen to reject it - though Mike's interference with the natural course of life and death was comforting in its own way. Even if this handful of feathers and high-pitched noise was destined...
for the dinner table. "My mother says that bush birds won't feed a chick that smells like humans. I
don't know if she's right but all of the references at the library only mention not interfering with a
fallen chick because they're meant to be learning to fly, and staying too close can keep the parents
from approaching."

"They can smell but they don't care about people smell," Mike explained easily. Chin lifting in
increments, Stan resisted a desperate urge to look down. With the bouncing ball of down and noise
scrabbling uncertainly against the edges and bumps of his thumbs and buttons, any dip of his head
could crush the thing - and the only thing Stan was certain of in this moment was that if the chirping
stopped short because of something he did, he would never recover. Ridiculous! He was a menace
to this tiny life.

"We handle the chicks all the time, and they can't fly very well to begin with so you're fine. I promise!
Look, he likes you."

This earned small smile from Stanley, as tense and hesitant as the rest of his body. The fact that his
cheek's heated at the prospect of being liked by a bird only made them burn harder with a spiraling
self-awareness.

Hands nearly up to his collarbone already, Stan started to silence as those tiny feet went from
clawing at the heels of his hands to clutching the collar of his shirt, a button snagged open by the
inconsequential weight. His shoulders curled, his conscious thoughts fighting against the half-
conscious reflex while the terrified notion of crushing the little thing while he couldn't see it sent his
pleading, frightened gaze up to Mike for help.

Which was only alleviated by the gentle scoop of Mike's hands rescuing his small ward and
passenger right out of the hollow made by the rise of his hands and the curve of his throat. Between
having little, reckless claws that close to his jugular, and the responsibility (and trust!) of a helpless,
fragile, naive hatchling, Stan lacked the wherewithal to release his tension until Mike had turned
away from him entirely.

Euphoria answered the sudden absence of fear-driven adrenaline, and Stan was left sipping in air
before a soft laugh escaped him. The lingering memory scratching claws against his hands was
thrilling in itself, and he curled his fingers into fists to preserve the sensation, as if it might otherwise
fly away.

"See? He's okay - oh, look." Shifting over so Stan could see into the coop, Mike pointed at an egg
that was shattered and splintered all the way around, the flimsy white interior layer broken and
twitching in such a way that spiky wet feathers just barely peeked out from inside.

"That's zip, it means the chick is just about ready to come out any minute now." He pointed at
another egg for comparison, with a tiny chip toward the top of the smooth brown shell. "That egg is
pipped, and it means that baby still has a couple hours to go before he's ready to come out." Glancing at
Stan, he smiled. "It's not as fast as it looks in the movies."

"That's incredible," Stan breathed after a moment, and leaned further forward to see through the
hatch better. "Can they breathe in there? What happens if they take too long? Does the hen still sit
or is it open air or do you keep it heated?"

"You just gotta let them do their own thing," Mike explained with a casual shrug. "You have to be
patient. My grandfather says to let nature run its course. If you try to help the shell open the chick
might not make it, and you definitely don't want to try helping along an egg that's only pipped. It
could take up to a day so you just have to wait it out sometimes - And there's a warmer down below
the nest we turn on at night."
It stood to reason that the best course for any natural born (or hatched) creature would be one without the interference of man. Even the ones with generations-long histories of interference. Basic evolution required that they have a good foundation for survival without the protection of hovering nanny hands. None of that stopped Stan from being devastated by the idea of a pre-pulled shell dying, so close to the finish line, to living their real life. But at least he could also be relieved by the built-in warmer.

Mike pushed to his feet all of a sudden, rubbing Stanley’s shoulder good-naturedly on his way up, shutting the hatch as well. “I’ll be right back. Don’t worry about the chickens, they won’t bother you.”

Pulling his knees up to fold an arm over them, Stan nodded his acknowledgement - and tried not to imagine what being bothered by a chicken might be like. Fortunately, the extent of their attention paid to him was sidelong glances as they plucked up bits from the straw-strewn earth. Having feared the worst, he was a bit relieved to realize that his seat was dry and hard, and hadn’t managed to stain his jeans even with moisture.

His worry that he should have vacated the coop rather than being left to his own devices vanished with Mike’s return, bringing frosty beverages with him, and Stan took the offered glass of tea just as his legs unfolded again, unable to resist the tip forward to see through the small door. Nothing had felt this imminent and anticipated in his life - which was saying quite a bit.

Mike sat again and lifted the door, peeking in briefly before he shut it again. “Do you want to throw ‘em a little feed while we wait for the egg to-”

“Yes!” Stanley’s answered immediately.

Mike blinked, as if startled, but ultimately laughed, cheeks stretching as Stanley’s warmed. “You know, when Beverly and Bill came last spring she went spilled the bucket and had chickens all over her so I’d recommend just handfuls at a time.”

“Then I’m glad I didn’t end up joining them,” Stan continued with a quiet chuckle, though he was disappointed to have missed it last year, even if his interest in such things hadn’t been quite as strong at the time. “It’s exciting to be here now, though. Bev said it was a great time and wants to hear about it asap. She’s been sending me pictures of the birds around Portland, when she remembers.” His voice trailed away on the last few words, his thoughts heavy.

"Bill said he would report when she called, but he always seems to be talking about leaving messages. I might try writing a letter instead." Sipping his tea, Stan scratched at his nose, only to lift the other hand to wipe at the smear of cold water he left behind.

"You didn't miss much last time, nothing that you aren't seeing now," Mike said. He set his glass on the highest, flattest surface of the chicken coop, and crossed back to the fence for the feed bucket. "And it was the one time Bev was around in a while so it was just lucky that that hatch lined up with her visit. I felt like a third wheel the whole time though, but that was my fault for inviting Bill too.”

"I might be grateful that I missed third wheeling," Stan murmured in response, uncertain if he was heard, though the carry of his voice suggested that they were both still within earshot. Doing his best not to think about how many - and then, how few - of their social outings had either been adjusted to fit Beverly's availability or dulled by Bill's attempts to pretend he wasn't awash with disappointment about her absence, he offered his hand to a passing chicken, wondering if it would explore him the same way as a strange cat or passing dog.

Instead, he tensed in increments as the bobbing head worked its way up his arm, following it like an
arrow before plucking at the hem of his sleeve. The reflexive jump of Stan’s body startled the stretched head back until the chicken looked nearly spherical and he murmured an apology for frightening the creature.

"It could be that Bill is keeping it to himself." Mike's suddenly very close voice drew his attention like a whip, his head snapping around only to be followed by the answering rise of his hands. Feed grain was far less terrifying to accept in the bowl of his palms, but Stan lifted his elbow to fend off the least patient chicken in the bunch, uncertain of the rules and not wanting to be taken advantage of in his gullibility. As more drew closer, he curled his shoulders against the knowing and intent prodding, an anxious laugh escaping his nose.

"Like, maybe if she did call they just talked about each other, and you didn’t come up. I think he is starting to figure out that we kind of check out if he starts gushing about Bev."

"Doesn't stop him from telling me, I guess," Stan murmured, trying not to sound too much like he was complaining. When the first peck of a whole, grown chicken proved gentler than he feared, he folded his fingers open a little further, hands spreading to offer more surface area while a gaggle (clutch? cluster? - he couldn't remember) of bobbing heads surrounded and overcame him. Claws gripping him through his shorts had him gasping but it didn’t quite cross the line into painful while the round creatures balanced themselves.

"Just wish he would go to the same lengths to see the rest of us. You’d think at some point she would just admit that Portland is more exciting than the Losers."

The answering silence, permeated only by the various sounds of several hens and roosters, made Stanley wonder if he had revealed too much. As if it was the worst thing in the world to reveal to one of his best friends his anxiety over another’s encroaching abandonment of their group.

Actually, that did sound like the worst thing in the world.

"You're supposed to spread it, like this," Mike said then, taking a handful from his shirt pouch to scatter across the grass, which a smattering of birds quickly hobbled to catch and pluck up. Following the demonstration, Stan rotated his hands apart, leaving his fingertips and wrists as pivot points so that the seed could pour out in a controlled flow through the gap it created. As soon as grain hit dirt, the attention was diverted, and he tried to not be disappointed by the sudden absence of feathered heads. Turning on his heels in a slow circle made up for the loss a bit, a giggle escaping him as the birds trotted in a small circle around him to get at any available inch.

"And I don't think there's anything stopping you from calling Beverly yourself," Mike added. "Even just in a friendly way. You know? It might be that their thing is fizzling out but that doesn't mean we should have to sacrifice Beverly because she and Bill break up."

Brows furrowing a bit, Stan glanced up, his hands brushing together to rid himself of the grain dust before realizing that he had left his book on the ground. Retrieving it meant reaching into what had become a relative sea of chickens - undulating waves of auburn and brown and white.

"You think they'll break up?" he asked, instead of a few of the other confused or incredulous questions that flitted across his mind. "I'm not sure I want to see that." At the rate that Beverly was still visiting, it would change very little about their friend group as far as attendance or location really went. But given how obsessed Bill was, that could only go badly. Talking about their phone calls and weekend visits was the happiest he had seen Big Bill since - well, since the last time she came to see them.

Still, the longer the gaps between grew, the longer their fearless leader's face, and Stan wasn't sure
that was worth the occasional overt joy (even if that wasn’t his decision to make).

"I don’t think they would try to make us choose,” he continued, contemplative, even as he found himself absolutely certain of the result. "But it hardly matters. Proximity alone would..."

Realizing quite suddenly that he shouldn’t be justifying the uncomfortable options of a hypothetical separation, Stan shrugged instead. Mike probably already knew, anyway. Some things were just obvious.

"I don’t think it's about choosing, it's just that he's here and she's not," Mike replied, his gaze serious, but not somber as he regarded Stan. He emptied the rest of the grain in his T-shirt onto the earth, the chickens rushing to gobble it up. Nodding his exactly in silence, Stan watched the fall of feed and tried not to be disappointed that all of the chicken attention was pointed downward. At least he had rescued his book before the bulk of them swarmed closer, tumbling over one another and two pairs of shoes to get to the fresh stuff.

"Beverly cares about us," Mike went on then, nodding. "Distance won't ever change that."

Uncertain of whether Mike was reassuring him, or himself, Stan nodded back - again - his smile warm and supportive even as his brows twitched together in confusion.

Then, Mike’s voice dropped to a whisper. "She's pretty, isn't she?” he murmured to Stan. He thought that Mike was talking about one of the hens, and glanced down to look in case there was a pointed finger to follow - only to drag his gaze back up as it continued. "When we first met, and she knocked Bowers on his ass? I was starry-eyed for a while. Not so much anymore, but still."

Stan’s hair stood on end the moment he realized who Mike was talking about, crashing over him like cold water. They had all agreed at some point or another that Beverly was pretty - not the most difficult standard to reach considering their miserable exposure to girls at school, though true and decided nonetheless. But the sympathetic edge to his friend’s tone that nearly left the dirty blond affronted, reading an accusation in otherwise innocuous words.

Teeth parting in preparation to defend himself, Stan paused, quite suddenly all too aware of the fact that his only available defense was the fact that he had only really been concerned about Bill.

Which was not the data point that he wanted to siphon through Mike's presumption.

"I think he's coming out, Stan!"

From here, a turn of his head offered him the sight of his friend bowed in front of the hatch door once more, and Stan wanted nothing more in that moment than to drop down beside him and watch. Let the conversation die behind them while they stared in awe. All he needed to do was kneel down and peer in, but his heart hammered violently in his chest, his arms rising to clutch the book against him, like a shield, like armor, and nothing like either of those at all.

"I have to go," Stan murmured, his eyes wet when he blinked. His voice didn't sound right to his own ears, a higher octave, breathless, on the brink of offering a dozen excuses - almost none of them true. But he had already offered them, bumbling and rambling while Mike stared on, sympathetic and patient.

Just like he was now, Stanley mused with a quick glance, glad for the darkness in that moment. Before his gaze could shift to Bill, Stan dropped his head back to stare at the sky, his hands on his hips while he heaved a sigh. These memories were not being as helpful as he had hoped, considering they seemed to revolve around something that certainly could not be his token. Not an artifact, at
The inky sky pricked with stars (so much more than Atlanta) stared back at him accusingly, the cool night air sharp on warming his cheeks. Like tiny claws at his collar. God. He hadn’t been this flustered since he was sixteen years old.

End Notes

Here's our attempt at a definitive IT fixit, mostly canon compliant in all the right ways. Because this story was written interactively, some chapters will be posted twice from different perspectives to maintain internal monologues and other important information. You can read both, or one or the other. Trigger warnings will be posted per chapter as well. Thanks for reading!

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