Objects in Mirror

by JoBones

Summary

After you come back to your hometown, reunite with the childhood best friends that you had forgotten existed, and destroy the very rude kid-eating clown from another dimension that’s been trying to kill you and said friends since 1989, what does a happy ending look like? A fix-it story about two middle-aged men who are playing a lot of catch up with a past that’s catching up to them.

Featuring: Bangor, gay reckonings, prolonged hospital stays, metaphors, gin and prune juice cocktails, Thanksgiving with the Losers’ Club, Eddie’s aggressive driving, lots of airports, more metaphors

Notes

Happy Canal Days Festival! This fic uses the 2017 and 2019 movies as a jumping off point, particularly in regards to characterizations, but will also incorporate some scenes, themes, stylizations, and characters from the book. Because hey, if Mike Flanagan can do it, why can’t I. And I’ve got some bones to pick with Gary Dauberman. However the book is not necessary background knowledge for this fic.

Content warning for everything explored/mentioned in the movies, but specifically in reference to homophobia, homophobic slurs, body hatred, abuse.
When they burst out of the house on Neibolt street, Richie wasn’t even sure at first if they really had escaped, or simply fallen through some funhouse mirror and back into the crumbling depths of the sewers. It was like they’d stumbled into the inside of a washing machine, and it took him a moment to realize no, they hadn’t made some enthusiastic wrong turn and cheerfully doomed themselves – it was storming. They’d popped back out topside while Derry was being ravaged by a biblical fucking storm, with a wind that pulled at Richie’s clothes and a whipping rain that cut across his face and smacked against his glasses.

He didn’t even realize he was standing still, until he felt Eddie’s arm start to slip from his shoulder and heard Bill shout “KEEP GOING!” Somehow he and Bill had managed to drag Eddie’s body between them out of the underground. They plunged forwards, shouldering through the heavy rain and screaming sky, and reached Mike’s van. Beverly pulled the door back. Richie scrambled in, pulling Eddie into the middle seat beside him with Bill and Ben’s help.

He was trying not to look too hard at Eddie’s midsection, which reminded him of a kindergartener’s art project, when the kindergartener in question decides to take every color paint and just smear it all together into a purple-brown gloopy mess. Even now, the memories were still jostling to get in like so many deal-hungry shoppers on Black Friday (Richie’s sanity going for rock bottom deals!), and he remembered how Ben had looked after they’d fought It that first time. So long ago – shirt in ribbons and stomach torn, and thought shit Eddie you make that look like a paper cut, and it wasn’t the first time he could turn off his own fucking brain.

Everyone else threw themselves in and Mike drove

(to beat the devil)

like hell in his gray soccer mom minivan, windshield wipers waving furiously as the rain exploded against the glass.

Eddie wasn’t responsive. His eyes were half-closed and his body slack like a scarecrow. He was heavy against him, but there was something heavier inside Richie, something that left him feeling like he was standing on the floor of the ocean, surrounded by a dark and crushing weight. He was conscious of his arms keeping Eddie upright, holding him, and he was thinking I never told him, and frantically asking himself what, never told him what, and suddenly he could hear Pennywise again – as horrifyingly clear as if the clown was in the car between them, snarling out its little song I know your dirty little secret.

(dirty)

God, Eddie was maybe fucking dying beside him and that’s what he was thinking of? His stomach churned, and he felt like throwing up except that would have meant hurling on Eddie, which was probably the last thing he’d want.

He closed his eyes and pressed his head into the seat back. If the rest of them were saying anything, he didn’t hear it. He was conscious of stroking Eddie’s hair back from his forehead, was sure he was muttering something, saying something to Eddie, but wasn’t sure what it was. Maybe something about how a man doesn’t deserve to get stabbed in the face by a psychotic childhood
bully only to survive that and then get stabbed in the gut by some kind of interdimensional fear-sucking evil entity. Maybe a man who went through something like that that deserved a break.

The rain tapered off as they drove. The hellish downpour lightened into a spring shower, the clouds pulling apart and the sky brightening. And by the time they arrived at the hospital, the sun was shining.

There was a moment, just before they pushed into the Emergency Room of Derry Home Hospital, all soaked in blood and the sewer and mutant clown spider goo and carrying an unconscious Eddie between them, when Richie was sure the doctors wouldn’t be able to see what was wrong. He felt a cold certainty that the nurses would turn their faces towards them, but that their eyes would slide right off, the same way grown ups had always turned from the horrors they couldn’t

( wouldn’t )

see. And Eddie would fade further away. They would scream for the doctors to look, to do something, but Eddie would be gone, draining away until he was nothing at all.

But when they burst into the room, in all their frantic and disgusting glory with Mike shouting for help, help right now – people moved. Those nurses bolted. A gurney appeared out of thin air, and Eddie – the sweetest of them all, the one who would have feared a gurney the most – was pulled onto it. Richie stood there, hands empty and helpless. There were nurses on either side, preparing to pull the gurney forwards, and it was Bill who said bye. Bill touched a hand to Eddie’s cheek for a moment, the one Henry Bowers hadn’t so rudely punctured with a knife, and said “We l-l-love you Eddie” like it was a protective spell, a blessing, as the nurses rushed him away, the gurney suspended between them like a battering ram as they pushed into the doors that led back into the places they couldn’t see.

The hospital wouldn’t let them stay. Derry’s healthcare system had hardly been state of the art to begin with, and the supernatural, cataclysmic storm that had ripped through it had resulted in a small hospital that was being stretched past capacity. They had no time or waiting room for five non-blood relatives, especially five non-blood relatives in a bloody state. But Richie would have stood there in that Emergency Room, staring at those doors and waiting forever, if Beverly hadn’t taken him by his shoulders and gently walked with him out of the room, saying “We can’t stay here, Richie,” in a soft voice.

Outside, it was a beautiful morning.

Without talking about it, they piled back into the van and Mike drove them to his house, a trim little Cape Cod closer to the edge of Derry. There was an unspoken agreement that they couldn’t yet disperse. It felt as though together they were balancing something precious between them, and if one of them walked away it would tumble to the ground.

A massive tree limb had fallen in his front lawn, but otherwise Mike’s home appeared to have been untouched by the apocalyptic storm that had whirled its way through the town. They followed Mike inside the house, and one by one took turns with the little shower in the first floor bathroom, until they were all mostly clean and wearing Mike’s sweatpants and T-shirts, as though it was Dress Like Your Favorite Derry Librarian Day.

The rooms above the Derry library had a lived in feeling – maybe not a cozy one, but some undeniable proof that someone lived there, the same way little chewed up pieces of newspaper collected in a corner might mark a small creature’s home. Mike’s actual house lacked that. It felt
stale and thin and held an old smell, as though even the air had grown too still. Old photos, yellow in their frames, hung from the walls, showcasing Mike’s parents and relatives, sometimes a younger Mike. There was one photo, Richie saw, of what must have been Mike on his college graduation day, his parents beaming on either side of their cap-and-gown son, but otherwise there didn’t appear to be many photos of him past high school. And again, Richie felt bothered by that truth, that they had left and flourished and Mike, good old Mike, had stayed and put in the work.

Mike had turned on the radio in his kitchen, and it was bleating out static-laced updates about the *freak storm* that had hit Derry that morning. Through the host’s reporting and the stories people were calling in with, it became clear that while they had been battling Pennywise leagues below, Derry had been going through its own apocalyptic shit. Richie couldn’t find much sympathy in his heart.

They assembled themselves in a circle of mismatched chairs around Mike’s shabby kitchen table. Richie realized they’d pulled seven chairs together when he saw there was an empty one on his left and another on Bill’s right.

Mike, blessed man that he was, had pulled out everything alcoholic in his place – scotch and beer, a little bit of whiskey. The remnants from what they’d brought themselves had to still be in the library. It had only been the evening before, hadn’t it? When they’d all arrived at the library after their little sight-seeing excursions, swapping stories – *you wouldn’t believe who I ran into, remember that old clown who wouldn’t stop fucking with us?* They had all had the same idea to hit the liquor store before showing up, and that realization had been one of the few things to make Richie laugh. They were adults and they were scared so they bought alcohol. Eddie had shown up with gin and prune juice, and Richie had laughed at that. It all felt like a lifetime ago.

For the hundredth time, he thought he could use a cigarette. Or a joint.

Mike had handed Richie a chipped light blue mug, and for some reason the shade of blue reminded Richie of the Babe the Ox statue they’d never built as a companion for Paul. Thank whoever for small town controversy and smaller miracles.

“Well,” said Mike, looking around at each of them before raising his glass slightly. “To us.”

They echoed him, raising their glasses to the center and drinking. Richie tipped back a large mouthful of whiskey. It was cheap, and it went down angry. He stared forwards, and the vastness of what was left stared back. He could remember when they fought Pennywise as kids, how some purpose was strung through them all. Sitting in this circle, no one had to say *we really did it this time.* There was no question of it. The thing that had united them and called them back was gone. No more grasping bloody hands.

“I’m g-g – I’m g-glad we came back,” said Bill, staring at the table. Richie could imagine he was. Other than Mike, Bill was the one who saw the full terror of what they had been going after and felt the full tragedy of who they’d been avenging. He looked at Mike. “We owe you.”

Mike shrugged. “I was only doing what someone had to do.”

“But you’re the one who did it,” said Ben. “Man, all those years… I’m sorry that – I wish it hadn’t just been you.”

“Thanks, Mike,” said Bev, smiling sadly at him. “Without you we would have forgotten our promise.”

“Yeah, thanks, Mike,” added Richie. “This sure beats my high school reunion.”
Mike was looking at them now, and Richie saw a flash of the Mike of before, wide-eyed and wondrous, finalizing the bond between them all one sunny day in Derry when Beverly Marsh had let out a battle cry and hurled a rock straight at Henry Bowers’ head.

“Don’t worry about it,” said Mike.

“We have to,” said Bill. “Derry’s never g-g-g – won’t say thank you.”

“Derry owes us all a thank you.”

“If there’s any of it left,” said Ben. “Something happened out here while we were all down there.”

“Fine with me,” said Richie. “No offense, but fuck this town – sorry Mike.”

Mike shook his head. “I know what you mean – believe me, I know. But – I guess I want to have some faith in Derry, still. See what it can be without It.”

“You’re too good a guy, Mike,” said Beverly. “You know that?”

“You just mean I put up with too much shit.”

She laughed. “That’s exactly what I mean.”

Richie looked at the empty chair beside Bill. If something happened to Eddie, if something was going wrong, would the doctors call? Mike had left his number, right?

“You know, I feel like I wasn’t alive for the last twenty-seven years,” said Ben, laughing awkwardly when they turned their concerned faces on him. “No, sorry - that’s not what I meant. Only – to not remember to remember your childhood? And you guys? It’s just weird to think I was living so long without you.”

Yeah, thought Richie. I get that.

“It’s not going to be like that anymore,” said Bev. She was smiling at Ben, a tired and sweet smile that made Richie feel as though he should look elsewhere. “I don’t think we’re going to forget again.”

“No, I don’t think so,” Mike agreed.

“Great,” said Richie, “Now that I remember everything, I can finally go to therapy for the clown that ate all the kids in my hometown.”

“Tell us when you find a good one, Richie,” said Beverly, taking another sip from her cup.

“Sure. Hey, maybe I can get us a group rate.”

They laughed, and it was the same feeling as when they had held hands in that circle, and Richie wondered if maybe they really were done surviving. If, like Ben had said, they could just be living now.

“So you gonna write a book about this one, Big Bill?” asked Richie.

Bill smiled. “I think m-maybe I’ve been writing books about it. About all of this.”

“Well, in that case you owe me some royalties.”
He laughed. “Sure Richie, I’ll g-get right on that.”

It felt… shit, did it feel bad that it felt good? Like the first night having dinner together, but without a specter drooling over their deaths in the corner. The fear wasn’t all gone, but there was relief mixed in there now, too.

“I can’t believe Eddie did that,” said Ben, his voice tinged with awe.

“That’s Eddie,” said Bill, “Scared until he isn’t.”

That was true, thought Richie, another piece of the past swirling to the surface, a small Eddie shouting *It’s battery acid! Eat it!* and firing off his aspirator at a massive gelatinous eyeball. Eddie, too angry to be scared, shouting *I’m gonna fucking kill you!*

“Eddie’s married,” said Mike suddenly, and the conversation sizzled away like water on a hot pan. Poof, gone. Richie stared. He had forgotten. Eddie had shown them a photo of her on his phone and Richie had immediately cracked a joke about how he’d heard about guys marrying ball busters but never wrecking balls. He felt that rare twinge of guilt, regret for a joke he’d told.

“He’s got a wife,” repeated Mike, like they didn’t all realize that now. “We have to call her.”

“What do we tell her?” said Ben.


“Not to outsiders,” said Bill. “Not to the rest of them.”

“Car crash?” offered Ben.

Richie snorted, “Right, the engine block flew right through his gut but don’t worry Mrs. Kaspbrak, he’s gonna be fine.”

“We have to tell her in case he’s not fine,” said Mike. Something in Richie wanted to grab his mug and smash it against the wall.

“Maybe we can wait,” said Bill, meeting Richie’s eye. “Until we know m-m-more? If she comes up here and asks questions –”

“Half of Derry was in the emergency room,” said Ben. “We saw Main Street – buildings sunk into the ground. The radio, saying all those pipes – backed up, exploded – it’s all…” He raised his eyebrows and exhaled heavily. “I don’t think we need to worry about too much explaining.”

“So we call her?” said Richie, and could he feel all their eyes on him now? Could he feel the way they were looking at him – and was it different?

“I’ll talk to the hospital first,” said Mike, “See if they’ve got an update. Then I’ll call her.”

The others nodded, but Mike didn’t move to make the call yet. Ben started saying something about a communications tower he’d designed, and it made Mike smile, and the conversation continued on as something safe and comfortable. They stayed in that incomplete circle for a while, maybe hours. The evening sun was streaking across the wooden floor, dust motes floating in the late amber light when Bill stood up, and said, “I’m g-g-going back to the town house. I j-j-j –…” he stopped, took a breath, and said, “Could use…a moment.”

The others nodded, they could understand that. Christ, they could all use a moment or two.
“You’re still stuttering, Big Bill,” remarked Richie.

“And you’re still wearing g-glasses, Trashmouth.”

“Just for the aesthetic,” said Richie with a grin, but it was true. Just the thought of trying to put his contacts in again brought back the burning feeling from before, and he didn’t much feel like ever putting in contacts again.

And it had never really been about being called *Four Eyes* anyway.

Bill smiled, then looked at them all in turn.

“I do love you g-guys,” he said. Richie felt it. He meant it. Movies and hallmark cards and inspirational quotes were always telling you to do that – tell people you love them, you never knew when it was going to be the last time. Who actually did that, he wondered. Who really lived like that?

Bill, apparently. Maybe all of them. The seven of them. Six. They could.

Beverly and Ben left together shortly after Bill did. Richie looked at Mike, who gave him a soft smile in return.

“How about that, huh?” said Richie.

“How about what?” said Mike, feigning ignorance.

“Alright, alright,” said Richie. “So what are you gonna do, Mikey? You finally gonna leave this place?”

Mike took a breath. “I don’t know. Wasn’t an option for so long.”

It didn’t feel right still, to Richie, the idea that they had all flown away from Derry and done well, and Mike had stayed and, well – he had a good reputation for a librarian at least.

“Well, your watch is ended. Go live a little.”

“Think I just might.”

“Come to Los Angeles, you can always crash on my couch.”

“Thanks, Richie.”

“You pulled me out of the clubhouse,” said Richie, the words coming without him thinking about it. The past still busy poking its head up, waving a hand to make sure he had gotten everything. “When we were smoking it out – remember?”

“Yeah,” said Mike soft.

“So my couch is always yours. That’s all I’m saying.”

Mike smiled, and without a word lifted his glass towards him. Richie clinked it with his mug and downed the rest of his drink.

“God, that’s bad, Mike.”

“I know,” said Mike. “I’m going to call the hospital, then Mrs. Kaspbrak. You want to stick
Richie hesitated. Felt dread running around inside him, roiling over like the inside of a cement truck. Yes, he wanted to stay, wanted to hear that Eddie was fine, hell of a punch this guy took but he’s gonna pull through. No, he didn’t want to be here, didn’t want to see Mike’s face or hear him say oh, oh I understand, and the other end of the phone remain an obvious, horrible silence, the truth blaring between those silent gaps.

“I’m going to take a walk,” said Richie. “If there’s any of Derry left to walk around. See you tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow,” nodded Mike. They stood together, and Mike pulled Richie into a hug before Richie had a moment to really think about it. “Take care of yourself, Richie.”

“Yeah, man, you too,” said Richie, pulling away with a laugh and disappearing out the door.

Richie let the roads take him back down to Kansas Street, though he had no real idea of a destination, the cheap whiskey softening his mind. He’d thought he would walk back to the Town House at first, but when he came to the intersection where he should have made a left he kept on going, letting his feet wander where they wanted. The air was crisp and sweet smelling, the last bits of sun heavy but not too hot. It was a beautiful evening, and wasn’t that just like Derry. Death and chaos in the morning. Sweet summer-smelling sunsets in the afternoon.

Bev was right – he didn’t think they would forget Derry this time. But already what had happened underground, in the tangled knot at the heart of the sewers, felt more and more like a nightmare. Something kept behind the veil, that was trickier to recall the more time spent awake. He rubbed a hand beneath his glasses and across his face.

Mike wanted to have faith in this town. Which was, alright – the phrase Stockholm syndrome came to mind. But Richie wondered what would happen to Derry without its monster. Had they cut out a tumor? It felt more like they’d wrestled a junkie’s stash from his desperate, clawing hands and flushed it all down the toilet. Or, he wondered, looking at a road that was closed due to a massive crack running through it, plates of pavement scattered and overlapping one another like broken pottery – or, when they had crushed the gray and slimy pulse of It, had they crushed Derry’s heart too?

And so what if they had? Sorry Mike, but if Derry was going to rot, let it rot. Richie’s head still felt like an overstuffed suitcase that someone was sitting on to force everything to fit, but he remembered enough now. There was so much to remember. Some people in this town wouldn’t have seen It as a parasite. Some people were a boulder on a precipice, and It had always just been the littlest push, the convenient excuse they needed.

(Get the fuck out of here faggot)

The monster had reared its head every twenty-seven years, but Derry had never been a paradise in between that. For all the kids that were swallowed up within Pennywise’s sewers, how many more had been swallowed up by the town itself? Kids who couldn’t fight it anymore and grew up to become the cold-eyed pharmacists or sneering cops. Or kids like them, who thought they’d made it out. Only maybe they hadn’t.

Right Stan? thought Richie to himself as the late summer sun dipped lower, pulling out his shadow like boardwalk taffy. It caught up to you, didn’t it?
He took a deep breath, inhaled air in Derry that for once in his life didn’t seem to have that closed creeping smell, and looked around. Here was the problem with trusting your feet to lead you, he realized. You didn’t know where you’d end up, but you’d still have no one to blame but yourself when you found yourself standing at the kissing bridge.

Like the singers would sing – the more things change the more they stay the same.

His whole life, following a script he hadn’t remembered being handed. And it was only coming back here, to this reeking town, that he saw the start of it in an arcade that time had left by the wayside. Where he’d felt that quick, hot burst of shame, the first brick he’d use to build up that wall inside. How many bricks had others handed to him during his life, between the ones he reached for himself? And how much care had he taken in kneeling down, laying them out, stacking them gently. Cementing them together with the crude jokes, the centerfolds, the girls in the backseat of his used ’92 Camry, the guys he made fun of with lisps and limp-wristed impressions. Walling up a truth he didn’t care to look at.

(don’t stare at him too much don’t look at him like that don’t sit so what are you what are you a pervert huh stop staring)

Part of him wanted to walk up to the bridge and find the initials that he wondered at still being there. A deeper instinct ground against that, because what if the clown suddenly, inexplicably was there? Or Henry Bowers, with his satanic grin and bowie knife, back from the dead and crowing gotcha Tozier! Or if the thing he kept behind the wall clawed its way out?

Richie shivered. The clown was dead, they’d killed It. Henry was dead, because they’d killed him, too. He’d be forty-one next year and didn’t need to be scared of phantoms or bullies.

He turned away from the bridge, and walked over to a bench that hadn’t existed when he’d been a kid. It was recent, and according to a little plaque it had been erected in memory of some asshole who had apparently died in 2011 and loved Derry. Richie fell onto it, tipped his head back and breathed deeply.

Home sweet home, he thought to himself, and laughed, because he’d said that very thing to Eddie yesterday, when they’d gotten to the Derry Town House with the intention of packing up their shit and getting the hell out of there. Right, Eddie had said with that nervous half-laugh of his. Home is where the psychotic clown monster that feeds on children is.

It was amazing how quickly they’d all fallen back in with each other. And it wasn’t just remembering they’d all existed – Richie didn’t expect there were too many forty year olds who would bump into someone they knew from when they were thirteen and immediately feel exactly the way they did from that time. But with the past had come something else; it was like a friendship not just remembered or rediscovered, but finally returned. Like finding something you loved that had been put away in the attic all these years. He could look at them all and see the kids from ’89 and feel that summer, that instant, binding loyalty and the way you think you’ll die for someone at thirteen if you have to, when you don’t even understand death because you just started to understand life.

The way you might still die for them now. Richie stared up at the trees and the sky dipping from deep sherbet tones to dark blue and remembered Eddie as he’d been back then – socks pulled up high (have you guys never heard of Lyme disease? Are you serious right now?), a fanny pack that rattled with all manner of pills and medication, quick eyes that were both fearful and cutting. That summer of 1989. What he’d known before the arcade, if, for once, he was really going to be honest with himself. What came back with everything else that had been hidden away in the attic.
He slumped forwards, rubbed at his eyes again and cast his mind elsewhere. Eddie almost died. Eddie was in the hospital. Some things you couldn’t think about a guy who might be hurt real bad because he’d tried to save you.

(your heart is sick)

His phone buzzed. His phone had been buzzing off and on all day, but he’d been ignoring it. It was mostly missed calls and messages from his assistant, some from his agent, from industry friends and Los Angeles people, the girl he’d been sleeping with off and on to check off a box. But this time he reached into his pocket and pulled out his phone – a message from Mike in a newly formed group chat. More fucking weirdness. Twenty-seven years not remembering the best friends of your life, and now you all have a group chat together. All six of you that are left, anyway.

MH: They moved Eddie to Bangor

Richie stared at the message. If they had moved him, he was still alive, at least. Unless Eddie’s last wish had been bury me in Bangor, and that he doubted. That new fear that pulsed along the back of his mind receded a little. His phone buzzed again in his hand.

BD: When?

MH: After we dropped him off

MH: They forgot to call me

MH: I called Eddie’s wife Myra, she’s arriving in Bangor tomorrow morning

BD: Can we see him?

MH: Don’t know

MH: When I called they said he was in surgery

Richie slipped the phone back into his pocket. Bangor was less than an hour’s drive away, and the worst memories he had of Bangor were holidays at his Grandma’s and being dragged to her church’s tortuously long Christmas and Easter services. So, not a patch on his worst memories from Derry. He stood up and started walking back to the Town House, planning his next move. He’d grab his things, check out, let the group know he was going to find some spot to stay in Bangor.

But when he walked into the Town House, they were all already there, waiting in the lobby – even Mike, sitting in a green armchair with a duffel bag packed and by his feet.

“There you are,” said Beverly when he walked in. “I’ve been calling you – did you get Mike’s message?”

He hadn’t checked his phone since putting it back in his pocket. Oops.

“Oh,” he said. “About Eddie? Yeah.”

“Well, maybe next time you could reply,” said Beverly. “Since he’s in Bangor we figured we’d go there, too.” And leave Derry.

Richie nodded. “Pretty sure all my stuff is still packed from when I almost bailed before.”

“Then go get it,” said Bev with a smile. “We’re all ready to go.”
They found a Holiday Inn to check into, and the next morning Mike called patient information and they learned that after a night spent in surgery, Eddie was in the ICU. Visiting hours in the ICU began at noon, which meant they were pulling into the hospital parking lot at 11:50 am promptly.

The Medical Center was a massive hospital, and it made sense to Richie why Derry would have packaged Eddie up to send him and the hole in his chest to Bangor. The entrance of the hospital felt like an airport, with its groups of people moving purposefully across the shiny tiled floor and TV screens advising which way to go for what. They made their way towards the general information desk, which Bill approached and said they were looking for information about an Edward Kaspbrak?

There were a few sets of sofas and chairs organized in clusters around the hospital’s entryway, and Richie noticed a woman rising from one of them now. She was a larger woman – pale faced, shiny brown hair, and wide eyes that knew the rest of the world was just lying in wait, biding its time until you dipped your head to the watering hole so it could snap its jaws around you and drag you down. It was a face he recognized from Eddie’s phone.

*Ding ding ding*, went off the bell in Richie’s mind. *Ladies and gentlemen, in one corner, back from the dead in a whole new way. They made her better, they made her stronger, it’s Mrs. Kaspbrak 2.0!*

She approached them while the woman at the information desk was pulling up information on Eddie.

“Excuse me,” she said. The rest of them all turned their heads. “Is one of you Mike?”

“I am,” said Mike, looking back at her calmly. He offered a hand. “Mike Hanlon. You must be Myra.”

She looked at his hand as though it held a knife, then straightened herself up a little and took it in hers, holding his hand for a moment so brief it could hardly be constituted as ‘shaking.’

“Thank you for calling me before,” she said. “I’ve been talking to the hospital and Eddie’s condition is very, very serious. He was in surgery for hours and he’s not awake yet.” She took a breath. “I, I know you came here to, to see him but there’s really no reason for you to.”

The déjà vu rolled over Richie like a storm cloud. Weren’t they here like this before? Younger, all of them, but the same woman looming over them – a little more cut in her voice, a steel that brooked no argument. She had spoken like a moving train that left you stuck on the other side. Words and accusations that pushed at their backs and forced them out the front door of the hospital while they knew somewhere in the back was Eddie, small and miserable with a broken arm.

But they’d been children then. And this woman might be Mrs. Kaspbrak, still lying in wait at the hospital entrance, but she wasn’t Mrs. Sonia Kaspbrak.

Bill knew it. He stepped towards her, hands open and palms up, and said, “Mrs. Kaspbrak, I know this is s-s-scary – ”

Richie saw her eyebrows rise at Bill’s stutter, and she seemed to flinch inward. It didn’t do much to endear him to her.

“ – but we’re h-here because we love Eddie too, and we’re worried about h-him.”
“I don’t think you understand. I don’t think you should see him. Eddie – he is hurt,” she said in a trilling voice, and Richie had a moment to think oh my god, really Eddie? She continued, “Seriously hurt! And I don’t know how or why! All I know is that whatever happened to him, happened while he was with you!”

Something passed over Bill’s face, and Beverly stepped forwards.

“You’re right, Myra, you deserve an explanation,” she said, her tone calm. “My name is Beverly, I’m another friend of Eddie’s. Why don’t we get something warm to drink, and I’ll tell you more about everything, okay?”

The OG Mama K would never have fallen for such an obvious diversionary tactic like that. Richie half-wondered if Myra would take up the mantle and try to deck Bev for even suggesting such a thing, the two of them getting cozy while her Eddie languished on death’s doorstep, or something like that.

But to his surprise, Myra deflated a little, her whole body slumping forwards. She looked at Beverly the way a lost child might at finding a helpful adult.

“Hospital food is never good, but it’s hard to mess up tea, right?” said Beverly. Her smile was kind. She’d always been the best at navigating a person and defusing a situation.

“You’ll tell me what happened?” asked Myra.

“I’ll tell you what I can,” said Beverly. “Maybe it’ll help.”

She gently touched Myra’s shoulder and led her away from them, following the signs that said Cafeteria, and Myra allowed herself to be led. Beverly glanced over her shoulder at them once, eyebrow raised. Well? She seemed to say.

Richie could see Ben torn by some kind of indecision, as though he wasn’t sure whether he should follow her or not. He reminded Richie of a dog tied to a bike rack outside a coffee shop.

“I think she can handle this one on her own,” said Richie.

“What?” said Ben.

“Nothing,” said Richie, turning with the rest of the group back towards the front desk. The woman who they’d asked about Eddie looked back at them, eyebrows raised.

“We’re the ones who brought Eddie to the hospital in Derry,” said Mike. “They transferred him here. We just want to make sure he’s okay.”

She looked at them all, eyes resting for a beat on each of them before ending on Mike and speaking.

“Mr. Kaspbrak is in the post anesthesia care unit. Visitors are limited to family right now.”

“We were told he was in the ICU?” said Mike, frowning.

“According to what I know, that’s not the case.”

“But he’s okay?” said Richie, the words tumbling out before he could stop them.

“I believe he’s stable,” she said. There was a sterile kindness to her voice. A kind of I know you’re worried about a person you care deeply about, but this is just my day job, so please move along
quality. Kind, but crisp. “Are any of you family?”

“Yeah we’re all brothers,” said Richie. “We’re adopted.”

The woman looked at them. For a moment Richie was really hoping she would have a little sympathy. Or maybe it would turn out she loved crass comedy tailored towards immature men in the mid 20s-30s demographic and would be a huge fan.

He hoped in vain.

“You can see him when he’s moved to the ICU,” she said. “It might be later today.”

“But we were told that’s where he was now!” exclaimed Richie.

“Thanks,” said Bill, clapping a firm hand on Richie’s shoulder. “Thank you.”

“This is bullshit,” said Richie when the four of them had walked a little further away from the desk and hopefully out of earshot of the hospital receptionist. “We can’t see him? He’s not fucking VIP or something, he’s our friend in a hospital room – who’s this lady think she is?”

“Eddie was hurt really bad,” said Ben, always the voice of reason. Man, Richie forgot how annoying that could be. How many Trashmouth classics had been wasted on Ben’s practicality? Too many to count. “It’s a miracle that he’s still alive. It sounds like he’s just still in a recovery room, this is probably standard practice, just controlling visitors.”

“Okay, well, I just think it’s a bullshit practice and we should be able to see the fucking guy – I mean, Bill, Mike?”

Richie saw Bill and Mike looking at each other, exchanging glances as though they could communicate without actually speaking. Bill inclined his head, and Mike said, “Alright.”

Richie pumped a fist and turned and started to walk off down a random hallway. He heard Bill and Mike close behind him, and Ben saying “Wait, guys! Wait, shouldn’t we, like – what about Bev?”

“Why don’t you keep watch for once, Haystack?” said Richie, wheeling around for a second, “Just stand there and look pretty, you’re already killing it, babe!” He grinned and walked forwards again, Mike and Bill on either side of him.

It was stupid the types of places you could get into if you just walked like you had the permission to be there. They followed the signs labeled PACU – fourth floor. Richie’s smile faded as the elevator slowly chugged along, shuddering to a wearisome halt on the fourth floor. Hospitals were hospitals. No one came here for a good time. In a way, Richie was in the anti-hospital business.

Entering a post-surgery ward almost made him expect to be immediately greeted by bloody bandages or murder victims. But it was a hospital hallway, and whatever future-zombies might be on this floor were in hospital beds behind curtained off sections. There weren’t individual rooms here; it was more like one big room, with curtain partitions along the edges. Steady beeping, various conversations, and the occasional overhead announcement all mixed together to create a clinical noise. There were medical professionals in white coats and scrubs moving between beds, but no one stopped them as they walked around the room, passing other patients newly out of surgery and flanked by visiting family.

“Almost feels familiar,” said Mike in a distant voice.

“Mm, nostalgia,” said Richie. “Nothing like visiting Eddie in the hospital to bring back those good
“Beep beep Richie,” said Bill, and then they found him.

It wasn’t easy, seeing a person he knew and cared about, unconscious in a hospital bed, covered by a thin sheet and shrouded in all kinds of tubes and IV drips. He looked almost unrecognizable, but Richie could never miss Eddie. A breathing tube went down his throat, his left leg was guarded on either side by two long metal rods that Richie couldn’t look too closely at. The real damage, he suspected, was beneath the thin hospital sheet covering his torso. Standing there felt both impersonal and wildly intimate.

“Shit,” said Richie. “He looks terrible.”

Mike placed a hand on Richie’s shoulder. Unlike when Bill had done it in front of the information desk, there was no subtle warning or pull behind it. Just gentle reassurance. It made something stick in his throat.

Bill had moved to stand beside Eddie. Sleep usually had a way of making people look peaceful. But Eddie wasn’t asleep exactly, and he still looked worried. He probably had good reason for it. It was in his eyebrows, drawn downwards, the faint lines in his forehead from some forty-odd years worth of worrying. Did he analyze risk even in his sleep? Was he dreaming about appraising portfolios or whatever for problems?

Man, Richie really had no idea what it was Eddie did.

“At least h-h-he’s alive,” said Bill.

They stood there in silence for a moment, and Richie wondered if they were all considering the total insanity of this moment.

“Excuse me – it’s only two visitors at a time,” said a strict voice from behind them. They turned to see a nurse giving them all a hard stare. Richie groaned inwardly. “Did you sign in at the front desk?”

“We did,” said Mike.

“Well, they should have given you a visitor sticker. Make sure they do next time.” She remained standing and looking at them, her message clear – after you.

“See you, Eds,” muttered Richie, touching the bed’s mattress lightly before turning to follow Bill and Mike out the door, the nurse’s stare prodding them all the way down to the elevator.

Eddie didn’t wake up the next day. He didn’t wake up for a while, in fact. Hurry it up, Sleeping Beauty, Richie thought as he stood in front of the lunchmeat section at the local Hannaford. It had been a week since they’d driven up to Bangor, a week since everything. He had a million voicemails from his agent on his cellphone, ranging between frantic and angry. California friends still shooting him texts, asking him what was going on.

He missed them, sure, but not enough really. Those relationships felt different, the texture of them thinner, beside his friends from Derry. It was like holding up a postcard of a landmark next to the real thing. Eddie was in the hospital and he knew that was the tragic anchor keeping them all here, but other than Eddie’s unguaranteed and uncertain fate, things were… good? Nights together like that first time back in Derry, without a vicious punch line shaped like a murderous clown hanging
at the end of the meal. They continued to catch up – there was *so much* to catch up on – and told jokes, remembered middle school, debated about where Mike should travel, laughed at the idea of nostalgia for the 80s, listened to Bill talk about his college days and how much his creative writing professor had hated him, listened to Ben’s horror stories about breaking into the architecture business, listened to Bev’s horror stories about breaking into the fashion industry.

And they visited Eddie. And Richie wondered if it was going to drive him insane. When they weren’t with him, there was an embarrassed shame that crept in and nibbled at his insides. Call it survivor’s guilt, whatever it was, it was a bad time. It came from that overwhelming thing you started to cotton onto more as you grew into adulthood, that vast, oppressive truth that you couldn’t afford to look at straight on. The thing that – Richie thought, in his more contemplative moods – that comedy could sometimes help a person glance sideways at, like a monster’s reflection in a mirror. The thing that would let It pull Georgie down into the sewers forever, that would have Stan grow up and find success and kill himself in a bathtub, that would let Richie stare at magazines in the checkout lane while Eddie was unconscious in one of Maine’s best hospitals. The uncaring truth of it all.

And when they were with Eddie, it was kind of unbearable. They’d go up to his room in the ICU and sit around his bed and continue catching up, sometimes speaking to Eddie, like he might open his bruised eyes and chime in with a pointed remark about something. But he didn’t. His body was fighting an uphill battle, sometimes gaining ground, and there were small admissions to that, like when they removed the breathing tube and took him off the ventilator. But he still didn’t wake up. And what was unnerving was that the doctors couldn’t tell them why he didn’t. Richie came to realize there was nothing worse than a doctor trying to tell you *I don’t know* in medical terms.

Through some small miracle, they continued to miss Myra. Until they didn’t.

Richie wouldn’t have called himself a morning person. Morning people had some sort of strange automaton mechanism driving them. They were people who woke up and got up. He was more of a well-I-can’t-ever-sleep-so-might-as-well-just-get-up-now person. An I’ve-been-awake-since-four-am-and-it’s-just-not-happening-for-me person.

It was a Tuesday, maybe eight or nine days since Richie and the rest had begun their indefinite stay at the Bangor Holiday Inn. They could have stayed somewhere nicer, but they hadn’t talked about moving, and Richie felt like it was a supernatural thing now. The Holiday Inn was a transient spot. The Holiday Inn said *oh no, I don’t need some place too fancy – won’t be here long*. There was hope in their reservation.

He’d been awake for a while but didn’t let himself get up until he saw the digital readout on the clock by his bed snap to 6:00. It was going to be a weird day. Mike had driven back down to Derry last night to check in on some library business and wouldn’t be back until tomorrow. Bill had gone with him, saying he wanted to see how Derry was doing, which Richie thought was a vaguely psychotic thing to want but Bill was a grown man. And it left Richie as a proverbial third wheel, not that Ben and Bev would say that. Not that they’d admit to even being two-wheels, as the case may be.

They usually didn’t visit the hospital until after lunch, closer to 2 or so, but visiting hours started as early as noon and really, if the staff knew you, seemed like you could show up whenever. Richie sat in the very beige, very fluorescent room that the Holiday Inn served their continental breakfast in, and thought okay, what the hell. Why not see how Eddie was doing this morning? He could pop in in the morning and come back with Ben and Bev in the afternoon. It wasn’t like Eddie was going
to pop up and say *hey, you’ve been here already!*

He moved through the hospital without thinking about it. Stop at the visitor sign in, slap the sticker on his chest, down the hallway and hook a left to the elevator, take it up to the fourth floor. Past the rooms he didn’t need to glance at to know where he was. Room twenty, on his right. He was whistling when he pushed in the door and walked inside.

And Myra was sitting there. In one of those plastic hospital chairs, on the other side of Eddie. Her head shot up when Richie walked in, and she just stared at him, body tensed and still like a rabbit that sensed a hawk overhead.

Richie stared right back. What the fuck was he supposed to do in this situation? What did he say when meeting the wife of his childhood friend who he’d forgotten about for most of his life and who was currently indefinitely incapacitated because he’d thrown himself in harm’s way to save Richie’s life? Hey Heloise, any hints for this one?

Start with the basics, he guessed.

“Hi,” said Richie, taking a hand out of his jacket pocket and lifting it in a tragic attempt at a wave. “We didn’t exactly meet before. I’m Richie.”

“You’re one of Eddie’s friends,” said Myra. She said it in a whisper, as though they knew each other from a stint in prison together.

“Yeah. You’re Myra, right?”

She nodded.

“You mind if I call you Myra?” he asked.

She shook her head.

“You mind if I sit down?”

She hesitated, caught between the truth and politeness.

“Alright, well, I’m just gonna sit down,” said Richie, and dropped himself down in the chair across from her, Eddie between them, uncharacteristically silent. Richie wondered if the shit he heard about coma patients was true, and if Eddie could hear them and their exciting non-conversation.

A couple of years ago Richie had gotten food poisoning that hit right as his fourteen hour flight from LA to Sydney had taken off. He spent most of the trip getting intimate with the airplane’s bathroom at 35,000 feet. That had been a more comfortable experience than whatever the hell this was. The silence, Richie’s ever-constant enemy, felt thick between the white hospital walls. This was some fucking time alright. Richie Tozier, who some people paid $100 to see, cooling his heels with a woman who’d probably pay ten times that amount for him to leave. He looked over at Myra, and caught her quickly looking away. How cute were they.

“You mind if I turn on the TV?” he asked. He could see her hesitate, fearful eyes cataloguing Eddie. The Mrs. K of old would have had some things to say, maybe some bullshit about how Eddie’s delicate ears couldn’t be taxed while he was unconscious or too many electronic devices in a room could cause a malfunction in the equipment keeping sweet Eddie bear alive. But the Mrs. K of old wouldn’t have let Richie get so far as the doorway, and if Richie didn’t get some background noise in here he was gonna throttle himself with Eddie’s IV drip.
“How about I keep it low,” he said with a smile that he hoped didn’t look too forced, reaching for
the remote on the bedside and clicking it on. It didn’t make a sound, but Myra jumped a little in her
chair all the same.

Richie flipped through the slim offerings of Tuesday morning programming – all talk shows, local
news, daytime soaps, and infomercials. He settled on a channel where an eclectic cast of characters
were making an enthusiastic pitch for a blender that evidently had the power to change your life.

“I love infomercials like this,” said Richie absently. “Really. The level of dedication? Like, here’s
a commercial that you know was created by people who went to film school, dreamed of being the
next Spielberg or Coppola, and instead of The Godfather they got The Magic Bullet.”

Myra made a slight noise that could have been interpreted as yes, surely, I agree, so Richie
interpreted it that way. The blender infomercial went on for another five minutes, during which the
enthusiastic hosts (“Which one do you think looks the most broken inside?” Richie had asked, and
gotten zero response to) used the blender to create all manner of smoothies, salsas, batters, juices,
sauces, and other pureed substances. The blender segment ended and was replaced with a
commercial about a small light with an adhesive back so that you could “Stick it in any location!”
and Richie thought of something he could say about that, but he didn’t know that Myra would
appreciate it.

A garden hose head with twenty different settings. A pan that would help you make literally any
meal under the sun in five minutes. Richie kept up a steady stream of infomercial commentary as
they watched, because they hadn’t called him Trashmouth for nothing as a kid, and he was even
rewarded with a small chuckle from Myra at one point.

Eventually the infomercials gave way to local programming. Richie was wondering if he should
wrap up this torture session when Myra suddenly spoke up.

“I’m sorry that…” she began, losing whatever it was she meant to say. And it occurred to Richie
again that for all the surface-level similarity between Myra and the Mrs. Kaspbrak of old, there
were some fundamental differences. Mama K would never have let Richie sit down, and she
wouldn’t have shared a small laugh with him or begin a conversation with a waver.

“I know you’re all staying in town somewhere,” she began again. “I’m sorry that we didn’t really
speak before. I’m… well, I don’t understand.”

“What?” asked Richie, propping another smile on his face while his stomach felt like it had
dropped an inch.

“It’s only that Eddie never mentioned any of you,” she said, sounding hurt. “Why wouldn’t he tell
me knew a, a famous writer, and a famous designer, or a famous comedian? Why would he keep all
that from me?”

Oh, it wasn’t you, Myra, it was the fucking famous monster from our childhoods, did he tell you
about that thing? It was that rotten town. I mean, I didn’t know that I knew a famous risk manager!

“Yeah, that’s a good question,” said Richie, fiddling with the zipper at the end of his jacket. “I can’t really give you a good answer for it. We just kind of lost track of each other.” I wish we
hadn’t. “I don’t think we will again.”

Myra nodded abruptly, gaze cast back towards Eddie. She readjusted the hospital bed sheet that
didn’t need any adjustment, smoothing it with a pale hand.
Richie watched Myra as she did this, this woman he’d never met before but who felt like an old ghost. This woman who Eddie had married, and all that that implied. They would have gone on dates together, he would have asked her to marry him. He would have shared his bed, shared his life with her. With this woman, who had been there during all those years when Richie had forgotten him. Suddenly Richie had a million questions he did and didn’t want to ask.

Assuming she’d even answer any of them. She was still trying to stare at Richie without actually looking at him.

“How’d you two meet?” asked Richie. *The Oedipus hotline?*

“Oh! Eddie and me? Through a friend,” said Myra. If the sudden change of topic bothered her, she didn’t let on. And she seemed like a woman who would let on.

“Yeah?”

“She was a work friend, Nicole. I was working retail, you know, just out of college, and Nicole was taking night classes to get her MBA. She had a class with Eddie, and I met up with them once. And it just kind of went from there. I guess no one really meets like that anymore, right? They always talk about that on the news, everyone meets each other online.”

“Yeah it’s a mad world. So Eddie was taking night classes?”

“Mhm. He was studying for his Master’s. Working at a firm during the day, taking the classes at night.” She looked down at the man they were talking about. “He was mostly supporting his mother then, too.”

Richie could almost see it. An Eddie in his mid-twenties. Chugging coffee from a thermos as he took the subway into Manhattan in the morning, holding on the subway railing with his sleeve and immediately applying Purell when he’d walked back above ground. Pulling little sandwiches out of a Ziploc bag for lunch while his coworkers went to the expensive bodega on the corner, weaving in and out of sidewalk crowds and cursing out slow-moving tourists. Taking afternoon vitamins and medications, swigging them down with a Redbull as he headed to class, taking furious notes that would be illegible to anyone but him. Making a friend in his night class, getting talked into meeting up with her and a friend of hers for drinks some upcoming night, regretting it but agreeing to it, meeting Myra, and then.

“I guess we dated for about a year before we talked about marriage. He was really sweet you know, not like how a lot of men are. I mean – no offense.”

Richie waved a hand. He knew all right.

“He never talked about his childhood in Maine,” continued Myra. “I knew he had some family up here, his aunts, and I guess I knew he lived here when he was little. But I didn’t know he was basically a teenager before they moved to Queens.”

“Derry wasn’t so different from any other small town,” lied Richie. “Maybe some exceptionally bad bullies.”

“That’s terrible!”

“Well, we’d get ‘em back every once in a while,” said Richie, and then he was telling Myra about the apocalyptic rock fight, the one that had cemented their friendship. He was describing the way a thirteen year old Bev had channeled her inner baseball pitcher, hurling a rock straight at the caveman skull of Henry Bowers, the one who – and he had to cut himself off. He was going to say
the one who stuck a knife in Eddie’s face like it was a sponge cake but he didn’t imagine that would go over without some more questions. The vague explanation that Bev had given Myra had included neither Henry nor Pennywise. He recalibrated – Henry Bowers, the one who broke Eddie’s arm when they were kids.

Myra gasped. “Eddie broke his arm?”

“When we were like, thirteen, yeah.”

“Oh, Eddie.” She said it so broken-hearted, stroking his hair with one soft hand, as though he’d broken his arm yesterday and not twenty-seven years ago. As if she could pluck up a sharpie and add his name to his cast.

It was the first time that Richie felt a real wince of annoyance towards her that day. Maybe that was a victory in itself. He’d thought he would hate Myra. Something in him told him he was supposed to, and it seemed to make itself heard with Myra’s hand on Eddie’s cheek.

There was a choked sound, and Richie realized with a start that it was Myra, that her eyes had gone glassy and her mouth was a quivering line and – oh fuck, was she about to cry?

“Hey,” said Richie, his body tense as though sensing danger and time to run. “It’s okay.”

“I just – I just keep thinking – what if he doesn’t wake up?” sobbed Myra, and she was sobbing now, from zero to waterworks in sixty seconds. She had one hand bunched up in the hospital sheet, the other gripping Eddie’s shoulder. “What am I going to do?”

“Collect on the life insurance?” He would bet Eddie had a good policy.

She let out another sob, the kind that grated against something raw and left no room for words.

“Please Eddie!” she pleaded, and that did sound like the ghost of another Kaspbrak, a woman Richie hadn’t heard in twenty-seven years. “Please, you have to wake up.”

Why did he have to find himself in this situation, huh? Maybe he’d like to sob and scream and shake Eddie too, but you didn’t do that with company in the room. He stood up and dragged his chair around Eddie’s bed, landing it next to Myra.

“Hey,” he said again, placing a tentative hand on her shoulder. In situations like this he always felt like the new guy on the job, or an undercover alien who’d forgotten to read the manual on how humans operated. She jerked up at his hand and looked at him, surprised. If he’d scared her then at least she wasn’t crying for a second. Works for hiccups and distressed wives! He took his hand back and sat with his arms folded.

“I know it sucks,” said Richie. “All we can do is be patient, right? He’s not awake but he’s not, you know, dead. Sounds like he’s out of the woods, so all we have to do is wait. He’ll come around. It’s Eddie, he’s too stubborn to just die, right?”

Myra’s tears had subsided, and Richie hoped she was done crying. He didn’t think he had it in him to produce a full-on pep talk. The last time I gave one of those, thought Richie, was to Eddie here, and look how that turned out for him. He looked over at Eddie, who hadn’t changed during this whole conversation – still unconscious, still with the slightest rise and fall in his chest, still surrounded by medical machines that gave Richie chills to look at.

Anytime buddy, thought Richie again. Anytime now.
When Sunday rolled around, Mike requested that they all get together for dinner. They’d spent two weeks in Bangor, two weeks that the doctors couldn’t account for because they didn’t know why Eddie hadn’t woken up yet. Two of the weirdest weeks of Richie’s life, but long enough that it was starting to feel normal. Sometimes he went to the hospital twice a day now – visiting Eddie in the afternoon with the Losers and in the morning with Myra. She still looked at him with a vague fear whenever he walked in, but she also started updating him on what the doctors had told her, although usually with a qualifier like “you know a lot of medical professionals actually forge their diplomas,” and “you know hospitals sell organs on the black market? Sometimes they let someone die if they know they have a really valuable liver or heart or something,” and if Richie bothered to question it she’d follow up by citing some show from a network he’d never heard of with a name like *Medical Confessions* or *Exposed*.

Mike had suggested a Thai spot downtown. He’d gone back to the Derry library again and would be driving back up that Sunday. Richie and company – or the three B’s as he sometimes thought of them to himself – shared a ride over to the restaurant in Ben’s rental.

“How’s Mrs. Kaspbrak the second?” asked Ben, referring to Richie’s budding friendship with Myra.

“Lovely. Still batshit crazy you know, I have some questions for Eddie when he wakes up, but other than that she’s perfectly nice.”

“I don’t know about ‘batshit crazy,’” said Bev from the passenger seat. “She’s a person who’s in a stressful situation. She’s probably reacting to that.”

“Okay Doctor Marsh, well, I don’t really get the impression that Myra necessarily had all her shit together before this went down,” replied Richie.

“J-J-Join the club, Myra,” said Bill. It had been two weeks since they’d left Derry and his stutter had remained. *It’s like all the speech therapy and lessons – gone. It’s like when I was a kid*, he’d told them.

“Welcome to Bill Denbrough’s home for fucked up kids who became fucked up adults,” said Richie.

Through the rearview mirror, Richie saw Bill smile to himself.

“Hey how’s the movie going?” asked Ben.

“Good, from what I hear. Audra wraps h-her last scenes on Thursday.”

“That’s great!” said Ben, and went on to ask something else about Bill’s movie star wife. The conversation carried them the rest of the short drive to the Thai place Mike had suggested for dinner. It was located within a humble strip mall, beside a used CD/game store (now there was an endangered species) and a Peruvian chicken spot. They’d all gone out to dinner a few other times in Bangor since arriving, and every time Richie felt the lightest tweak of dread at the memory of an eyeball pulsing its way out of a fortune cookie.

But it was approaching sunset, not yet dark, and Mike was standing outside the spot and waving to them, with a smile on his face. They were in Bangor, not Derry, and the terror really was ended forever this time.

“How’s it going guys?” asked Mike as they walked up, hugging each of them. It seemed they were
going to be a group that hugged each other as though it had always been twenty-seven years since they’d last seen each other. Richie didn’t mind it.

Mike led the way in, answering Ben’s questions about how was the library, how was the town. The rest of Derry was still recovering, and while there was no way a mere freak storm could have done something like caused the Standpipe to pop off its base and roll down a hill, the residents of Derry were taking comfort in that report. It was a freak storm after all, which excused the exceptionally improbable things that had happened.

The food was good and the conversation flowed like it had since that first hellish night in Derry, as though, despite everything, nothing had changed. As though twenty-seven years apart didn’t mean anything to a friendship like theirs.

They were halfway through their meal when Mike put down his cutlery and said, “I have something to share with you guys.”

With any other group of friends it might have been a casual statement. For them, it could be the herald to fucking anything.

“Look,” said Richie, “If there’s a shape shifting clown eating kids in Bangor, that’s someone else’s problem, okay? I’ve hit my quota for the year.”

“I’m with Richie,” said Bill.

“No more shape shifting clowns,” said Mike with the smallest smile. He reached into the inner pocket of his jacket and pulled out a piece of paper – an envelope.

“It’s from Stan,” said Mike in answer to the question none of them had asked.

None of them said anything for a moment. Eventually, in a soft voice, Beverly asked, “From Stan?”

Mike nodded. “I figured I could read it to you. He wrote it before he – died. It’s… well, you’ll see.”

“Yeah, Mike,” said Bill, nodding, “Go ahead.”

Richie stared at his plate. There’d been a small part of him that had been able to think of Stan as just late to the party, couldn’t catch a flight in time. He hadn’t heard Mrs. Uris on the phone, and what was a voice on the phone, telling them about Stan? He was just being a wet blanket, dragging his feet. Couldn’t get the time off of work. Was still waiting, down in Atlanta, remembering and wondering about them the same way they were remembering and wondering about him.

“Dear Losers,” began Mike, and Richie smiled to himself. “I know what this must seem like, but it’s not a suicide note. You’re probably wondering why I did what I did. It’s because, to put it simply, I knew I was too scared to go back. And if we weren’t together, if all of us alive weren’t united, I knew we’d all die. So, I made the only logical move. I took myself off the board. Did it work? Well, if you’re reading this, you know the answer.”

“Christ, Stan,” muttered Bill across the table. Mike paused for a moment, as though he might add something himself, but continued reading aloud.

“I spent my whole life knowing I had something to fear. Something different from what other people worry about, like getting into a car crash or a family member dying. Mike, your call woke me up to what that thing was, and maybe this seems crazy but I’m glad I got that clarity. That thing
ruled my life. Maybe it ruled yours, too. But if you’re reading this, then I hope you’re free from it.

“You were the best friends a kid could ask for. I wouldn’t trade that for anything.”

Mike paused again, and added “He signed it ‘Stan the Man.’”

Ben was asking something, but Richie couldn’t hear it. He was a kid, could feel the ground under his knees as he kneeled by the kissing bridge. He could feel the small, cool weight of the pocketknife in his hand, the bite of the wood against the tip of the blade. Henry Bowers’ words hot against his ears, and how it was a little scary but mostly good to drag those initials into the bridge, where hopeful sweetheart after sweetheart had been.

“Hey, Richie?”

He looked to his right and saw a slightly blurred Mike – for the briefest moment he wondered if his glasses were missing, but no, he was wearing them. Fuck, was he crying?

“Sorry,” he said, and could have kicked himself for the broken rasp in his voice. He rubbed his eyes, but something was stuck in his throat, and when he tried opening his mouth to clear it a sob came out instead.

“Fuck,” he gasped, because he really was crying now. Body shaking and tears on his cheeks. God, stop crying, stop crying you idiot! He felt Mike’s hand on his shoulder, heard the scrape of a chair from across the table because emotional distress was like the bat signal for their stupid group, and he didn’t even understand why he was crying. But Stan was dead, had killed himself in a bathtub, and Eddie was still unconscious and the doctors had no explanation why and

(he’ll die never knowing that you)

“Is everything alright?” asked a different voice, and Richie wiped away at his eyes to see their waiter standing at the head of the table, looking concerned.

"It’s fine,” said Richie, voice hoarse to his ears. “The spicy kapow, you know it’s - it’s just really spicy.”

The waiter looked back at him, then nodded slowly. If he wanted to ask why spicy food required a group love fest to help this one white man cope, he didn’t ask.

"You can stop hugging me in the middle of this restaurant,” said Richie as the waiter walked away, “I’m really okay.”

"It’s hard, Rich,” said Bill, standing beside him. His eyes were looking a little glassy too. “It’s hard for all of us.”

"Really," said Richie, even though his head hurt and the past was knocking on his door. I’m here, Richie, I’m here to collect. “I’m fine.”

"Well, I’m not fine,” said Bev, sitting again in her spot across the table from him. Her body was hunched forwards and her head was tilted down, her left hand resting against her temple. She looked so tired in that moment. “This situation is not fine.”

"Stan…” said Bill. He looked across the table at Mike and shook his head slightly. “I don’t know if it makes it better or worse.”

"Yeah,” said Mike, heaving a sigh. Richie suddenly felt like there wasn’t enough air in the
and the walls were closing in. “Stan always had that real specific way of looking at things.”

“That’s right,” said Ben, though he was looking at Bev. “He didn’t like when things didn’t fit into that way.”

_Better or worse?_ Either way, he was gone. Either way, he’d written them a letter that said _this isn’t a suicide note_ before he killed himself in the bathtub. And the walls were still pressing, and the air wasn’t enough. Richie could feel himself breathing, but it was as though the oxygen was too thin or his lungs weren’t working right, _sorry to steal your shtick Eddie_, and this wasn’t right.

He pushed his chair back, threw his wallet on the table.

“I’m going to take a walk,” he said to their questioning faces, “Around the block. If the bill comes just use any card in there, okay?”

“You alright Richie?” asked Bill, looking at Richie with genuine concern. The last thing Richie wanted.

“Yeah, of course,” replied Richie attempting a smile, but he was going to die if he didn’t get out of here _now_. “I’m fine, I’ll meet you outside okay? Just need some air. I’ll be back.”

He strode towards the front door, pushing it open with more force than was required and striding into the evening air like a drowning man finally breaking through to the surface. The outside smelled clear and blue. For a moment he just stood, breathing deeply, before sliding his hands in his pockets and starting to walk.

_If you’re reading this, then I hope you’re free from it._

Oh fuck you Stan, easy enough for you to say. You opted out of the whole thing.

And some things were hard to get used to. Some things were hard to settle with yourself.

So they destroyed the monster that lived under Derry, that was fed by Derry and fed it in return. That was where the fairytales ended – the dragon slayed, the giant defeated – but they weren’t in a fairytale as far as Richie could see. There were no rescued princesses or humble knights or kingdoms ruled by justice. There was only their poisonous childhood town with its winding, bloody history and all those other fears that haunted their adult lives, the things that had threatened to make them too stiff, too brittle to face Pennywise a second time and defeat It for good.

He stared out across the empty two-lane road that the strip mall sat parallel to. The sidewalk beneath him had morphed into a lumpy asphalt pathway. The sun had set, and out here the night sky was black and crowded with stars in a way you didn’t quite get in LA. A sky like that could almost make a guy philosophical, if a guy didn’t know the truth. That there was nothing but monsters between the stars and no reward waiting at the end, no matter how many how many times his parents had said grace at the table or how many Sundays at mass he had in the bank or how many times at those masses the priest had put on a mask of sorrow and talked in vague ways about the plague sent by the lord to claim sinners.

_I hope you’re free from it._

Yeah fucking right. Admit what was waiting behind the wall? The wall he’d been building without
realizing what was behind it, until a friend he’d forgotten he’d forgot had called him up. And there was memory, two suitcases in hand, squeezing through the doorway and starting to unpack itself despite Richie’s protestations. And suddenly there was the arcade again, in quaint little Derry, his childhood home with its annual summer fair and volunteer-run local museum open on Tuesdays and Wednesdays and bullies that liked to carve their initials into your guts.

And there was a boy, but you didn’t remember him, not really, until he was standing on the other end of the room from you, taller than you remembered, because it’d been twenty-seven years and much like you, he’d grown up.

Twenty-seven years later and now Eddie had a wedding ring on one hand and a driver’s license in his pocket and sat in his chair with a slight forwards hunch, the way some people sat after years of the world pressing in on them from behind. And for a moment what Richie had really feared that night almost seemed possible. That he would walk into that restaurant and find six doughy, complacent faces staring back at him, like the faces he remembered his parents wearing as they sat in the living room and watched 60 Minutes after work.

But something happened during that dinner, and the kids they’d been were suddenly shining through, and there was Eddie. He still got himself worked up walking through Richie’s tripwire comments, still cursed like buckshot and kept an aspirator at hand, right beside his water glass. He was still wired with that same frenetic, dogged energy, and it was while ragging on him and laughing with him that Richie realized with the same quick, sudden panic that would grip a person realizing they’d left the oven on, that it was still there. That small little spark, when Eddie was laughing because Richie made him laugh, and the fuse that it lit. Still there.

So much for when I became a man, I put away childish things. Like childhood was something to fold up and put in a box marked for the Goodwill. That was what they’d tried to do, after all. And childhood had jumped out like a fucking jack-in-the-box to scream in their faces.

Free from it.

Richie dragged a hand along his face, craved a cigarette, and thought of Sandy. She’d been a friend and the longest – only, really – relationship of his to date, before everything had finally ended one day, real crash and bang style, after she’d gotten a job offer up in Washington. But before that, near the end, he remembered one morning when they’d been in bed together and she’d asked him if he’d ever slept with a man. He’d brushed it off and when she’d come back with well, would you want to he’d asked if she was trying to propose a threesome.

God Richie, she’d said, rolling her eyes and then rolling out of bed. You’re never serious.

And she didn’t bring it up again. At the time, he didn’t see how a question like that could be serious. What was he supposed to have done, grabbed Sandy’s wrist and asked her to say what she was really saying? Asked how she thought a thirty-something comedian who was just starting to make a name for himself could come out of the closet now? How the fuck were you supposed to “explore your sexuality” or whatever the hell the kids called it? He should have been doing this in college or just after graduation, when he had all of a city and no one who really knew him, when he could have been nervously shuffling his way into some gay bars, or hanging out with those guys from the theater department that he never wanted to let himself get too involved with.

Get over yourself, Richie, is what he imagined Sandy saying. You don’t know how to be gay? Look around, idiot, you live in Los Angeles.

Yeah, except before he was all grown up and maybe gay in Los Angeles in 2016, he was maybe gay and a kid growing up in a small town in the 1980s, with parents who loved him but took him to
church every week where suddenly that love seemed to be made conditional. He was a kid sitting alone up in his room, listening to comedy records and clutching at a dream, while the new comedy gods he treasured made punch lines out of fags. He was surviving in Derry, where adults were looking the other way about clown murder in addition to all the other usual shit. Like bullies that spit in your lunch and rubbed your face in the dirt and called you faggot and that’s the only word you know for

(your dirty little secret)

what it means to be gay.

He stopped walking, the road stretched out on his left, empty warehouses yawning on his right. The restaurant and the strip mall were maybe half a mile behind him – he hadn’t meant to walk on that long, but he had.

It was more than just a wall, he realized now. A wall was something you could build up and walk away from. Whatever he had was leaning, falling, and he’d been supporting it his whole life, pressing his back up against it to keep it from crumbling.

He thought, so suddenly, of a moment he remembered from the animated Sleeping Beauty movie, a kid’s movie – a girl’s movie, that he hadn’t seen since he was small. He remembered a scene where one of the good fairies was trying to make a cake without magic but didn’t know how to, and the way her soft, unbaked creation dripped and leaned to the point where she had tried to prop it up with a broom. He remembered it making him anxious (in that way that trivial, comedic scenes fashioned by adults could make a kid nervous), and he remembered the relief he felt when the fairy gave in, pulled out her wand, and whipped up a satisfying, Technicolor multi-tiered cake.

“Okay,” said Richie to nothing. Because Mike had called, and he’d returned to the childhood town he’d forgotten, with the childhood friends he’d forgotten, to fight the nightmare he suddenly remembered all too well. And if a murderous cosmic entity of evil in the shape of a clown was going to stagger towards him while growling about knowing your secret –

Except it wasn’t about Pennywise. Not this part. The stupid fucking clown had taken so much, he wasn’t going to give It this. This part was about Eddie, and the small little thrill that he remembered from when he was a kid, back when love was something that had to be watered down and traded back with terms like crush or like-like. That feeling, quick and sweet and exciting, because it came from standing on the edge of a shore that he hadn’t known existed. A shore he hadn’t returned to until he’d walked into that restaurant the first night in Derry. Eddie had given that back to him.

And if he took that, if he held that feeling, then he had to admit the truth about himself. And maybe that wouldn’t be so bad. He could stop trying to approximate what his life was supposed to be. He could tear down the wall and look at what had been hidden there the whole time.

“Okay, okay,” he said again. He spoke softly but something in his voice sounded too loud. He stared out at the road. “So maybe I’m gay.”

An ambivalent silence shrugged back at him. It felt hokey, to stand there in the early evening and proclaim his sexuality to the air. Weird to stand there and feel the roll of those words in his mouth. I’m gay, like a block of rubber between his teeth.

If a middle-aged comedian stands in the middle of a forest and says I’m gay but no one’s there to hear it, is he still a huge fucking dork?
He smiled to himself for a second, rolled his shoulders. He turned around to slowly make his way back to the restaurant. The smooth sidewalk returned beneath him, becoming lit up by the fluorescent lights from the shops and food places that made up the strip mall.

Someone was standing outside of the restaurant, and as Richie got closer he could see it was Ben. Shy, good-hearted Ben, who still really had no business looking the way he did, like some kind of front-runner contestant on The Bachelorette.

“Hey Rich,” said Ben as Richie got closer, “Good walk?”

“Yeah, real lovely view of nothing,” replied Richie. “Are we leaving?”

“No, or not yet – I think everyone else just ordered another round actually.”

“What are you doing out here then?”

“Thought I’d check on you,” said Ben. “How are you feeling now?”

Richie considered the question and considered Ben. Ben Hanscom, who always wanted everyone to have their turn. Who went to the movies with him when they were kids and who’d come into his hotel room a few weeks ago to convince Richie to stick around – and was so good a guy he really believed he had. Who loved Beverly Marsh, and had loved her even when he didn’t remember her. When she and the rest of them had been kept locked away, lost in the fog, before Mike’s phone call brought them all back.

“Hey Ben,” said Richie, his voice sounding strange to his own ears. “Can I tell you something?”

“Yeah of course.”

Richie breathed out, looked to the side and said, “I think I’m gay.”

Distantly he recognized that his knees felt a little shaky. His stomach recoiled the same way it did when he was already well past drunk and decided to take another shot anyway.

A hand, heavy yet gentle, landed on his left shoulder, and he looked to his side to see Ben smiling at him.

“That’s cool,” said Ben. “Good to know.”

If Richie didn’t know for a fact that Ben was a successful architect, he’d probably have pegged him for some kind of new-age counselor. He’d fit right in at those shining, teakwood-accented clinics that dotted the West Coast. Maybe he’d helped build one for all Richie knew.

Richie opened his mouth to say something sarcastic, but there was his mouth, running off in a different direction from his mind, and instead he said, “I’ve never said that to anyone before.”

Ben’s face changed. “Oh. So, is this like… I thought maybe you just weren’t telling us, you know, since it’s been so long.”

Richie stared at him. “Did you already think I was gay?”

“No! No – well, not that – no, Bev actually thought that maybe you just weren’t telling us everything.”

“Did Beverly think I was gay?”
“No no, or – no I mean, well, she didn’t say that specifically. She just thought you know, maybe there was something you weren’t telling us, and maybe that could have been it? That you were trying to play it safe. I mean, I get it man, twenty-seven years, you don’t know.” He shrugged. “We were kids and we said a lot of shit.”

Fucking Beverly. Of course. A woman who’d risen to the top in the fashion industry. She could probably clock a gay man in five seconds. Deeply repressed in three.

“Man I’m sorry,” said Ben. “I’m taking from your moment.”

“Well it’s not like I’m winning an award here,” replied Richie. *Unless being a forty year old homosexual and finally admitting to it is something to celebrate.*

“No, but… I mean, if we can’t appreciate what we have?”

“Wow, all this time – Pennywise was just trying to give us the gift of perspective.”

Ben gave a little half-laugh and shook his head, then asked, “Are you going to tell everyone else? Not that – I mean, not that you have to do anything you don’t want to.”

Fuck, he would, wouldn’t he? It wasn’t like telling Ben activated the Losers’ hive mind and freed him from having to repeat this trivial little fact.

“I guess. Unless Bev’s done everything for me,” said Richie.

“I don’t think –”

“I’m kidding,” said Richie, before Ben could get too defensive.

They remained standing outside, neither of them saying anything. But it wasn’t a tense, darted silence like Richie was used to filling. It was a smooth and comfortable quiet, a shared moment on a pleasant Sunday night in Bangor, Maine. Strange to think of other people, savoring the end of their weekend, looking towards another week of school or work, while Richie stared down another week in limbo.

He felt overwhelmingly tired, almost jealous of Eddie who was just blissfully sleeping through it all. Alright, alright, not blissfully. And it wasn’t like he was staying in The W or anything. But he was definitely unconscious and had managed to maintain that for a while, while Richie was lucky if he could get his body to shut down for four uninterrupted hours of sleep. *Wake up already, you prick. Being a medical mystery is super overrated.* If he would just wake up –

He thought of the cistern, the moment after he’d slammed back into reality thanks to Eddie. The way he had looked at Richie, so bright and unafraid. And he remembered the scene that kept plaguing him during those scant four hours and usually threw him out of them. Eddie leaned against that cavern wall, eyes looking through them instead of at them, and that horrible, icy fear, that they would lose him. And that he would never know.

*Just wake up, Richie thought. Wake up and I’ll tell you.*

According to the digital display on the clock by his bed, it was 4:15 in the morning when Richie was tossed out of sleep. After fifteen minutes of staring at the back of his eyelids and feeling no closer to unconsciousness, he gave up. He was on his phone, playing a mind numbing game with bright colors and satisfying sound effects, when Mike’s late night (early morning?) text came into
the group chat.

MH: Eddie woke up.

MH: I got a message from the hospital, they said he woke up last night.

MH: He might be asleep still when we go tomorrow, but it’s a good sign.

Richie stared at his phone and clamped down at the hope that was threatening to leap forward. Hope was the thing that got you fucked up. Although telling himself that was one thing, feeling the worry that had dug its deep, anxious claws in him start to loosen just a little was another.

*About time, asshole.*
Chapter 2

The first time he drifted back into consciousness, it was like waking up from a dream within a dream. His world wasn’t a place, and he wasn’t a thing in it. He was heavi ness and pain floating inside some dark and pressing void. His brain felt slow to start, like a car that been left too long in the driveway, and it was a bleary effort to even recognize that he was thinking what the fuck.

He noticed music then. Far away, but it was there, a happy, mechanical melody, like what he might hear at a carnival or a circus –

*The clown.*

And now everything was urgent. Bone-deep instinct was shoving at him to move, but he didn’t know how. There was a shrieking beep somewhere, and then his *mother* was there, his ma was looming over him and saying something but it was like she was yelling at him while he was underwater. He needed to warn her, make her understand that It was back. He opened his mouth but the water rushed in, and he could see It now – grinning in the corner, just out of sight. *Hiya Eds.*

*But you’re dead! I killed you!*

*How does that old saying go? Don’t turn your back on the inter-dimensional evil until you’re really certain It’s dead?*

He had to warn her, she had to turn around, she had to or It would get her and then It would get him and for the love of fuck *why couldn’t she hear him?*

He faded away into the haze.

The second time was more like waking up. The second time, Eddie woke up and was surprised he wasn’t dead.

He came to in a dark and blurry world that echoed the feeling in his mind. He was in a room he didn’t recognize, but Eddie knew hospitals the way magnets knew north, and even before he opened his eyes he knew what sort of place he was in. Even if the *where* wasn’t clear yet.

There was a woman in a chair to his right. She was slumped forwards and staring at the floor, probably sleeping, and for a moment he was hit with déjà vu, and he wondered *shit, maybe I am dead,* maybe he was dead and here was his fucked up after life, eternity in a hospital room guarded by his mother.

But no, no – it was Myra in that chair, Myra, his wife. And there was pain lapping along his body, a throbbing pain that carried a memory of something awful and his friends screaming.

His stomach was a block of ice. One question, frantic and flailing, managed to cut through his mind, suddenly cluttered with winking clowns and lecherous men crawling with infections that offered blowjobs and

*(oh my god Eddie my sweet Eddie what did you do what did you let them do to you)*

was It gone?
Instinctually he tried to jolt upright, and pain slammed him back down like a massive hand. He couldn’t breathe, his lungs were pulling and sucking and the air wasn’t coming in and he knew, despite everything, it was his aspirator he needed. Another lowdown dirty fucking trick from the asthma

(it’s in your mind, Eddie, not)

always just waiting for him to look the other way before springing out and taking him down. He opened his mouth, not sure what to say, and an empty gasp came out.

Myra, who could sleep through Manhattan traffic and the Tuesday morning street sweepers, sprang awake at that gasp as though it had been a yell.

“Eddie!” she cried, leaning over, eyes wide. “You’re awake! What’s wrong? What’s happening?”

Christ, couldn’t she see? He was dying here. He opened his mouth and sucked in another whistling breath, and she seemed to get it then. She threw open the small drawer on the bedside table and pulled out the familiar plastic inhaler.

“Here Eddie, here I’ve got it for you sweetheart,” and before he knew what was happening she’d put the inhaler in his mouth herself, and for a perfect second within his panic, he saw Mr. Keene. As he’d looked when Eddie was a child, a looming face that insisted it had something to finally tell Eddie. And then she was pushing down on a dose, and he was breathing in deeply as she did so. The pharmacist faded and a temporary calm floated upon him, his throat opening to feel less like a coffee straw. The pain, momentarily forgotten, filled back in.

“Eddie.”

The inhaler was gone. He felt a pressure, and realized it was Myra’s hand wrapped around his hand and squeezing lightly. She was looking at him with those round eyes, the same round eyes she had turned on him when he’d told her I have to go. There had been fear in them then, a pure terror, and he remembered when he left he’d been thinking what do you have to be scared of?

Now he wondered if she had been scared for him, the way he certainly had been scared for himself, half out-of-his-mind with the idea that he didn’t know why but he might be coming back to Myra as pieces in a body bag.

Well he had surprised himself there. He wasn’t in a body bag yet.

“Eddie what happened?”

What happened?

Myra, sweetheart, great question. He didn’t ever tell you about Pennywise, did he? Well, don’t take it so personal, he just basically blacked out on his whole childhood, can you believe it? But he remembered now, remembered Pennywise, the grinning, shifting alien monster that lived in the sewers of Derry and ate his friend’s brother – It ate Georgie, Myra, tore his arm right off like a chicken wing.

Anyways, Myra, he knows that he came back and went back into the sewers a second time with his friends, to face the thing from the shadows again, but what did he find in the shadows? What happened after that? What happened?

“I don’t remember,” said Eddie in a cracked and rusty voice that hurt to use, and the room was fading away again, getting harder to see, and then he was back in the black.
After they had crawled out of the sewers, small and scum-covered and shivering in the late summer evening, Eddie had taken one look at himself and realized his mom was going to kill him.

So he followed Bill back to his home, because Bill’s parents could be waved off with a story in a way that Eddie’s mom couldn’t. If she got one look at him she’d rush him to the ER himself and set up a permanent residence for him there.

Bill and Eddie left the rest of the group and headed into Bill’s neighborhood, walking their bikes beside them. In that moment, walking with his head down and a serious look on his young face, Bill reminded Eddie of a cowboy in a western, a type of solitary, American hero, walking his bike instead of his horse. Or maybe it was just the fact that Bill had scrawled SILVER on the side of that bike and shouted it every chance he got.

They didn’t talk on the walk over, just parked their bikes around the side of the garage and went up the backstairs and into the kitchen. The faint sound of the TV drifted in from the living room to the side. Bill’s mom was in there in the kitchen, washing dishes at the sink. She turned slightly at the sound of the backdoor, then turned around entirely, eyes wide, when she got a full look at them. Eddie had to imagine he looked especially worthy of notice – he looked like he’d been dunked in an oil rig.

“Oh my goodness, what happened to you two?”

“He’s f-f-fine,” said Bill, toeing off his shoes and kicking them by the door, “We were p-p-p…. down in the B-Barrens and Eddie f-f-fell in.”

Eddie thought it was obvious that Bill’s stutter became more pronounced when he lied, but Bill’s mom didn’t seem to notice. Mrs. Denbrough looked wary, but she didn’t rush over to grab Eddie painfully by the shoulders and scream her worry in his face the way Eddie’s own mom would have. There was a small stack of waiting dishes in the sink, and her hands were still soapy. Eddie stretched a hopefully-convincing grin across his face and waved with his good arm.

“Yeah, I lost my balance! Oops! Just fell in!”

“Well, do you want me to call your mother?”

“No, it’s okay, I’m going home right after this. Thanks Mrs. Denbrough!”

She nodded, then wrinkled her nose slightly, “You two should be careful around there, a lot of bad water goes into that river. You probably need to take a bath. Both of you.” She nodded at Bill and his shoes. “Put those in the front Bill.”

Bill silently scooped them up and headed towards the front of the house, Eddie trailing behind. He dropped his shoes at the front door, and Eddie followed suit.

“These shoes are dead,” he muttered, and Bill nodded.

Eddie had been to Bill’s house plenty of times over the years – movie nights and sleepovers, sometimes with Richie and Stan. There had been less this past year, and the house itself felt different. There was a gray gloom that hung in the air, like the dark stain of a coffee mug.
They went upstairs and into Bill’s room. Bill rummaged through his dresser, pulling out a fresh set of shorts and a t-shirt. He looked at Eddie, thoroughly soaked in a horrible mixture of sewer water and some sort of slick, black ichor.

“I g-guess you n-n-need underwear, too?”

Eddie glanced down at himself. “I just need to get home, I’ll go commando.”

“G-G-Gross man, you’re borrowing my clothes,” said Bill, but he was grinning. He handed Eddie the clothes and led him to a closet in the hallway, where he wrestled out a thick towel. Eddie followed him into the bathroom at the end of the hallway. Bill turned on the faucet, adjusting the knobs slightly to get the right temperature, the same way Eddie’s ma would have checked the water. He reached over for the plastic white drain cap, and Eddie stopped him.

“It’s okay,” he said. “I’d rather take a shower. If I got into a bathtub right now I’d just contaminate everything.”

“Okay,” said Bill, adjusting another knob and the water poured out from the showerhead instead. “You c-can use the soap there.”

“Thanks Bill.”

“Do you need h-help?” asked Bill, looking at Eddie’s cast.

“No, I’ve got it figured out,” said Eddie, remembering the doctor’s words to *keep the cast dry* Eddie, and his mother trapping his whole arm in taped up saran wrap before letting Eddie near the bathroom. His cast had been entirely submerged in sewer water and who the hell knew what else – some shower water wasn’t going to hurt it now.

Bill left, and it was just Eddie in the Denbrough’s clean, blue-tiled bathroom. There was a window covered by a pair of chintzy, white curtains, and the small gap between the curtains revealed a streak of deep blue-black. Summer days always ended that way, slow evenings that hung on later than seemed right, and then swooped into night in one quick gasp. Eddie’s mom probably would be worried about him by now. Well, more worried. She was always worried.

He tugged off his clothes, feeling relief as he was freed from the fabric, soaked through with sewer water, soaked through with what was left of Derry’s missing kids, soaked through with the blackness that Pennywise had spilled or spat or bled. He kicked his clothes over to the edge of the bathroom, a dirty wrinkled mess that he just wanted to forget.

He stepped into the warm shower, and it felt good to step into it. He closed his eyes and dunked his head under the spray, feeling a little adult as he moved his fingers through his hair, teasing out the dirt and disease, feeling it leave him. He grabbed the soap bar that Bill had indicated and attacked himself with it. The water at his feet took on a dingy look before swirling down the drain.

He washed quickly, not wanting to stay alone for too long, conscious of the bathtub’s overflow drain grinning at him with its shiny, chrome cover. He dragged the soap over him one more time, and stepped out of the tub before shutting off the shower. The bathroom felt a little too silent without the rush of water.

He pulled on Bill’s clean clothes and hung the towel up on a hook. He considered the pile of his dirty clothes and decided to ask for a trash bag after all to get rid of them.

He opened the door and walked back over to Bill’s room. Bill hadn’t changed yet and was sitting cross-legged on the floor, a photo album lying closed in his lap. Eddie could see a photo of Georgie
on the front cover and hesitated to say anything. He realized, looking at Bill looking at the photo, that there’d never been a funeral for Georgie. There was nowhere to go for him. He’d been missing, and then that missing had slowly started to slip and twist into *gone*, but there’d never been a funeral. Even Eddie had a stone he knew existed for the father he barely remembered.

“I guess it’s over now, right Bill?” said Eddie from the doorway.

He almost expected Bill to jump, but he just looked up slowly at Eddie.

“I think so,” said Bill. “I f-f-feel like there’s something left to do, but I don’t know what it is.”

Dread stole down into his lungs, wrapped its fingers around his throat, and squeezed. It cried for his aspirator but Eddie, for once, didn’t answer it. He closed his eyes against it, willed it to pass. He could sense Bill waiting with a patience that mirrored Eddie listening to Bill work through a particularly hard sentence.

“Y-You okay?” asked Bill when Eddie’s breathing had evened out. Eddie opened his eyes, and moved past the magnitude of the moment with the easy ignorance that only a kid was capable of.

“Yeah,” said Eddie. He still felt a little like a big bird had hooked its talons along his shoulders, but he seemed to know it wasn’t going to take off. “What do you mean Bill?”

Bill looked at him.

“About, about the clown,” said Eddie. “We killed It.”

“Yeah…” said Bill slowly. “We did s-s-something to It.”

Outside it was night. What had happened, under their feet, deep in Derry, was already taking on a slightly fuzzy feeling, the way a dream disappeared as the day dragged on. They had won. They were all here. So many kids weren’t, but they were, and the summer wasn’t over, and why couldn’t that be enough? Bill just had to keep pushing and had to keep fighting. Eddie looked at the photo album again, Georgie’s faded photograph smiling out from the center of it.

“I just want it to be done, Bill.”

“So do I,” he replied. He unfolded himself from the floor and slipped the photo album onto the bookshelf opposite his bed, then turned and smiled at Eddie. Bill’s smile always had a touch of safety to it, the type the adults of the town should have offered.

“Don’t worry, Eddie,” he said. “Whatever h-happens, we’ll stick together.”

And Eddie wanted to believe him, so he did.

Third time’s the charm.

Eddie woke up again to light streaming in through a window that showed a clear view of blue sky, and thought to himself, *well I’m definitely not in New York.* He looked around at the room in the light – he still felt a little like he was in a dream and a lot like shit, but he also felt more like he’d returned to the world this time. Myra was still in the chair beside him, head nodded forwards as she
slept. His neck hurt just looking at her. The rest of him hurt just

*(shock more than pain, a thick, crab-like leg that cut into him and through him)*

because. He swallowed the lump in his throat *(ouch)* and pushed back against the memory, looking around the room for something – anything – to distract him.

He looked down at himself. He was wearing a white and blue patterned hospital gown, mostly covered by a thin blanket. His left leg, sticking out from the blanket, was wrapped up in a neat cast. There was a small, delicate assemblage of plastic tubes and thin wires crawling up and down his body, some along his arms, one along his leg, some disappearing under his hospital smock to a destination he didn’t want to uncover yet.

*(you’re sick Eddie they hurt you I warned you Eddie but It got you the sick old man the clown It got you)*

He remembered the pain from trying to move before. Tentatively, he lifted his left arm and found it wasn’t so bad. It didn’t do much to add or detract to the pain that he felt lying within him like a lake. His right arm produced a different result, and he only was able to lift it an inch or two before a warning wince rippled along his side. He dropped his arm back on the bed and closed his eyes for a moment, breathing in the sterile hospital air, listening to the hum and beeping of the machines flanking him. You could quit a job, you could move away from a city, you could leave a wife, you could run from a monster. But you couldn’t escape your body.

He took a deep breath and opened his eyes again. A hundred questions stared back at him, and he was sure that the doctors had to have him on some seriously heavy shit, otherwise the overwhelming *not knowing* of it all would have sent him into despair.

Two questions loomed beyond the reach of the soporific medicine.

What had happened?

And where were his friends?

*I told you Eddie* came the voice in the back of his head, the one he placated by choosing the most expensive but most comprehensive health care plan at work, by taking his vitamins on time and never crossing the street before the light was green. *I never wanted you hanging out with kids like that, bad seeds grow into bad apples Eddie.*

He pressed his head back into his pillow and squeezed his eyes shut for a moment, before opening them and looking around again for a distraction from any aspect of his current situation.

But it was a hospital room, low on the entertainment scale. There was a book on the bedside table, a small, shiny paperback with a barely cracked spine that Eddie guessed Myra was reading. It was angled away from him, but it looked like a romance novel, the type you could buy for $6 at a Duane Reed. This one was called *The Fisherman’s Promise*, and featured a cover with a brooding man who wore an open raincoat over his shirtless torso. His serious stare and well-shaded six-pack almost reminded Eddie of Ben, which made him laugh, although the laugh came out more like a hoarse wheeze of surprise.

“Eddie?”

He glanced over to the side. Myra was awake and looking back at him. She leaned forwards and put her hand around Eddie’s hand, holding it gently.

Was he okay? He’d certainly been fucking better.

“Yeah,” he said, his voice hoarse. His tongue felt like a rubber eraser in his mouth, his throat raw, but the world didn’t seem likely to tip him back over into the dark this time. “I’m okay. Thirsty – really thirsty. Hey – where am I?”

“Bangor,” she said. “Eddie I’ve been so worried.”

“Well, it’s okay now,” said Eddie, not sure if anything was okay. But this was a routine with Myra, a language he was fluent in. Hysterics and placations. Worried pleas and calm assurances. Here was one thing, even injured and bruised in a hospital bed, that Eddie could do.

“Is there water?” he asked.

“Oh, I’m not sure that I…” He saw her look questioningly towards the doorway, as though a nurse or doctor would pop their head in at that moment to chide Myra for even considering giving Eddie water.

“Please, Marty,” he said, using her old pet name.

“Well… okay, I’ll get you some.” She stood up and disappeared into a little attached room – a bathroom. He heard the sink running and Myra was soon back with a little paper cup, like the kind Eddie would get at the dentist for swishing and spitting. She moved as if to hold the cup for him, but he was determined to take the cup himself. His left hand wavered a little holding it, and some of the water spilled down his chin. It was tap water from the sink in a Maine hospital, not even fully cold, and it was the sweetest, most refreshing drink he’d ever had.

“Myra,” he said, not sure how to ask his question. She didn’t know Bill or Beverly or Mike or Richie or Ben, would never have heard any mention of or allusion to them other than the night when he’d left Manhattan. But he didn’t know how to ask other than to say, “Where are my friends?”

He saw her recoil from the question. It wasn’t a physical movement, but something that passed behind her eyes, that tightened along her mouth. There were elements to Myra, hidden expressions he knew how to see only because he’d been married to her for over ten years and it was his job to know how to read them.

So you’ve met them, he thought to himself, and knew again in a far-off way that if it wasn’t for the medication he’d probably be panicking.

Before he could press the point there were people walking in the room, two nurses and a doctor, and the doctor was saying “Mr. Kaspbrak, it’s nice to see you awake,” and Myra was standing up and moving to the side to make way for the nurses. The nurses were kind and the doctor clear and polite as she caught Eddie up to speed on the exciting drama that had been his body. Yet the more she explained, the further Eddie could feel himself slipping backwards into some dark, confusing tunnel. He was supposed to believe these things had happened to him, these surgeries had been performed on him? There were screws in his left leg? He’d been unconscious how long? One of his lungs had been removed? He only had one fucking lung? Beg your fucking pardon?

Eddie had never taken to the idea of your body is a temple. A temple, in his mind, was a grand and solid structure that only became more impressive the further it aged. He didn’t think the body of one Eddie Kaspbrak was anything so grand as that, and he didn’t have a “relationship” with it the
way members of the cult of yoga always talked about having a relationship with your body. His body was a project, an apartment like the one he and his ma had lived in when they’d moved to Queens. He took care of it the same way he did a house, vacuuming and cleaning, griping about property taxes, shelling out for the electrician, the plumber, the exterminator, the experts who knew more than he did about his own home.

Now he had a doctor sitting calmly beside him and explaining the inexplicable, and what Eddie was hearing was that if his body was a house, it was one where someone had plowed a truck straight through the living room and out the back. He was alive, but otherwise the situation wasn’t great.

All the check ups and consultations and doctor-recommended diet plans, the trainers and advisors, the moderate cardio three days a week at the expensive Manhattan gym, everything his mother had pushed and begged and insisted he do, and none of it mattered when Pennywise was waiting at the end of the road with Its jaws open wide.

The doctor went on for a while, and then the nurses went to work, leaving Eddie feeling like a cross between an alien abduction and a piece of meat at a butcher counter. He was exhausted by the time they left, but his unanswered questions fluttered against his mind like a bird against a window, and sleep stayed away.

His answers arrived a little around three o’clock. Myra was still there, although he’d learned that she had a room in a local hotel and had told her once already that she should go back and take a nap. She’d given him such a look, equal parts horrified and betrayed, that he’d dropped the matter, although she really looked like she needed some real sleep in a real bed.

She’d turned on the little TV in his room, mostly, he felt, to cover up the empty conversation that hung between them. He was too tired to ask about everything, and she seemed too nervous to mention anything that would give him an opportunity to ask about everything. So neither of them spoke, letting Bangor’s local programming chatter on in the background.

“Hey,” said a woman’s voice, and both Eddie and Myra turned to look towards the entryway of his little room. “Knock knock.”

“How on Earth,” said Eddie.

Beverly was standing in the doorway, smiling at him and holding a bouquet of flowers in a glass vase, which Eddie found strangely sweet. She walked into the room, and then they were all following after her – Ben and Bill and Mike and Richie, and Eddie felt like a kid again, the way he’d been so long ago, small and hurt in a hospital bed when all his friends, defying his mother, had come turning around the corner. The only one missing was Stan.

Except he wasn’t a kid now, he was, allegedly, a man. And his arm wasn’t broken, just the rest of him. And it wasn’t his mother beside him but his wife, and she was looking at the five people walking into his hospital room with an expression like a dog sensing an intruder. Eddie’s ma would have been up and blocking the doorway before a single foot had gone past the doorway, bellowing for a nurse and yelling about visitor rules and violations, but Myra simply stayed in her chair, watching.

“Hey Eds, how you doing?” asked Bill, walking over to stand beside his bed.

“Holy shit,” said Eddie again, the words hard to say around the lump in his throat. He had the
question he’d been suffering to ask since the first time he woke up in a blur, still sitting on the back of his tongue, but he couldn’t ask it with his wife here.

“Myra,” said Eddie, turning back to her. She had her hands wrapped around his again, and he squeezed her hand back. “Listen. Why don’t you go get some actual sleep, okay? In a real bed – seriously. I’ll be okay.”

“What?” she said, as though he’d suggested she turn around and walk out the window. “Leave you? Now that you’re awake?”

“You’re not leaving me,” said Eddie. He remembered the way she had pleaded when he’d left for Derry with no real explanation to give. He wasn’t likely to run off to anywhere now. “And I’m not leaving either – obviously. Come on, you’ve been sleeping in a chair for hours – and I’ll be okay now, really.”

“What if the nurses come back?” she said. There was an urgency to her voice. “You don’t know any of the nurses yet, Eddie, you haven’t been awake long enough.”

“I’ve met two of them and the doctor,” he replied. He gave her hand another squeeze. “This is the perfect time for you to go rest, since I won’t be alone. You can go get some sleep. Come on, Marty, please.”

He could feel his friends standing behind him, and didn’t let himself wonder at what they might be thinking.

“You want me to leave.”

“No, Myra, I want you to take care of yourself, too. Okay? Please?”

He saw her glance over his shoulder, probably looking at the five other adults that she’d never met before, wondering why the hell Eddie would kick her out as they walked in. Please Marty please, he thought, I’ll figure out how to explain it later, I know I’m a piece of shit but please, Myra, just go.

Maybe she saw it in his expression – they had been married over ten years, after all. She took a deep breath.

“Okay,” she said. “So you don’t worry about me.”

“I don’t want both of us in the hospital.”

She nodded, then said “I love you Eddie,” and looked at him meaningfully.

“Love you, too,” said Eddie, letting her lean in and kiss him chastely on the lips. She gathered her things and stood up, making nervous eye contact with the rest of the Losers as she left. Richie gave her an earnest wave, saying “Hey, we’ll catch up later” as she walked out the door. Eddie made a mental what the fuck note to himself about that.

Then they were all still standing to one side, and it made Eddie feel like a character from one of those British period dramas Myra liked to watch, when some frail young woman was trapped on her deathbed and everyone had arrived to pay their last respects.

“Jesus, can’t you sit down?”

There were four chairs in the room, so half of them sat. Bill pulled up a chair beside Eddie and Bev
took Myra’s old seat on his other side, after placing the bouquet on his bedside table. Ben stood beside her, Mike dragged another chair over towards Bill, and Richie stood near the foot of his bed, hands in his jacket pockets in a stance that already felt so familiar to Eddie, even though he’d only known this adult Richie for a handful of days.

“How you feeling?” asked Beverly.


He looked from her to all of them, and there was the fear that always hung there, that had always been there. When Eddie was in 9th grade he’d learned about how if a person had chicken pox once then they had it for life, and he’d come home nervous and itchy all over because his science teacher had said the virus stays in you forever. And even though she had also gone on to explain that it didn’t mean you had chicken pox symptoms forever, his brain didn’t hear that part.

And the fear of Derry, maybe that stayed in a person forever, too.

“How do you know?” he hesitated.

“Gone,” said Bill firmly.

“Forever, this time,” added Mike.

Eddie was nodding, but he still asked “How do you know?”

“It has to be this time,” said Beverley.

“We crushed Its heart,” added Richie. “You would have hated it Eds, we held Its little gray heart and crushed it. Bodily fluids everywhere buddy. Or whatever kind of fluids – would we call what It had a body?”

Yeah, Eddie would have hated that, but then, he’d hated most of this so far. The only parts to not hate were the five people sitting and standing in his hospital room right now.

“And then Derry went to hell,” said Mike. Eddie looked at him, sure the question was obvious on his face. “When we came back up, there was a massive storm happening. It ripped half the town apart, almost literally.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean an unnatural storm. Main Street cracked open and the Standpipe tipped over and rolled down the hill.”

Eddie stared at him. It sounded like a joke. The Standpipe wasn’t a tree, it was a massive fucking water tower with a concrete base and probably all kinds of shit that anchored it to the ground. Ben would know.

“Nothing like that happened in Derry the last time we fought Pennywise,” said Ben, voice thoughtful. “And the scars are gone again.”

“And it feels g-gone,” added Bill. Eddie looked from his newly smooth palm up at Bill and that little kid feeling came over him again. What it’d been like before all the Losers came together, the way it was so easy for the world to knock them down and tip them over, and how Bill – when even the teachers knew him as Stuttering Bill and had to catch themselves sometimes – refused to be knocked over. Bill was looking at him, gaze calm but sure, and if Bill felt that certain then maybe,
okay, maybe he could breathe.

“I – I’m glad you’re okay,” said Bill. He was leaned forwards in his chair, hands clasped in front of him. “I k-kept thinking about how I y-y-yelled at you.”

“Oh,” said Eddie, whose mind was scrabbling to pull out what Bill was talking about. Between the horrors of Neibolt, the descent through the sewer, and everything fading to a final black, Bill yelling in his face didn’t stand out as much.

“Hey don’t beat yourself up too bad, Big Bill,” added Richie. He smiled at Eddie. “I’m the one who told the son of a bitch he could be brave.”

Eddie stared at Richie. There was something

(trapped in the ritual in the Deadlights like a fly in a web)

there, but it was shuttered. He could remember the descent, the moment before they’d disappeared down the hatchway, deeper than they’d ever gone as kids, the horrible cistern. Holding hands, the sick awful lights. It, and Its true form, too terrible and otherworldly for them to grasp. Fear flooding everything, and hanging on to Richie in the middle of it all. And then nothing, an abrupt jump, the way a scratched CD skipped over a song.

“Richie,” said Eddie, and he thought he could see something in his friend’s face, but he didn’t know how to read it. “What happened?”

Richie raised his eyebrows. “You don’t remember?”

“I remember… everything going to shit,” said Eddie. He looked around at all of them. “But I don’t remember – what happened to me.”

He saw the look that passed between them all and felt on the outside of something. Richie exhaled hard. “Well, Pennywise didn’t sit you down and give you a nice massage if that’s what you’re asking.”

“Come on Richie,” muttered Bill.

“We were in a bad spot,” said Beverly, and Eddie turned to look at her. “Richie especially. And you, you sort of attacked Pennywise. We even thought you might have killed It for a second.”

“But I didn’t.”

She gave him a half smile. “No. It… It sort of impaled you.”

The room seemed to dim a little at her words, his mind trying to pull away from reality. He sucked in a shaky breath. That explained things.

“You okay?” asked Ben.

“Yeah, yeah,” said Eddie. He took a moment, then looked up at Richie again. “This happened because I was trying to save you?”

“Believe it or not,” said Richie. He grinned. “And on behalf of my many adoring fans, I thank you.”

“Can I send your adoring fans my hospital bill?”
“Sure, just forward it to me.” Richie winked. “I’ll take care of it.”

Eddie shook his head and spoke to the rest of room again.

“The doctors told me I was out for three weeks.”

“Yeah,” said Bill.

“But…you’re all still here.”

“Of course we are,” said Bev. “We weren’t going to just leave you, Eddie.”

“Yeah, but.” Three weeks was a lot of vacation time or sick leave to burn through. And in Bangor, of all places. Eddie wouldn’t waste more than a layover in Bangor. He looked at Bill. “Aren’t you making a movie?”

Bill waved a hand. “They don’t really need me, I just do the script. They finished shooting last week. Got it figured out without me.” He grinned. “They were probably happy I couldn’t make it.”

Mike put up his hands, “To confess, I have been driving back to Derry throughout the week to deal with the library – so I haven’t been by your bedside three weeks straight like everyone else here.”

“Dammit Mike!” said Richie. “How could you?”

“I know,” said Mike, “But water damage and books don’t really mix too well.”

“Is everything ruined?” asked Eddie.

“No – the library actually got off easy compared to some other parts of town. Well, the walkway that connected the children’s and adult’s section got destroyed, but in terms of actual inventory, there was only the one section in the basement – the part where we keep a lot of archival documents. The water got in there so, it’s been a real production trying to find anything that can be saved. And then trying to save it, of course.”

Mike leaned back in his chair, folded his hands across his waist. Eddie didn’t remember his father and had never met Mike’s, but it felt very much like a fatherly pose. “I could go on about the recent adventures in the Derry Public Library but it’s probably not that interesting.”

“I don’t know, assessing damage? Sounds like a wild time by Eddie’s standards,” said Richie.

“Shut up Richie,” said Eddie, the words rolling off without him thinking about it. “What have the rest of you been doing? Just waiting for me to wake up?”

“We’ve gotten pretty familiar with the Bangor dining scene,” said Bill.

“The dining scene, and anything within a one mile radius of our Holiday Inn,” added Bev. “We’ve mostly just been… talking.”

“There’s still a lot to catch up on,” said Ben.


“For example,” said Richie, “Beverly has been copping our style to make a profit for years!”

“What?” asked Eddie, confused, while the rest of the group laughed or groaned.
“Show him Bev!”

“Oh my god,” said Beverly, shaking her head and smiling before beginning to dig around in her purse for her phone. “So, the first time I got to show a collection at fashion week? I mean, the 80’s were kind of coming back, and I guess I just, had you all in the back of my mind somewhere when I was designing. I just – here. I can’t explain it again.”

She handed Eddie her phone, which was open to some blog’s gallery of catwalk photos. Eddie knew he was looking at Fashion because he didn’t understand how anyone could wear what he was looking at, or why anyone would want to, but since this was Bev’s collection he wasn’t going to say that.

He scrolled through the first two photos, unsure as to how anything was supposed to evoke the 80s beyond the obvious big hair, and then paused at the third photo of a model with wild curls. She was styled in a perfectly tailored light blue blouse, buttoned to the top and tucked into a sleek pair of tanned slacks. Over it all was a structured coat with a spiral-print that brought to mind a spiral staircase. Eddie stared at the image and remembered Stan, so put together, and admitting a story of what he’d seen in the standpipe, what had come down those stairs that curved around the inside of the tower like a twisted set of bones. How fucking bizarre to look at a photo of a model on a runway and find the memory of that story in a coat.

He continued scrolling through the images, and while he continued to not understand most of what he was looking at – seriously, who wore this stuff? – he saw pops of things that he was surprised to realize he did understand. Not through the lens of fashion, but something else. A busy and colorful print that brought to mind the over sized shirts Richie used to wear all the time. A look reminiscent of that pair of olive green overalls Bev had worn that summer. And near the end, a model in a collared pink dress that hit mid-thigh, with a black, gold-zippered fanny pack across her waist.

Eddie looked up at Bev.

“You put a model in a fanny pack on the runway?”

“Fanny packs actually came back for a bit,” said Bev while Richie cackled with delight. “You were just ahead of the curve.”

“It’s a cute dress, huh Eds?” added Richie.

Eddie glared. “Yeah, I bet you’d look great in it.”

“Well, I wouldn’t want to steal your look.”

“Anyway, that’s an old collection, I barely knew what I was doing,” said Bev, taking her phone back from Eddie. She looked at the screen – the last look, a gray coat over an orange blouse – and slipped her phone back in her bag. “It’s funny, since we’ve just been talking and seeing all these ways how…” the sentence trailed off, and she glanced over at Ben.

“All these things from Derry that kept sort of, showing up. In our lives or our work,” said Ben. He looked over at Mike and grinned. “Like my communications tower.”

Eddie looked at Richie. “Does that mean you have some kind of comedy thing you do about spending the summer in the sewers or something?”

“No, but I used to do a sketch with a character who was kind of like, a super anal asthmatic little twerp? Not sure if that’s familiar?”
“Are you fucking serious?”


“Okay wow, hilarious,” said Eddie, conscious of Bill grinning beside him. “Really fucking glad I saved your life or whatever.”

There was a sharp knocking, and they all turned to look. There was a nurse standing in the doorway.

“Sorry to interrupt,” she said. “I just need to check in with Mr. Kasprak.” She looked around at all of them. “Also I don’t know if you’ve been made aware, but our visitor policy in the ICU is two visitors per room.

“Huh,” said Richie, “Good to know!”

“Thanks,” said Mike, nodding at the nurse. “We’re heading out now anyway.”

Eddie watched as his friends slowly stood and collected their things, gave him a smile and promised to be back soon, assured him that they were so glad he was ok. Richie added he’d be back tomorrow morning and that he had a pack of sno-balls he owed Myra, and Eddie wasn’t sure if that was a dig or not.

Mike was the last to leave him. He pulled a letter out of his coat pocket – the top had already been opened. He held it in front of Eddie.

“When you’ve got a moment, read this.”

“Okay,” said Eddie. “What is it?”

“It’s from Stan,” said Mike, placing it on the bedside table. Eddie’s stomach clenched.

“How – ”

“Just read it.” Mike gave the letter a little tap. “When you can. No rush.” He put a hand on Eddie’s shoulder, gentle but reassuring, and Eddie wanted to grab him and say forget about me, how the fuck are you Mike? Twenty-seven years never forgetting, keeping watch and waiting for It and waiting for us. Was it worth it?

“Feel better, Eds.”

The pressure from his shoulder lifted and Mike was gone, following the rest of his friends out the doorway and back into the hospital, leaving Eddie alone with the nurse. The memory floated back to him, the backroom of the pharmacy, Mr. Keene saying this lie has gone on too long, his words honest, but his eyes like a child getting to decide how big to cut his slice of birthday cake.

The nurse stepped into the room and closed the door halfway behind her. Eddie’s breath was growing thinner, a valve shutting off somewhere inside of him, and the nurse was talking to him now, sounding farther away as she went on to explain what she was here to do. All he could focus on was how his friends had been here and he’d been so obsessed with asking them what had happened and what had they been doing. But he hadn’t thought to ask about what came next.

He avoided looking at himself. When the nurses came to wash him, to check how he was healing, to change his bandages – which he made Myra leave the room for if she was there, even though she insisted she didn’t have to, she’d been by his bed while he’d been unconscious and seen them
changed – he would focus his gaze on the ceiling.

The first time he’d been awake while they were swapping out the bandages on his chest he had looked down at himself. Saw the mottled, red lines of skin where the doctors had pulled the pieces of his body back together after it had been burst apart, when tissue and bone were bludgeoned, veins ripped asunder and blood left spurting like a loose hose, and Eddie didn’t know if he was remembering something or inventing a scene in lieu of what was forgotten.

Either way, the vision in his mind pushed at something unpleasant. And the sight of himself was even worse. Such a mess that his body had nearly evicted him. Such a mess that his mother probably would have had that heart attack – not the one that eventually got her, but the type she always said that he would give her. Stop that Eddie, you’ll give me a heart attack! Because her worry and her love was so deep for him, one wrong move on his part and that would be it for her. Step on a crack you’ll break your mother’s back. So he didn’t look.

The doctors were working on a plan for him, because he was in the fun situation of being really fucked up in a neat handful of ways that didn’t normally intersect. When the nurses weren’t coming by to prick, prod, grope, or press at him – which was constantly – then he was learning something new from a doctor or being introduced to some type of therapist. Occupational therapist, respiratory therapist, physical therapist.

There were so many more ways to be fucked up than even he had ever dreamed. After a lifetime of dedicated worrying, of expert scrolling through WebMD and subscribing to various health and fitness type publications, he was only now beginning to realize how uncharted the world of the human body really was. For all his paranoia, he’d gotten a little too used to thinking of the body as something that could be solved, as though doctors could just pick up a user manual, find the corresponding system error message and prescribe treatment from there.

He had thought of the body as something that occasionally had to be fixed, like a loose doorknob or leaky roof. That was how his mother had tended to talk about things. There were no medical mysteries with Sonia Kaspbrak. X would cause Y which was why you were better off not even thinking about it. You’re different Eddie, you’re delicate his mother would always remind him, the torch Myra had taken up to win his mother’s blessing.

You have to be careful Eddie. Take your pills Eddie. Don’t walk down that street if they’re repaving it Eddie, the toxins in the air are bad for your lungs Eddie. Don’t play anywhere near that filthy river Eddie, there are parasites and worms Eddie, do you know what a worm does so it can live inside of you? I know you want to go on the field trip Eddie but farms are disgusting and animals are full of diseases. I know you want to go with them to Six Flags but those rides are all death traps and the people who go to these places are not clean sweetie, sweetie do you want me to have a heart attack, thinking of you in one of those places? Honey I need you to be home by seven, honey I need you to be home by six, Eddie did you schedule that appointment? Eddie did you pick up your prescription? Eddie did you schedule your follow up?

And Mr. Keene’s face, looming in the depths with a truth he’d already known but couldn’t quite look at still, Mr. Keene telling a child the asthma’s in your mind Eddie, not your lungs.

“How do you feel, Eddie?” asked Myra – she asked it constantly. She sat beside him and stared at him with wide eyes that said tell me it’s going to be alright for me, tell me nothing’s going to change, and Eddie felt the echo of his mother’s you’re going to give me a heart attack.

“Like shit,” said Eddie without thinking, because he did. Because at the end of the day everything he’d spent his life agonizing over was nothing compared to the real thing that slammed him against a hospital bed and kept him there.
He heard a quick inhale of breath on his right, and glanced towards Myra. Her eyes had taken on a glassy look, and he knew that she was trying not to cry. *Very suave, asshole*, thought Eddie to himself. He sighed, and reached out his hand towards her.

“Come on Myra,” he said, because he couldn’t reach any further. He kept his voice low, his tone soft. “Meet me halfway, otherwise I’m going to fall out of the bed, right?”

She looked at him, then pulled her chair in closer to the bed, so that Eddie could place his hand on her right shoulder.

“Don’t worry about me, okay?” he said. “I’m doing alright. I’m doing better.”

“Are you sure Eddie?” said Myra. “You really are?”

“Absolutely. Even the doctors say so,” he said, tracing the knuckle of his hand gently across her cheek. There was a sweet familiarity here, in the midst of this storm. He knew Myra and he knew this script, even if the rest of it was completely off. This wasn’t just Eddie reassuring her that he’d already gotten his flu shot, or that he’d take a cab instead of the subway once it got late. This was *(it’s a mental block, it’s all in your mind)*

unfamiliar territory.

“Another week or so, right? That’s what they’re saying. Then – ” *Then we’ll go home,* Eddie meant to say, but the sentence disappeared in his mouth, the air suddenly gone out of him for a second. He took a breath, said, “Then we can leave.”

Myra nodded, placed her hand over Eddie’s, said what he couldn’t.

“Then we can go home.”

Eddie’s hospital stay was becoming one long, boring, painful smear, punctuated by visits from nurses, doctors, or with one of the twenty types of therapists he’d been introduced to. The therapists were quickly becoming the worst, because they required Eddie to actually *do* things, exercises like sit up in bed, lift his arms, raise his legs. Things that would start to blow a storm across the lake of pain that he tried to keep calm.

The only good moments, between sleeping and chipping away at his Sudoku puzzle book, were when his friends came by. In the back of his mind, he worried about when they would run out of things to talk about, since there was nothing to do in a hospital room but chat or watch the tiny TV across from his bed. But so far his fears had yet to come to fruition. There was always more to catch up on, something new to say, some update from Mike about the library (and Eddie hated to give Richie any credit on this front but he was right, Eddie *did* find Mike’s discussion of the water damage and recovery in the library to be interesting).

The next Tuesday it was just Richie and Bev in the morning. Myra was back at the hotel, although she would have probably disappeared anyway. Ever since Eddie had encouraged her to use his friends presence as an opportunity for her to take a moment for herself, she’d been leaving every time they came by – although Eddie wasn’t sure if it was her really taking a moment for herself or acting on the hint Eddie had first given, the *I don’t want these worlds intersecting* hint.

So it was just the three of them, hanging out in Eddie’s new-and-improved step-down room, which the doctors had transferred him to once he’d moved from death’s doorway to the end of death’s
driveway. Eddie was sitting in his wheelchair and Beverly was talking about things she needed to wrap up back in Chicago. She thought it was too bad none of them had gone into law and taken the bar in Illinois.

“It’s kind of funny you went into fashion,” Eddie said. “I think I always pictured you being like, an Olympic archer.”

Beverly laughed at that, and Eddie grinned but added, “I’m serious.”

“Yeah, Bev would have made a good Amazonian,” said Richie.

“You guys.” Beverly shook her head.

“How’d that even happen?” asked Eddie. “I don’t remember you being into that stuff when we were kids.”

“How would you have known?” said Richie. “It’s not like we had a sewing circle.”

“I mean she never talked about it.” Eddie scowled at him. “Not like you, you never shut up about the arcade.”

Richie grinned at that.

“Well I didn’t really sew when we knew each other,” said Beverly, smiling. “I have the same answer I always give when I do interviews, and they ask this. I always talk about how we didn’t have a lot of money growing up, how one time I ripped a blouse and I didn’t want to get into trouble for it, so I borrowed my aunt’s sewing basket and patched it up myself. I did a bad patch job, but it was the first time I mended something.”

“Okay,” said Eddie. “So, is that not the truth?”

“Let me guess,” said Richie, “It was a clown that ripped your shirt?”

Bev rolled her eyes at Richie. “It is true – I mean, I don’t tell them that I was only at my aunt’s because I was living there after my dad had gone psycho. The part that I never know how to tell them is, is what it felt like to be a kid, and how it was just nice to be able to make something… it wasn’t about fashion, it was just about creating anything. I think I could have been a carpenter if that had been an option.”

She shrugged. “So that’s all it was at first. But then I kept doing it, and I wanted to do more than just mending or following the same patterns because, with fashion – your clothes are like your armor. And I started to think of it like that. So sometimes I felt like a blacksmith more than a seamstress.” She was smiling to herself and leaning forwards slightly, her arms resting on her legs and her gaze directed towards the floor while she spoke to them. Eddie thought he recognized… embarrassment? But he couldn’t understand what she had to be embarrassed about. Being good at something?

“Anyway it just kind of… went from there. I was in New York for a few years before I ended up in Chicago.” She lifted her head to smile at Eddie. “So I guess we were neighbors for a while and didn’t even know it.”

“Yeah, that’s New York,” said Eddie. “You’ll live next to your neighbor for five years and never see them but run into that one asshole from Bushwick every week.”

“Is there an asshole in Bushwick we should know about?” asked Richie.
“Everyone in Bushwick is an asshole,” Eddie replied.

Beverly laughed at that, then asked, “So they think you’ll be out of here by the end of the week?”

“That’s what the doctors tell me to think,” said Eddie. He’d been in the hospital for a month now, although maybe he’d cheated it slightly by remaining unconscious for three weeks.

“Are you going back to Chicago soon?” he asked Beverly, though didn’t really want to. Of course they would come to a point where they talked about leaving. They weren’t kids growing up in the same small town, seeing each other at school and passing summer days together. They were adults, scattered all across the country, smart adults who had made choices about where to live based around careers and marriages and the housing market.

Of course, they would all leave Bangor, and go back to wherever they came from now.

“I think so, as long as you’re out. I’m looking at flights back for Monday or Tuesday next week.” She ran a hand through her hair. “Ben’s going to come with me, so. We’ll be leaving at the same time.”

“Aha,” said Richie, crossing his arms over his chest and grinning like an asshole. “What’s going on there?”

“I don’t know.” She still sat leaned forwards, like she was protecting something, and her eyes were bright. “I’ve never dated a guy who wasn’t an asshole.”

“Wait,” said Eddie, staring. “Wait, what – are you and Ben dating?”

“I don’t know,” said Bev. “Maybe? Not yet – it’s – it’s kind of complicated. We’re still talking about it.”

“Oh my god, Eds, are you serious?” said Richie. “You don’t remember? I mean, now, of course. He had the biggest crush on her.”

“Why would I possibly remember that? I mean, why would I have known that?”

“I don’t know, because it was so freakin obvious?” Richie glanced at Bev. “He was like a cartoon character, with little hearts and birds flying around his head. Man, I remember when we were kids, Bev and Ben and me went to the movies together – you remember that?”

“We went to the movies?” said Bev, expression searching.

“Oh my god, Eds, are you serious?” said Richie. “You don’t remember? I mean, now, of course. He had the biggest crush on her.”

“Well – where did that come from?” asked Eddie.

“I paid for your ticket,” said Richie. “Ben got an IOU. Which, actually, I don’t think he ever paid me back for.”
“Oh I see, so it was just us on the date.”

“And now Ben’s gone and stolen you from me.”

“Twenty seven years and you never called,” said Bev, teasing.

Richie looked thoughtful. “Twenty seven years later though. Some crush.”

“Some crush,” agreed Bev.

“But…” said Eddie, struggling to pull the conversation back into the realm of memory that he’d been a part of. He’d just totally missed this, Ben harboring apparently the world’s biggest crush on Bev. Sure, he’d only just actually remembered his childhood. But having it back now, he thought he had it, that he remembered everything.

But then, memory wasn’t really as solid as they liked to think, was it? It wasn’t so much unearthing a fossil as it was walking across an old stage, taking in the scenery in the dark and breathing in the musty air. His memory would only be as good as his perspective from the time, and Eddie had always been bad at figuring out who was whispering and blushing about who. Honestly, he still was.

“So… you’re not dating? But you like him too?”

“This is cute,” said Richie. “Do you think this is what it would have been like if we’d all gone to high school together?”

Bev ignored Richie and looked at Eddie, and Eddie wondered if she was chewing over the same thing he had when he had sat down to dinner and looked at them all for the first time in over two decades. If she was asking herself why would I tell them this, do I really even know them anymore? Only to realize, with a deep instinctual pulse, that she did.

“I don’t know if, as kids, I felt about him the way he’s… always felt about me. But…” She was smiling but looking at the floor again. “Not to get into everything, but I’ve had some – bad relationships.”

There was a lot they’d never talked about when they were kids, but still things you knew even if you didn’t talk about them. The rumors about what kind of a man Mr. Marsh was, and the bruises Bev would brush off. The way she had shown up that first night back in Derry, with her father dead and buried but a fresh set of dark purple marks along her arm. And for a moment Eddie felt a strange pulse of anger, at the idea that they’d been kept apart for twenty-seven years, and what they might have been otherwise.

“Anyway so, that’s why I’d say we are… figuring things out.” She sighed. “Plus I need to get, like, a restraining order, so there are a couple of other factors.”

“Shit,” said Eddie. “Well, good luck with everything?”

“Too bad we couldn’t have lured your ex-husband to Derry while Pennywise was still kicking,” said Richie.

“Yeah, and save me an expensive divorce.”

There was an electronic chiming sound, and Bev started.

“Sorry, that’s me,” she said, picking up her bag and pulling out her cellphone. She glanced at the
caller and answered, saying “Hey! … Yeah, can I call you back in five minutes? Five minutes. Okay? Great, thanks, bye.”

She looked back up at them, “Sorry, I’ve got to take this call. But I’ll see you tomorrow Eddie?”

Eddie lifted one hand in an empty gesture. “Not checking out anytime soon.”

When they were kids, and Bev would smile at him, Eddie would always think why is a girl this cool talking to us? He found that he still thought the same thing now.

“Good,” she replied, bending down to give him a quick hug. “I’ll see you then. See you later Richie.”

“See you Bev,” said Richie with a little wave. “Give my regards to Mr. Hanscom.”

“I’ll let him know he still owes you for the movie ticket,” she replied, shouldering her bag and heading out the door.

“Yeah, tell him inflation’s a bitch!” called Richie after her. They could hear her heeled boots clicking down the hospital hallway.

Eddie looked at Richie, who even in a hospital room appeared to be at ease, leaned back in his chair with one long leg folded across the other. Did he ever feel uncomfortable or unsure about anything? Life constantly left Eddie feeling like a kid lost in a crowded department store. Meanwhile, Richie still had the same look he’d had as a kid. Like he could always take one glance at life and find a way to laugh at it.

“What?” said Richie.

“What?” asked Eddie.

“You’re just kind of looking at me.”

“Oh,” said Eddie. “Just wondering if you were leaving soon, too.”

“I don’t have anywhere to be, not a lot going at 2 pm in Bangor. Why, you got a date with a nurse?”

“I mean leaving Bangor, asshole.”

He shrugged. “I’ll probably get a flight to LA some time next week, but there’s no rush. At this point, my agent’s gonna be freaked out whether I’m back in a day or a month.”

“Don’t you have…uh, shows?” Eddie realized he had no idea what Richie’s career really looked like.

Richie waved a hand. “They’re getting rescheduled.”

Eddie had a feeling it wasn’t nearly as easy or cheap to reschedule things as Richie’s casual attitude implied.

“You know, I’ll actually be in Manhattan in a month,” added Richie.

“Really?” asked Eddie.

“Yeah. Unless this little impromptu vacation’s pissed off my agent to the point that she drops me, but that’s the plan.”
“How long will you be in town?”

“At least a week,” said Richie. “Maybe we can get dinner – you, me, the missus.”

“You can come over to our place,” said Eddie, because he knew Myra didn’t like going out to eat – although just the thought of it felt strange and distant. The idea of his Manhattan apartment, that they’d been living in together for five years, suddenly seemed like a picture he’d seen in a glossy magazine.

“I don’t think Myra would mind – especially since you two are best friends now,” he added, which wasn’t entirely an exaggeration. Myra had stuck around on the one or two occasions when she’d been there and only Richie had shown up, and there was a casual, forged-via-circumstance kind of friendship forming there. Which Eddie didn’t really know what to think about.

“We’ve got matching bracelets and everything. Next step is to fight a clown in the sewers.”

Eddie was braced for an if she can fit in them joke, knowing Richie, knowing how people talked about Myra. When it didn’t come, he found an insult on his tongue, ready to launch for no reason, and just sat there with his mouth hanging slightly open.

“What, too soon?” asked Richie.

“You know what’s sort funny?” said Eddie, changing tracks. “About you guys being friendly? She doesn’t even like your comedy.”

“Guess she’s got taste.”

“We tried watching one of your stand up specials a few years back, and she made me turn it off. She doesn’t like when comedians use so many bad words,” said Eddie, with a slight grin.

“What’s she doing married to you then?”

“Well I’m not a fucking comedian.”

Richie chuckled, switched which of his legs were crossed, and looked sideways at Eddie.

“You watched my set?”

“Only those five minutes. But I didn’t recognize you. I didn’t realize I knew you. Which doesn’t make sense, but...” Eddie shrugged. “It was the same with all of them. I’ve probably seen Bill’s books all over the place and never realized.” When Richie only nodded, Eddie added, “So... what’s it like being a stand up comedian?”

Richie laughed, a quick involuntary bark that wasn’t like his usual laugh. Eddie looked at him.

“I don’t know,” said Richie. “What do you want me to say? What’s it like being a Manhattan business risk guy?”

“Senior risk manager,” said Eddie. “And no one really cares about what I do. I mean, I don’t go on comedy tours across the country.”

“You could,” said Richie, grinning. “I’d pay to see it.”

“Whatever Richie,” he said. They looked at one another, grinning, and Richie laughed a little, and then Eddie laughed at that, and then they were both sitting there and laughing for no reason. It brought back summer days – those good ones, the ones that weren’t swallowed up by a monster in
‘89. Long days down in the Barrens or outside the Tracker Brothers field, maybe the arcade or the movie theater. Days back when it was just him and Richie and Bill and Stan, days that grew to include Mike and Ben and Bev.

Looking back in perspective’s rearview mirror, he saw now they were some of the only times when he felt safe in Derry. Even at home with his mother, fear nipped around every corner of the house, lurking in the cabinets and waiting in the sink. She wouldn’t let him forget the dangers that were outside and always pressing inwards, sneaking along through the cracks and the pipes. He had thought this was how she kept him safe, that the pills and balms and creams offered a kind of security.

He felt his chest tighten at the memory and there was Mr. Keene’s face, somehow worse than the clown, worse than the personified sickness, sitting him in his backroom and asking do you know what a placebo is? He had an image suddenly, perfectly formed in his mind, of his mother lifting Eddie before her like a shield.

He reached into the pocket of his robe, searching for his inhaler. His hands clasped around the smooth plastic and in a movement as easy and natural as breathing – well – he brought the inhaler to his mouth and pressed down. He saw Richie watching him, and wondered if he was thinking about the same thing Eddie was. Didn’t you tell us Keene said it was all fake? It was just your mom screwing with you?

Yes, he had.

(Yes, she was)

“You going to be okay on the other side Eds?” asked Richie.

Eddie breathed deeply before responding. “Why wouldn’t I be? Oh, because Pennywise impaled me and fucked up my lungs so bad they had to remove one? Yeah no, I’ll be fine. What was I doing with two lungs anyway!”

Richie smiled briefly at that. He was staring at the floor, looking thoughtful in a way that was new to Eddie. He remembered serious conversations from their childhood – what passed as serious for them anyway, things that were real but they didn’t have all the words for. They could talk about school sucking and Henry Bowers and being targeted for being too sick or too frail, too loud, too different. They could skirt around the truth of their fear, the way that their homes couldn’t protect them, how their parents failed them, what if they were too sick, too frail, too loud, too different. But they shied away from the core of it, like a light that hurt to look at.

Maybe now they would learn how to see it.

“You know,” said Richie, “This whole thing… coming back to Derry, being with all of you. So much of it has felt like some kinda… really fucked up dream, you know? It’s weird to think about going back.”

“I know.”

Richie took his glasses off and wiped them with the edge of his shirt. “I don’t really know what’s the weirder thing to go on living after – fighting Pennywise, or remembering Derry.”

“Yeah memory’s a fucked up thing,” supplied Eddie.

“Sure fucking is,” agreed Richie, replacing his glasses. After a moment he said, “You know what this does make me think about though? Security questions.”
“What?”

“You know how when you make an online account, you make your username and password and then you have to set up those security questions in case you forget your password?”

“Yeah…”

“Yeah, so those questions always have options like, name the first street you lived on, or who was your first grade teacher.”

“Okay.”

“So I never picked those! I was like who the hell could remember that?” Richie leaned forwards and tapped his forehead in an exaggerated way. “Now I can.”

“Wow,” said Eddie. “That’s what – You know you don’t need to worry about those if you just remember your passwords.”

“I couldn’t even remember my childhood, how was I supposed to remember my passwords?”

“Are you fucking serious? I also couldn’t remember my childhood but I can keep track of my passwords.”

“Well I guess you’re like some kind of mutant.”

“Fuck off. Just write them down.”

“Write them down? With what, a pen and paper?”

“Yeah, pen and paper. I know you’re being a jerk but seriously that’s all it is. So you keep track of them and don’t lose them.”

“God you’re so old.”

“I’m middle-aged,” said Eddie. “Same as you.”

“Oh gross man, don’t call us middle-aged, that’s so depressing,” replied Richie. “Makes me feel like I should be having a crisis.”

“I feel like I’m in crisis all the fucking time,” breathed Eddie, and it wasn’t quite the exaggeration he wished it was. He’d grown up with his mother making sure he was well aware of the dangers that circled them – invisible contagions in the air, chemicals in the food from the grocery store, dirty people on the subway, dirty men in the park – always circling. And you’re delicate Eddie, you’ve got a target on your back, you have to be extra careful. The crowded department store feeling.

“Have you tried yoga?” asked Richie.

“Holy shit, if one more person mentions yoga – I can’t stand all these people doing fucking yoga now. And you know what, that’s fine, but they can’t shut up about doing it. Just do the yoga and be quiet about it!”

“You are in crisis,” said Richie. “Like a small dog.”

“What?”
“Small dogs are always anxious, man. Stresses me out just to look at them.”

“Oh thanks, I feel great about myself.”

Richie leaned forwards and smiled at Eddie. It was still a fun exercise to find the snatches of the boy he remembered in there, the trash mouthed thirteen year old who never stopped with the bad jokes.

“I’m just messing with you Eds,” he said in that rarer voice, the gentle tone he’d heard from him before they’d taken that plunge through that hatchway into hell. “Seriously though, you gotta get a massage or meditate or something. Would suck for us to beat Pennywise if you just gave yourself a heart attack. I mean hell, we all should. Spa day for the Losers’ club.”

“Yeah, I know,” said Eddie, hearing the snappish irritation in his own voice. He’d been living his whole life with people telling him he was going to give himself a heart attack. At this point it was all the assholes telling him you’ll give yourself a heart attack that he expected would will one into fucking existence.

Richie hung around for another hour, amusing himself with The Fisherman’s Promise, which Myra had left behind. He read almost half of it aloud to Eddie, because he couldn’t go more than a page without saying you’ve gotta hear this, before regaling him with some sloppy, stilted prose about Karina Warren, newly arrived to a small fishing town in Maine. Under ordinary circumstances, like not being confined to a hospital bed and hooked up to an IV drip of medication and pain relief, he wouldn’t have let Richie read him more than a sentence from a book like that.

But everything was still weirdly jarring, his past and present grasped up like dice in some giant fist and being shaken around, the images of skinned-knee thirteen year olds lighting up firecrackers and shrieking caught up against the visions of a leering clown that told them they were too old, too old now to stop It. It was easy to lean back in his wheel chair, ostensibly watching the muted game show that flickered from the small TV in the corner, really waiting for Richie’s voice to cut in again and recount Karina being rescued from falling off the pier thanks to the efforts of rugged fisherman Samson Downe. There was something grounding in the bite of amusement to his tone, something that made Eddie smile to hear the near-glee in Richie’s voice as he recounted a particularly hackneyed sentence. This was easy, and maybe something near peace. So much so, he didn’t even notice when he closed his eyes, and slipped backwards into sleep.

If he pulled through all of this, Eddie wondered if it would just be for Myra to kill him. Either she’d drown him in concern, or he’d die from the guilt he felt at being utterly sick and tired of her concern. He should have been grateful for her devotion. This was part of the whole ‘in sickness or in health’ thing, right?

But sitting in the hospital, she looked at him sometimes like a drowning person waiting for rescue, like Eddie was her emergency flotation device and he was running out of air. Normally he could scrape out enough calming words and assurances for her, like they were used to doing. Back in their two-bedroom Manhattan apartment, she would worry after him going into the city so late at night, or catching whatever disease the news was saying some tourist had brought into the country
through JFK. And he’d respond accordingly, rescheduling when necessary, taking whatever medications were recommended, and telling her not to worry all the while. It was a give and take, the only kind he understood, and he knew what people on the outside thought they saw, but people on the outside never knew.

But that was all before, and it felt like a before, a clear marker in his life. Before Mike Hanlon had called, before Pennywise had elbowed Its way back into his mind and pulled out his childhood like a rabbit from a hat. Ta da! Suddenly his life with Myra looked small, like they were two dolls in a toy house, and it made his stomach twist to consider what that meant.

On Saturday morning, after two long weeks of consciousness, they let him out. A discharge team spoke to him and Myra at length, recommending specific facilities and therapists in Manhattan, estimating timelines, reinforcing that he wasn’t meant to be putting any weight on his left leg. The doctor who talked to them had a crisp, confident way of speaking around his words, elegantly evading the truth of we still don’t know what the hell happened to you or how you’re alive.

Myra stood close to Eddie as the doctor spoke, following up everything he said with a new question. Are you sure he’ll be able to walk again? Are you sure he won’t be too winded if he uses crutches? What if he gets a fever? Has his immune system been compromised? How sure are you about these recommended diets? Is this prescription enough for his pain? Will he get addicted to the pain medication? How will she know if he’s developed an addiction to the pain medication?

He let Myra take the lead on the questions, despite there being others she didn’t ask that were screaming in the back of his mind. He let her push his wheelchair out of the hospital, help him from the wheelchair to the rental van, rental van to the fifth-floor room she’d been living out of for over a month at a nearby La Quinta. Maybe he should have been feeling grateful, or in awe, because he was somehow, miraculously alive. But it was hard to feel that, sitting on the scratchy beige blankets that covered the room’s king-size bed and cognizant of the fact that inside and out, from head to toe, he was a fucking wreck.

He dragged a hand over his face and looked at the digital display on the clock by the bedside. 2:34 pm blinked back at him. He had a few hours before Bill would drive over to pick him up – they were getting together for dinner that night, one last meal before they all took up and went their separate ways. Just the six of them, and while he had assumed Myra wouldn’t want to come, he actually hadn’t even asked about inviting her. He hadn’t even told her yet.

No husband of the year award for you.

“Myra,” he said. “I’m letting you know, I’m getting dinner with my friends tonight.”

She looked up from the suitcase she was putting back together, an expression of mild surprise on her face.

“Out? Tonight? With them?”

He nodded. “Yeah. Just one last get together, before we all split up again.”

She sucked her lips in, and Eddie was well familiar with that flat frown. He was braced for her reasons against it – nothing the doctors had said indicated he shouldn’t be able to handle sitting in a restaurant for a few hours, he wasn’t going to be alone, and he wasn’t going to be far.

“Eddie,” she said.

“What?”
“Why haven’t you ever mentioned them before?”

He looked over at her. He didn’t know why he hadn’t expected this question from her, and he didn’t have a good answer. He would never have a good answer for why didn’t you tell me you were best friends with a famous author? Why can’t you tell me why you had to come back? Why did you disappear and I got a call from a man I’ve never met and never heard of, telling me that you were in the hospital and they didn’t know if you would live?

“I don’t know Marty,” said Eddie, his words considering. “I had a weird childhood. With some not great things. I just wanted to forget it all. And I mostly did, until now.”

“Did… something happen to you, when you were kids?”

There was an understatement of the year. The century. Oh yeah, something had happened all right.

“Yeah,” said Eddie. “And I wanted to just act like it never happened.”

“But… something changed?”

“What do you mean?”

“You had to come back.”

_You had to come back._ He thought of the letter Mike had left on the bedside table, Stan’s “this-is-not-a-suicide” suicide note.

“Yeah. We had to come back for something. But that part… that part’s over, it’s all done. It’s finished. I know that’s not – I can’t really explain everything.”

Myra nodded, as if his response made perfect sense and she understood it. She wasn’t like other wives and husbands that Eddie could only imagine about from TV shows and online advice columns and whatever his colleagues at work might mention in passing, since he didn’t have many close friends to talk about marriage with. With matters like this, Myra didn’t needle, no searching for a crack or flaw that she could dig her fingers into and pull apart. She wasn’t looking for a weapon that she could have on hand to use against Eddie later. She wanted an answer that was just good enough, so that she could take the worry or question and put it to bed.

It came to Eddie, slowly, that in some way that was what their marriage was built on. Good enough. Which was always fine, until you knew better.

“If it’s all done,” she said, “Then why don’t you just try to forget it again?”

She said it so kind, like a parent reassuring their child it was just a bad dream, but the words were like taking a bite of something and realizing it had gone bad. He met Myra’s eyes, wide and earnest, and felt his mother’s nodding approval at the back of his mind.

_She’s right Eddie she’s right, what did those people ever do for you except almost get you killed over and over again._

And what did you ever do for me, Ma?

His mother was never interested in the full story. Maybe Myra wasn’t either. It seemed like she could live with these cracks wallpapered over, but Eddie wasn’t so sure if he could. Even if he didn’t have a pain that traveled along his side, even if he didn’t have the makings of a future scar over his face, across his chest, one less lung to work with, screws in his left leg, he didn’t think
forgetting was a possibility this time.

“I don’t think I can,” he said, the sentiment feeling truer, more solid as he said it. “I don’t think I want to. If there’s one good thing about this mess it’s them, it’s getting them back. They’re my friends,” said Eddie, and hadn’t he said that before, hadn’t he made a deal –

“Eddie…” Myra slowly finished folding the shirt she was holding in her arms, placed it neatly in the suitcase. “Do you think that’s smart?”

“Smart?”

“Sweetie, I think it’s really – nice that they came to see you in the hospital. It’s the least they could have done honestly, but, whatever you had to do up here, you just told me it’s over, right? It’s done.” She was picking up steam now, and looking at him with an expression that begged for him to come to his senses. “Now I just want you to get better. I want to help get things back to normal.”

“I thought you liked them,” said Eddie. His mouth felt dry. He’d lost the thread of the conversation – he was just telling her he was going to dinner. The past was reaching up again, and something smug in the back of his mind was nodding with self-righteous satisfaction.

She’s right, Eddie.

“I think they’re fine! But they’re from a bad time, Eddie. There must have been a reason that you didn’t talk to them or mention them all the time I’ve known you. Just because – whatever this was, just because it happened doesn’t mean that you owe them anything now.”

Something had shifted. The hospital was the doctor’s domain, where Eddie, for all his being weak and reliant, held the center of concern. Now it was just the two of them in this one room with its king size bed that Myra had booked.

“I thought you and Richie were getting along.”

“Oh. Well, he was nice to me. I like him, sure. That’s what I’m saying Eddie, I don’t have anything personal against them.” She took a deep, shaky breath. He saw her eyes had become shiny. “When you left, and you couldn’t really tell me why you were leaving, it was the most terrified I’d ever been in my life. Until a few days later, when I got a phone call telling me you were hurt, and no one knew if you were going to wake up, and I had to come to Maine as soon as possible!”

“Myra,” said Eddie. He could feel her words piling up on top of him like stones. “It’s never going to happen again. You think I wanted to end up in the hospital for five weeks?”

“Of course not! I know you would never – I’m only trying to say that… that it’s very easy to think things will be different, or that you can separate who a person is from what’s happened but it – it isn’t.”

Eddie looked at Myra and remembered how the only family she talked to was an aunt who lived down in Missouri. For a long time he’d thought she didn’t have any family at all, only to eventually discover she had a mother and father and older sister, who also lived in New York, somewhere in the Bronx. She never talked about them.

“I just don’t want you to get hurt again,” she said.

And he believed her. But he’d spent his whole life shrinking from the possibility of anything that could hurt him, and it hadn’t mattered in the end, when all along the winding road was taking him back to Derry. His ma had always said the same thing. *I don’t want you to get hurt.* But he had, he
had and he survived, and maybe what she’d always been saying was *I don’t want you to hurt me.*

(You’re braver than you think)

“It’s going to be okay, Marty,” Eddie replied, though he sensed that maybe it wouldn’t be. There was something beginning to bloom, a bruising truth that made him feel like he was the one lying to her now. And he felt bad, sure – but not bad enough.

Despite his reassurances to Myra, Eddie still had his own mother’s voice in his head when Bill came by to pick him up, worrying and fretting and shrieking and grinding at him, that he would go back to eat a meal with those people, when he was in this state. It was good to drive over with Bill, who had a grounded quality to him. They talked about breezy, meaningless things on the ride over, and Bill helped unpack Eddie’s wheelchair for him when they arrived at the restaurant.

And then there they all were again, like the moment outside of Neibolt house, like the restaurant in Derry, like that day outside of the Barrens. Bev saw him approaching first, and at her wide smile the rest of them turned their heads and then they were cheering, excited, shouting *Eddie!* Loud enough to make the rest of the restaurant glance over. Maybe they were wondering what the deal was, if this Eddie guy was someone worth noticing.

*Apparently I stabbed a cosmic clown monster in his face like some guy out of 300,* thought Eddie as he approached the table. *Yeah I’m worth fucking noticing.*

“How you feeling Eddie?” asked Ben after he’d pulled up to the table.

*Good enough* thought Eddie, against the pain that still pooled inside his body, the fear that simmered in the back of his mind, the future that waited, curled up behind the corner. How the fuck were any of them feeling?

“Well, I’m not dead,” he said, shrugging. “So.”

“That’s true,” said Mike. “Doctors have any more idea about how you’re not dead?”

“I think they’re still kind of confused,” replied Eddie. “The whole thing would have crushed any faith I had in the medical system if I didn’t know how totally insane the truth was.”

“Right,” added Bev. “You can forgive a doctor for not considering that your injury came from a million year old space monster.” She smiled. “I’m glad you’re out of the hospital, Eddie.”

“Yeah, me too.”

“You know,” said Richie. “I always thought that for you, a hospital would be like, your version of a Barbie dream palace.”

“What the fuck does that mean?”

“I mean, you’re always so worried about getting sick and stuff, and a hospital is like a fortress against sickness.”

“Yeah, except you’re only in the hospital when you’re super fucking sick. And then you actually can end up at risk for further infection. Which is not my version of a, a Barbie dream house or whatever – why would I even want a Barbie dream house?”
“I didn’t say you did – don’t blame me if you can’t keep up with a metaphor. Am I right, Bill?”

“Y-You’ve lost me Rich.”

“Oh my god,” said Richie, sitting back against his chair. “How did I end up with such dumb friends?”

They all laughed at that, and then the waiter came by to ask about orders, and then they were talking easily once more. It felt to Eddie like they were picking up the same conversation again, one that continued from the first night back in Derry to his hospital room to sitting here now, in Bangor, a thread that bounced and flowed and went between the pasts they shared and the ones they didn’t.

There was still something a little weird, to go between conversations about Monopoly nights at the Denbrough residence or summer days at the arcade, to discussions about high school or college and then politics or promotions, everything still managing to weave together. Eddie felt a lightness at that table, something so different from the obligatory after-work happy hours he sometimes attended outside the financial district, or the quiet meals he and Myra might share in their living room.

“What time are you flying out tomorrow?” asked Mike, nodding towards Beverly.

“Oh, evening.” replied Beverly, looking towards Ben as she said it. “I think six? We got a direct flight to Chicago.”

Mike nodded. “Any idea what’s waiting back in the real world?”

“Mm. Some,” replied Beverly. “It mostly feels surreal. Thinking about going back, answering all these work emails. It feels like I fought in a war no one knew about.” She considered the half-full beer bottle in front of her, then looked back across at Mike. “What about you? You ever decide what you’re going to do?”

Mike nodded. “I still think I’d like to travel. I have a couple of things to get squared away here, first – in Derry, I mean. My house, and my parents’ farm. But after that, yeah.” He smiled. “I’d like to get in my car and just…go.”

Ben was grinning wide. “That’s awesome. You know where?”

“Everywhere, I think,” replied Mike. “I haven’t left Maine since I was a kid.”

“Wow,” said Bill. “Well you h-have to come to Washington. You c-c-can stay with Audra and me.”

The rest of them agreed, insisting Mike had to visit them, too, that they had a guestroom ready for him for as long as he needed. There was a little more discussion of air travel and departures – Bill as it turned out was staying for another week, meeting his wife who was flying into Bangor on Monday. Richie was looking at flying out on Tuesday, and Eddie and Myra were planning on driving back to New York early the next morning.

For a moment there was the usual adult talk when travel came up – how crooked the airlines were, how tight those layovers had become, what a useless pain in the ass the TSA was. They had come back, had come together, and now it was done. Eddie saw the circle they’d formed back in 1989, hands bloody and grasping as they swore their oath, and with the slightest chill remembered how they’d all drifted away after that. As though the root of what had brought them together, the bond between them wasn’t something as bright and beautiful as friendship, but rather their sinister duty
to defeat Pennywise.

Was it going to be like that summer again? With It defeated, would whatever held the rest of them together vanish? Could it really be that the only anchor between them all would be their horrible destiny and without it, they’d fade into the black again?

It came on swiftly, familiar yet not-so-familiar, the tightening in his chest while the voice in the back of his mind said good, good riddance, good if you never see them again, they’re no good for you Eddie. His breath escaped him, the asthma sneaking in through the back like it always did, not caring what Eddie thought he knew now, and Eddie reached for his pocket, aware of their eyes turning towards him only to find – his pocket was empty. The impossible had happened. He’d forgotten his inhaler.

You dumb dumb son of a bitch thought Eddie to himself as his world grew blurred and his breathing tightened. There was a heavy, steady weight against his torso, as though some giant fist had wrapped itself around him and was squeezing its thumb against his sternum. He was a kid again, scared and pinned against the floor of a dusty, horrible house as a clown in a suit with bright orange buttons advanced slowly closer, knowing it had inevitability on its side. He couldn’t breathe, he couldn’t breathe. He’d forgotten his inhaler and now he would die in this two-star restaurant in Bangor, Maine as these people looked on and that would be his legacy.

Movement, as his wheelchair was angled away from the table. A gentle pressure. On his good knee and on his shoulder, and a voice that was steady and calm, speaking to him.

“Eddie,” said Richie. “Hey, Eddie. Look at me, can you look at me? It’s okay. It’s okay Eddie, you can ride this out. We’re here, we’re all here, you can breathe with me, can’t you Eds?”

No he fucking couldn’t, he couldn’t fucking breathe that was the problem, the whole fucking problem.

"In with me man, okay? One, two, three, four. We’re right here, Eddie. Just us.”

Richie kept talking, his voice a soothing murmur. He kept telling Eddie to breathe and even though Eddie was convinced there was no way in hell he was breathing, he also didn’t appear to be dropping dead from suffocation at the table. Not yet anyway. He was, slowly, drawing in thin, shaky breaths alongside Richie’s counting, and after what could have been a minute or an eternity, the room started to come back, the pressure against his chest began to loosen. He saw Richie’s face across from him, and he wondered if something in his own face had changed because Richie was smiling at him now.

“Hey,” said Richie. “You want some water?”

Eddie sucked in another thin breath. “What the fuck man?”

“What?”

“How did you do that?”

Richie leaned back in his chair, and as he did so Eddie realized it had been Richie’s hands on his knee and shoulder. “I remembered what you said to us in the library, about what Mr. Keene told you when you were a kid.”

Old Mr. Keene with his lipless mouth, smile like a neat little cut across his face, taking Eddie behind the counter and telling him your lungs don’t have asthma, your mind does.
“You think I’m crazy,” said Eddie. Richie snorted.

“No. I mean, maybe you’re a little fucked up, but we all are.”

“He’s right,” said Bev, reminding Eddie there were four other people at the table, none of whom looked like they were about to call him crazy. Their faces echoed the same sentiments, care and concern. “You okay Eddie?”

“Yeah, yeah – I’m fine. Fine enough.”

A soft silence fell upon the table. It was broken by Mike, who looked over at Eddie and – good guy that he was – smiled as though nothing had happened.

“What about you Eddie? If I come through New York, you got a couch I can crash on?”

“Couch – shit, Mike, you can have the whole place. Just come visit.”

He raised his glass towards Eddie. “I’ll hold you to it.”

The conversation resumed. Ben asked their waiter to take their picture, which everyone groaned about before moving to stand on Eddie’s side of the table for the shot. They raised their glasses to Stanley Uris one more time. They stayed until the restaurant was just them and tired waiters folding napkins at the bar and shooting them quick looks to see when they would get the message. When Bill saw it was almost one am, they finally conceded maybe it was time to go – Eddie and Myra were supposed to be hitting the road early. It was only about a seven hour drive home to Manhattan, and they both preferred to drive over planes.

It was another group love fest outside the restaurant, everyone hugging each other, and Eddie thought he’d probably experienced more hugs in this past month than the past ten years of his life. Ben and Bev left together, which still floored Eddie, even though he kept realizing he shouldn’t really be floored by it. They headed off towards their rental car, walking close to one another but there was nothing else, Eddie thought, nothing that would make anyone think to see the type of love that they probably held between them.

Mike left afterwards, and it was just him, Richie, and Bill when Bill patted the pockets of his jeans, then the pockets of his jacket, then his jeans again.


Eddie waved a hand. “Take your time.”

“I’ll be quick,” said Bill, turning around and heading back towards the restaurant. The front was already locked, and Richie and Eddie watched as Bill knocked on the door and stood waiting, shaking his head at the ground.

“Our fearless leader,” said Richie, grinning after Bill. He was stranded outside for a minute before an unenthused waiter opened the door, listened to Bill’s explanation, and let him back in. They watched the brief exchange from their spot on the edge of the parking lot.

“I used to really hate Bangor when I was kid,” said Richie. “Mostly because we only came up here to see my grandma, and I was a brat so I didn’t love visiting her.”

“Yeah,” said Eddie. “I was the same, with my aunts.”
“Bangor,” said Richie, sounding bemused. “City of weird old relatives you don’t really want to see.”

“I guess – hey Richie?”

“Yeah?”

“Thanks for helping me,” said Eddie. “Back in the restaurant.”

“Well, I did owe you for saving my life,” replied Richie.

“Oh, so we’re even now? That’s the equivalent?”

“Hey, a life’s a life, I don’t value one more or less than the other.”

“I’m not talking about that I’m talking about the situation, like, you think me facing Pennywise is the same as whatever the hell you did?”

“Perhaps so,” said Richie in an obnoxiously sage voice.

“What did you do?”

“What?”

Eddie shifted in his seat. He was opening a door that had been closed for so long, a door that the voice in the back of his mind begged him to forget about. I did it for you Eddie the voice said.

“When I… was having an asthma attack. And you were just saying stuff.”

Richie shrugged. “I just said stuff.”

“How’d you know that would work? Because I mean,” Eddie shook his head. “I never forget my inhaler. I don’t think I’ve been caught without it since I was a kid.”

“I had this sort-of friend in college,” said Richie after a moment. “We both did comedy. He’d have these kind of – I don’t know, moments? Attacks? He’d get like, overwhelmed. Anyway, I was with him and his girlfriend once when that happened. I didn’t even really realize something was happening to him, but his girlfriend, she knew, and she kind of helped him through it. I just kind of did what she did.”

Eddie was quiet. The idea that he might be like this overwhelmed sort-of friend from college set off alarm bells in his head. As if he knew what he was thinking, Richie added:

“I mean, I’m not saying that’s what was happening to you exactly. I’m not a fucking doctor, you know?”

“Yeah no shit – I don’t think I was going to make that mistake.”

Richie grinned at Eddie. “Sometimes I’m not as surprised you live in Manhattan.”

“What?”

“When you first said you lived there, I thought that was crazy. But then you open your mouth and I’m like ah, there’s that New York City charm.”

“The fuck is that supposed to mean?”
“Exactly.”

“Oh I live in New York so I’m an asshole, you live in LA so you’re absolved of everything? LA is the asshole capital.”

“That’s because you’re from New York.”

“Well, first I was from Derry.”

Richie huffed a breath, an almost laugh. “Derry’s beyond the asshole capital.”

“Yeah. That’s true,” agreed Eddie. An asshole was someone who cut you off in traffic or used their phone on the brightest setting in a movie theater. If someone murdered a kid you didn’t just call them an asshole.

“I hope everyone’s right,” said Eddie. “I hope we don’t forget this time.”

“We won’t,” said Richie, and there was another memory, riding double on the back of Richie’s bike at the end of a late summer day in Derry, one of those days near the end when it had just been the two of them down in the Barrens. “We’ve already been outside of Derry for a month.”

“Yeah, but we’re not far. And we’ve been together, and now we’re all separating again…”

“We won, Eds,” said Richie, “Can’t you feel it?”

Maybe we won wasn’t exactly the right phrasing, not when Patricia Uris had found her husband dead in a bath tub, and Derry was a town that had bargained children with a monster. But Richie was right, something had been gained. Eddie didn’t know how to describe it, because it was more than just his memories returned to him. It was in the warmth from sharing a dinner with his oldest friends, it was in the wind that swept through him when he thought of himself as married, it was in the certain shrill tone that he knew would be in his mother’s voice if she was here to see this. It was like turning around fast enough to finally spot the monster he’d always suspected had been following him. He didn’t know if it was good, but in some strange, surreal way it felt better.

“I guess… sure, I guess it feels like it’s going to be different.”

“It is,” said Richie. “You’ll all get invited to my next birthday party for one thing.”

Eddie smiled at that. “Wow, a Richie Tozier Los Angeles party. Is it just strippers and cocaine?”

“Uh, because my birthdays don’t take place in a 1980s Playboy mansion, no. It’s not.”

“Just strippers then?”

Richie opened his mouth, then nodded, and conceded, “Actually I may have had more birthday parties involving strippers than I’m proud of.”

Eddie laughed. He didn’t like his own laugh, it sounded nervous and grating even to his own ears. Like a bad actor trying to perform a stage direction every time. But Richie made him laugh.

“I’m not surprised,” he said. “You really… grew up into what makes sense.”

“What do you mean?” asked Richie after a pause.

“Nothing bad. It’s like what we were talking about before, like I didn’t ever see Bev doing fashion design. Or Bill being an award-winning novelist. I mean not that, not that it doesn’t make sense
and they aren’t great at what they do. But you, being a famous comedian, living out in Los Angeles? It’s like, exactly what any of us would have guessed. And it’s who you are.”

And who are you Eddie? The guy who married his mom and works sixty hour weeks in an office with a window that stares straight at the concrete building next door.

“I just think that’s cool,” said Eddie.

Richie didn’t say anything for a moment. And that was still novel, this notion of a Richie who sometimes let silence sidle its way into a conversation.

“Actually,” said Richie eventually, “I guess… well that’s funny, saying I turned out how you’d expect. Kind of reminds me, I meant to tell you something – I already told the rest of them, uh – while you were in the hospital. Which. Is obvious, I guess. You’ve been in the hospital. So.” He inhaled deeply. Eddie looked at him, curious. “You know how – coming back here – well, to Derry – you remember all kinds of things. Lot of it maybe you wanted to forget anyway.”

Eddie thought of the pharmacist again, about his mother in his hospital room, begging and pleading and trying to make him understand why it was all for your own good Eddie.

“Yeah, I do.”

“Yeah. Of course. Well. Something I was really trying not to think about, is that – I don’t think I’m straight.”

“Straight?” said Eddie. Straight what, straight shooting?

“Like, I think I might be gay.”

Eddie looked up at Richie, because it didn’t sound like a joke but wouldn’t it be just like Richie, to say something like this and follow it up with just kidding, you thought I was serious you dumb fuck! Except Richie wasn’t even looking back at him, he was staring straight ahead, so maybe he was serious. Eddie scrabbled for something to say – shit, did he even know any gay people? Like, personally? He thought Marcia in HR had a wife, and he was pretty sure Alec in sales might be gay – he was super skinny and dressed incredibly well, at any rate.

“You might be?” said Eddie.

“Yeah, I mean, unconfirmed but that’s the working theory.”

“Wait, so… are you saying you forgot you were gay?”

“No!” exclaimed Richie. “No, I mean – look, I’m like, just figuring this shit out myself okay so as far as knowing, not knowing – whatever. But I think – well, things happened when I was a kid. In Derry, I mean. And some of that I forgot. And then my whole life, I just…” He shrugged. “I told the rest of them. Felt like I should tell you, too.”

“Shit,” said Eddie. “I mean. Uh.” What were you supposed to say when this happened? He’d been in conversations where people had casually mentioned a boyfriend or girlfriend. He maybe had a cousin who was bisexual – he didn’t keep up with his aunts and their families too well. But no one had ever declared their sexuality to him, and this felt like a declaration. Was there some kind of fucking etiquette to this situation? He thought this was something that happened between kids and their parents. Not forty-year old men. “That’s… that’s cool?”

“Is it?”
“Isn’t it?” Eddie looked at Richie. “I mean, you tell me. I’m not like a crazy god-loving Republican if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“You’re not gonna preach to me about burning in a fiery lake for all eternity?”

“Wasn’t planning on it.”

“What a relief,” said Richie, and Eddie couldn’t imagine that there was any way Richie would really be worried about Eddie damning him to hell. But there was real relief in his voice.

“So, we’re good?”

“Of course we’re good,” replied Eddie, confused now. “Why the fuck wouldn’t we be?”

“I don’t know,” said Richie, and Eddie looked back up at him, feeling like it was yet another version of Richie he was seeing. Suddenly Eddie wished he wasn’t leaving tomorrow. It felt so fucking pedestrian – wow great seeing you all, we’ll have to do this again. He wished it could be like the things they talked about when they were kids, we’ll be friends forever, when we grow up we’ll all live on the same block together.

And more than anything, he wanted to make Richie understand yeah, of course they were good. He wished he was one of those people who could speak and make you believe in every word they were saying, the type of person Bill was, that the rest of them were. The type of person who made you feel safe and heard.

“Well, we are,” said Eddie, instead of all the things he wanted to say. “We’re really fucking good okay? So you still have to invite me to your birthday party.”

He saw Richie’s eyebrows lift a little, and then he laughed. “Sure Eds, of course.” He paused. “I think it’s like a 50 hour drive from New York to L.A.”

“I don’t like flying but I can do it,” muttered Eddie. “It’ll be more of a pain in the ass now that ever before, but I can do it. Especially if the alternative is a fifty hour drive.”

“Very brave,” said Richie. “Any Kaspbrak flight tips?”

“Revisit your will and take an ambien when you get on the plane.”

“You check your will every time you fly?”

“Dude, they still haven’t even found the Malaysian plane.”

Richie was laughing, which felt right, felt easier. Bill reappeared soon after, keys swinging from his hand.

“Sorry about that,” he said, walking back up to them. “Took a w-w-while to find them.”

“That’s fine,” said Richie. “Gave me a moment to bare my soul to Eddie, so that’s exciting. Now everyone’s on the same page vis-à-vis my sexual identity crisis.”

“Oh,” said Bill, “Well, that’s good.”

“Yup,” said Richie. “But if you tell TMZ I will sic my lawyers on you. Seriously. I don’t care how many blood oaths we swore as kids.”

Eddie snorted. “What’s TMZ?”
“Oh, Eddie,” said Richie, smiling. “Ignorance truly is bliss.”

“Fuck off.”

Richie laughed, and then they were saying good拜es. It seemed like Richie thought he would leave Eddie with just a wave and a pat on the shoulder, and Eddie had to tell him he was the world’s biggest asshole if he thought he was leaving without a hug. There was a slight hesitancy to it, and Eddie figured that maybe Richie was worried about the frailty of Eddie’s current state.

Richie headed off towards his own rental car, waving his hand good bye again before disappearing around the corner of the restaurant. Eddie watched him go, and then Bill helped him get into the passenger seat of his car.

“Thanks for the ride,” said Eddie, pulling his seatbelt across.

“Of course,” replied Bill. “Not a problem.”

Bill backed up of the parking spot and turned onto the main road, and Eddie remembered how it was Bill who had let him come home with him after the fight when they were kids, and it was Bill who was taking him home now. Or, well, the La Quinta that was his current home base anyways. The place where his wife was waiting.

“How’s Audra doing?” asked Eddie.

“Oh, she’s good,” said Bill. “She’s got a c-couple of weeks before her next j-job.”

_Her job as a famous movie star on another big budget movie_, supplied Eddie in his head.

“She’s flying in Monday, right?”

“Yeah. So she’ll miss you, and Ben and Bev.”

“Well, she’ll get to meet Mike. And Richie.”

Bill nodded. “Yeah. That’ll be good at least.”

What would Audra think of them, he wondered. What did it mean that she wanted to come here herself, to see the town that Bill had been dragged back to? Myra hadn’t asked about going to Derry, and it wasn’t that Eddie wanted to take her there, but he didn’t even know what she would say if he put forth the possibility.

“Does Audra ask about your stutter?” he asked.

Bill smiled a little at that, a wry look that didn’t have any amusement in it. “It started b-before I left.”

“What do you mean?”

“After Mike called. I was trying to explain to her why I had to g-go. I told her about G-G-Georgie. She knew he had died, but I told her he was m-m-murdered. And I told her about the p-promise, sort of. And when I started to tell her, it started to come b-back.”

Eddie nodded slowly, as though any part of this made any sense. “But you didn’t tell her about – It?”

Bill shook his head. “I don’t think I could h-have told her about It even if I wanted to. It was too
early for me, there was so much we had to remember.”

“Are you going to tell her?” asked Eddie after a moment.

“I want to.”

“Do you think she would... believe you?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know if I would believe me. But I feel like I have to try.” He breathed out. “The night before I flew to Maine, she told me I had nightmares, she said I made noises and moved in my sleep. I thought I never had any dreams.”

Eddie stared out at the street in front of them, the headlights from Bill’s car cutting the only light across the dark road. He had plenty of nightmares that he remembered. Nightmares where his mother hadn’t dropped down dead from a heart attack but languished and melted and drowned in a sickbed, nightmares where he had to keep running because something was behind him, and he couldn’t turn back to see and he couldn’t stop running, but his lungs were shrinking within him. Nightmares where he was small and trapped in a sick and shambling house and he was calling for somebody, but he didn’t know who it was.

That happened he realized. The thought came suddenly and easily, like a flame catching onto a wick. It was a memory.

“Are you going to tell Myra?”

“Am I going to tell Myra,” repeated Eddie. He saw their dollhouse life in his mind’s eye again, Myra worshipping at her altar in the kitchen, he with his at the medicine cabinet in the bathroom. Where was the room for extradimensional evil in there. “I don’t think I can. She asked about you guys, and why she’d never heard of you. I told her something had happened in Derry when we were all kids, and I’d tried to forget it all. And she seemed to... be fine with that.” More than fine, maybe. Myra wanted to forget it all and put it behind them more than Eddie did.

Bill nodded. “If it works, it works.”

And there was the hospital room again, the one from he was a child, his breath thin and stale and struggling. The conversation that he’d been keeping behind the door, when he had looked at his mother and scraped together all the courage he had left to ask her a question that wasn’t really a question. The pharmacist told me it’s just water in my inhaler, ma. Did you know?

It wasn’t really a question because he already knew the answer, but she answered it anyway, in the way she looked at Eddie as though he was something more powerful than a child with a broken arm in a hospital bed. In the strained whisper of her voice that insisted she had only done what a mother had to do. And they’d made a deal, we’ll forget what the pharmacist said Ma and I’ll trust you but trust me on this, they’re my friends and I won’t leave them.

And after that conversation, when she left the bedroom, and he could give in, he relented and used his inhaler and as relief filled him he thought who cares if it’s a placebo if it works it works.

“Do you think it works?” asked Eddie.

Bill glanced across at him. “I don’t know Eddie, it’s not my marriage.”

Eddie looked out the window. He’d forgotten the pharmacist’s words, the hospital bed, what his mother had admitted. But he’d forgotten his friends too, and that wasn’t supposed to be part of it, that wasn’t the deal. His mother had taken them away from Derry and after that it had been just the
two of them, in that tight little apartment in Queens. A mother and her son. A woman building a ship inside a bottle.

And then, with a slow inevitability, Myra. The marriage he’d slid into so easily. Someone else had set up their first date, and it had all rolled on from there. She didn’t give him butterflies in his stomach or drive him wild with desire, nothing like feelings described in the movies and songs. But she understood him, she knew how to watch out for him and worry over him, and sometimes it felt like he was sinking and she was a weight around his neck but that was all he knew of love.

“And what if it doesn’t?” asked Eddie eventually. Bill looked across at him. Big Bill, who had led the march into his hospital room and been the first to sign his arm cast, who was always brave and unafraid and willing to do what was right, even when what was right risked everything. “I mean, what if it doesn’t work?”

Bill didn’t say anything at first. Eventually he exhaled heavily and said, “I don’t know Eddie. I don’t really know M-Myra, I wouldn’t want to s-say the wrong thing.”

His mother was already starting to get sick when he first met Myra – it was the heart attack that got her, but the signs were there. She’d developed heart disease, and more and more Eddie was shuttling his mother between clinics and hospitals, the same places she was always urging him to go to but resisted for herself. And while his mother was stepping out, Myra was stepping in. It was like that scene from *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, when Indiana Jones swapped the golden idol for the bag of sand.

*She deserves better.*

It was the sort of thought that crept softly upon a person, and Eddie was startled by himself. Better? Did she? Was there a better out there? And Eddie? What did he deserve? Sometimes, most of the time, it seemed to him none of them really *deserved* anything. What were any of them entitled to, other than death, of course, the last stop at the end of the line.

*Maybe a few good laughs before you go,* he imagined Richie would say. *With some good friends, so you’re laughing so hard you don’t even notice when the end grabs you.*

And maybe Myra did deserve better, he thought again as Bill turned up the street the hotel was on. Better than their dollhouse life. Better than the shoes left behind by a mother who twisted loving and lying. Better than their instruction-manual marriage with its bulleted love. Better than a husband who couldn’t tell her the truth.

His mother’s voice was pleading in the back of his mind, and for the first time it struck against steel inside of him. There was an angry heat that threw off sparks, and he clamped down on it because if he let this go he didn’t know what else would catch. And that was a different type of fear, not knowing how much of him there was that could burn.

“Hey, Eddie?”

He snapped his head around. Bill was looking at him, soft concern on his face.

“Did you say something?” asked Eddie.

“Just that we’re here,” replied Bill, nodding behind Eddie. The garish, orange-plastered front of the La Quinta sat outside the passenger door. He didn’t feel any confusing dread about leaving this place behind, at least.

“Thanks,” said Eddie.
Bill turned off the car, but he didn’t move get out. He sat for a minute, and Eddie sat with him – where the hell else would he go anyway?

“You know,” said Bill, after a moment. “We really are going to be okay this time.”

He was looking at Eddie, and Eddie nodded. It was what Eddie had said to Myra earlier that day, but when Bill said it, Eddie knew he meant it. Bill believed it himself.

He stared up at the front of the hotel. What would the kid he’d been twenty-seven years ago say now, if he could see how his life had turned out? It wasn’t just memory that had come back to them – memory wasn’t like a book that you checked out and returned to the library. It was remembering to remember, the feeling of looking over a shoulder, realizing childhood was a fading photograph. And that was hard, but maybe it was okay, too.

Maybe it was time to grow up.
Chapter 3

“– arrived in Los Angeles, weather is a dry 79, time is 2:30 pm so go ahead and set your watches. Ladies and gentlemen on behalf of your crew we’d just like to say thank you for flying United and whether you’re coming home or just visiting, welcome to Los Angeles.”

It had been fucking weird to fly back. Strange to step off the plane and into LAX, feeling the full weight of himself step into the airport. It was like coming back from a trip loaded with souvenirs, except in this case the souvenirs were his fucked up childhood and a gay awakening.

He felt jumbled as he moved through the airport. It was like everyone he’d ever been or thought he was or hoped to be was trying to figure out how to reorganize themselves, like fitting four people in the backseat of a sedan. A lot of elbows and knees digging into awkward places.

In some ways he was twenty-four again, still fresh out of college, living on cash from gigs and hungry to make it, new to the city he’d build the next sixteen years of his life in. In another way he was younger, thirteen, with a mouth that never shut up and fully believing dick jokes were the height of comedy. And in another way he was forty, just forty and fucking tired and willing to do unspeakable things if that’s what it would take for the baggage carousel to start moving.

He felt as though he was watching himself on a screen, everything familiar but slightly distant. There he was in the backseat of the Uber from the airport to his apartment, the sprawling freeways whizzing by. There he was later that week, doing a conference call with his agent and assistant and manager to recalibrate after his east coast disappearing act. There he was again, attending a party at some famous person’s house, holding a rum and coke and laughing with some pretty woman by the host’s pool like he was starring in ad for prescription medication. And the screen was disappearing, and he was slipping back into himself, the Richie Tozier of before.

It would almost have been all too easy to return to normal – normal was a pleasant quicksand. Normal invited a guy to forget what had just happened, to write the nightmares off as just nightmares, get back to telling the jokes and collecting the checks.

But he had souvenirs in his bag, things to unpack. Memories that knocked normal a little off balance and required a slight recalibration.

For one thing, there was this whole gay reckoning business, and whatever the hell he was supposed to do with that. He felt a little like a contestant on one of those reality shows, the ones where they flew someone up in a helicopter to the top of a mountain, dropped them off and said good luck! Here he was at the mountaintop, realizing now that it had never been about getting to the top of the mountain. It was about getting off the damn mountain without triggering an avalanche or getting eaten by a wolf or causing a PR disaster and fucking up his entire career.

He would have liked to have a gay Bear Grylls with him to explain this shit – the next time someone nudged him in the side and told him to check out the chick in the red dress, should he use his cellphone battery to start a fire? Drink his own piss? Gay Bear Grylls, where were you?

He probably did know a gay Bear Grylls or two, but recruiting one would mean confiding in someone, and confiding was not really Richie’s thing. Not a lot of big laughs in confiding. Plus there was the whole matter of potentially fucking up his entire career to consider. His comedy, which Variety had once described as “straight bro couture,” did not inspire the idea of a fan base that would buy rainbow-themed Richie Tozier merch.
But when all that became too much of a headache, he had the new group chat with five other people on his cellphone. It was like he held a totem with him wherever he went, a thin little lifeline. They sent out benign life updates – there was a new café opening nearby Bill’s house in Washington (thrilling stuff Bill what’s the sandwich selection look like); Mike wanted to know if anyone had any thoughts on that year’s Booker Prize winner (Booker what); Eddie sent out the latest report from the CDC concerning this season’s flu virus (If I got the shot once ten years ago I’m good right). It was them reaching out, shaking each other’s shoulders, saying hey don’t worry, I didn’t forget about you this time.

Sometimes it was an actual phone call. Richie would sit in LA rush hour with Ben on speaker phone, listening to him outline the updates he was planning to his ranch home out in bumfuck Nebraska, the debate he was having about what type of rock to use for the backyard patio. Or sometimes he’d be standing in his apartment like he was now, packing for a trip while idly catching up with Beverly.

It was a brisk October day in Los Angeles, blue and bright beyond the floor-to-ceiling windows in Richie’s high-rise apartment. It offered a postcard view of the city – not one with the HOLLYWOOD sign, which was the first thing people always asked when they came into his place for the first time. He’d shake his head and point over his shoulder and tell them nope, that’s the other side of the building.

He had a record playing softly in the background, because he fully admitted to being one of those guys who couldn’t let go of the feeling of vinyl, loved holding a record album in his hands, even though he’d also worshipped the Sony Walkman, the portable CD player, the first chunky iPod when each of them had hit the scene. And he wouldn’t give up the infinite streaming possibilities on his phone for anything. But he was one of those guys. His record collection was probably the greatest love of his life, to date – sorry Sandy.

There were maybe fifteen, twenty books in his apartment, tops, and he probably hadn’t even read half of them. But his shelves were flooded with CDs and records, with one or two cardboard boxes stuffed with cassette tapes that he didn’t even have a way to play anymore but couldn’t quite let go of. The tapes and CDs he’d picked up from yard sales and moving sales during his high school days – a lot of Pixies and The Smiths, Bowie and Queen – mix tapes from his college days, oscillating between 90s era indie bands and R&B hits. Old, scratchy vinyl he’d inherited from his father and always got stuck on at least once song. Shiny, new overpriced records that had come back during the vinyl revival – some part of his soul had cried at the idea of him buying a new pressing of Nevermind for $40 from a Barnes and Noble. But when he’d seen it for sale and remembered listening to it for the first time – headphones on and his door shut in their new house in Michigan, sixteen and understanding what he was hearing in some deep animal place – he’d gagged that crying part of his soul with duct tape and handed over the money.

“Hey Rich,” asked Beverly on the other end of the phone. There’d been a lull in their conversation, the type of which didn’t bother him when he had Fleetwood Mac spinning slowly in the background.

“Yeah?” he asked, rummaging through his sock drawer to see if he could find a single matching pair of socks.

“Are you an art guy?”

“Define art guy.”

“Do you like art? Collecting it, having it in your home, you know. Capital-A Art.”
“Feels like that really depends on the art,” replied Richie. Half the décor in his apartment was the result of a last-minute decorator hire when a pop culture magazine had come over to do an interview with him. The other half, curated by him, was movie posters and photographs. There’d been a girl who used to come over who’d described his apartment as a slightly classier version of T.G.I.Friday’s. In retrospect, he should have asked about the suffix on class-ier. “Why, are you selling something?”

“Tom and I used to collect it,” replied Bev, and he could hear the way she tried to say it casually, shrugging off her ex-husband’s name like an ill-fitting cardigan. “But I don’t really feel like keeping any of what we collected, obviously.”

“So you want me to be reminded of your shitty marriage every time I’m home?”
“Beep beep Richie.”
“You’re the one trying to pass off weird divorce art here.”
“I just figured I would ask! Some of it’s really nice, and maybe you’re really big into art, I don’t know.”

Oh, because I’m gay now, I have to love capital-A Art?
The response rested on the tip of his tongue, almost out of his mouth, when he swallowed it back.
“This may shock you,” he said instead, “but I am not widely regarded as a man of culture.”
“Well, you’re a comedian, that’s culture.”
“Are we going to have some kind of bullshit MFA lecture here about what Culture is?”
“We could,” said Beverly.
“Give me a moment, I’ll have to dig out some turtlenecks and cigarettes first.”
“Hang on, I have to try to picture you in a turtleneck.”
“I wouldn’t recommend it. I do not have a physique that lends itself to anything that wants to cling.”
“That’s not what I meant,” replied Beverly, laughing.
“Hey it’s alright, I know I didn’t make it this far based on my looks.”
“Don’t let those impossible beauty standards get you down, Richie.”
“Spoken like a true, naturally hot person.”
“Spoken like a woman,” said Beverly. “Who works in the fashion industry and knows a lot more about impossible beauty standards than you do.”
“Oh shit!” crowed Richie, “Alright, you got me.”

He could practically hear the affectionate way she was rolling her eyes at him, two time zones ahead. He looked back down at the scattered contents of his suitcase, and the contents seemed to shrug back up at him. He was going over to Manhattan for a few creative meetings, some business dealings, which meant slacks and a nice suit jacket. He had a list somewhere that he’d written for
packing purposes, but as usual he’d misplaced the list five minutes into packing. From the living room he noticed silence, heard the deadness of the air as loud as a hammer and walked over to flip the record. The Chain started to thump softly through the speakers as he returned to the bedroom to dig around his closet for more suitcase inspiration.

“So how is Mr. Hanscom these days?” asked Richie.

“Oh, you don’t keep up with him?” replied Beverly, her voice teasing.

“I read the Architectural Digest, if that’s what you’re asking. I’d just rather hear from you.”

“You want to know what’s going on with us.”

“Okay,” said Richie. “You got me. I’m a nosy bitch. And Ben won’t tell me anything because he always says he wants to respect your space or something.”

“Yeah, he’s sweet like that.”

“Really admirable. So what’s up with you two?”

“A lot of figuring things out.”

“He’s still renting his own place in Chicago?”

“Yup.”

“So he’s not staying with you?”

“Well I’m staying with my friend Kay right now,” she said. The Richie of before might have taken all the hints and backed off. Personal drama, no thanks. But he’d started this conversation, and it wasn’t just out of some juvenile need, some question of his friends sleeping together (although, sure, wherever a juvenile need was a possibility, it probably factored into his considerations). But most of this question came from the small, new part of him that had five people he cared about more than anyone else and just wanted to make sure that they were okay.

“Well I hear Ben’s got a place,” said Richie.

“I just need a little time,” continued Bev. “Trying to figure out a divorce – I mean, the way things are going over here? This is a fucking shitshow.”

She sighed heavily into the phone. For once, Richie kept his mouth clamped shut.

“I feel like,” she said, “I spend all my time talking to lawyers, all my money paying lawyers, who are trying to tell me how to keep the company, keep my money, but it all just goes to them and, and…”

“Yeah,” said Richie. “Sounds like a shitshow alright.”

She gave him a tired laugh. “It really is. Sometimes I think about just giving up, letting Tom have it all and starting over.”

“Would you?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Part of me feels like that would just be letting him win. But I think, there’s also… I don’t know if I can be that lucky twice.”
Richie felt the unguarded truth of that hit him. Saw the view from the top of the mountain, and it was vast and unnerving.

“It wasn’t all luck, though,” he heard himself saying. “That got you where you are.”

“Sure. But it wasn’t like there wasn’t any luck involved. And I just… I don’t know if I’ve got two multi-million dollar fashion empires in me, you know?”

“Okay, good point. Have you considered hired assassins?”

“Oh, please. It’s hard enough – I mean, sometimes I think Ben is going to find Tom and murder him.”

“Would that be so bad?”

“Yes, Richie, it would be so bad,” said Beverly. She was silent for another moment, before saying, “He thinks I should try therapy.”

Richie barked a laugh before he could stop it. “Sorry – no, that’s – uh, that’s cool? I guess? Are you going to do it?”

“Maybe,” she replied, and he wasn’t sure why it knocked him off balance a little bit. An admission to the outside world that yes, hello, I’m fucked up. “We’ll see. I scheduled an intake with someone. So, I don’t know.” Another sigh. “As much as I really hate the idea of talking to someone about my life and the things that I’ve done, I think… I sort of hate the idea of all those things controlling me even more.”

“And you think talking about it is going to stop it?” said Richie before he could think it over.

“I hope so,” she said. “Have you thought about it?”

“What?”

“Talking to someone?”

He laughed. “The only type of therapy I do is live, on stage with a microphone, and a paying audience.”

“Doesn’t sound like therapy to me.”

“Oh you’re the expert now? One intake scheduled and she’s the newest mental health authority!” He looked over his suitcase. “I mean seriously, why the fuck would I go to therapy?”

“Because you’ve got things to talk about? I’m just asking.”

“What kind of therapist is going to listen to someone talk about a, a cosmic monster that pretended to be a clown and lived in the sewers and ate kids? That sounds like a really fun way for me to end up in the kind of hospital they don’t let you check out of.”

“I wasn’t suggesting that. There are other things you can talk to a therapist about.”

(get the fuck out of here faggot)

“I don’t have anything else,” replied Richie.

“Alright, fair,” said Beverly in a tone of voice that suggested she was neatly filing this topic of
conversation away to pull out and shove in his face later. “That’s everything with me – what about you? Are you seeing anyone?”

He was sure, if they were having this conversation in person, that Beverly would be looking at him with an arched eyebrow and expression that would read *checkmate, bitch.*

“No, who would I be seeing?”

“I don’t know. I re-watched your special recently – ”

“Oh great.”

“ – and you talk a lot about getting around in that.”

“Who are you, my mom?”

“It’s just a question.”

“Yup, sounds like my mom.”

“Okay,” laughed Beverly, and she let the conversation turn towards his New York trip, though he felt her unsaid words, a hovering reminder that said *I let you off easy.*

They moved into easier conversational territory, talking about Bill’s books, and Richie mentioned how he kept meaning to buy a copy of one of them – he’d never actually read any of them, although he had seen the movie adaptation of *Joanna* that had come out a few years ago and personally, he thought everyone was a little harsh on the ending (“Richie, it was so bad!” she exclaimed). He wasn’t much of a reader these days.

“You’re going to see Eddie while you’re there?” asked Beverly as their conversation wound towards its natural end.

“That’s the plan.”

“Give him a hug for me.”

“Assuming I can without it putting him in the hospital again, you got it.”

“He’s not that delicate,” said Beverly.

“No you’re right, he’s not. But you have to give Ben a kiss from me.”

“Sure,” said Beverly, and he could hear the smile in her voice.

“Twelve, one for each of his abs.”

“Richie.”

“It’s good talking to you, Bev.”

“You too, Richie.”

“That’s cool you’re going to see a therapist.”

“Thanks.”

“My advice – don’t go too heavy on the clown at the beginning.”
“Beep beep Richie.”

“Alright!”

The next morning he was jerked awake from his thin sleep by the merry chiming of his cellphone alarm, which felt like someone hammering an ice pick into his ear. He woke up on the couch, as he usually did on nights when sleep gave him the cold shoulder and the only option was to relocate to the living room and let whatever was marathoning on late night TNT or HBO lull him to sleep.

The world outside his window was black, because it was 4:45 am and his car was scheduled to arrive in fifteen minutes. More than enough time to roll off the couch, stagger to the bathroom, and shove himself into some other clothes. Grab his suitcase and carry-on, check himself in the mirror – yup, barely hanging on there, he could shave in New York – and take the elevator down to the lobby to wait for his car. He shot off a text to his assistant to assure him that yes, Richie was awake and yes, en route to the airport as planned. You go AWOL one time for Maine and no one ever lets you forget it huh?

His assistant, wonderfully chaotic man that he was – which was to say, an early riser – immediately sent him a response: glad to hear it.

Richie didn’t love being awake early, involuntarily or not, and he didn’t have any particular interest in airplanes or flying, but he did have a weird, special place in his heart for airports between the hours of 5 and 10 am. There was a beautiful lawlessness, an exquisite limbo that permeated the airport during this time. It was a place that existed outside of time, outside of society, a lost blip in the world. He loved to see businessmen stretched out on the floor at gates using their carry-ons as a pillow, dead-eyed parents that looked as though they’d crossed the country by foot instead of air, middle-aged women at the bar ordering their second whiskey sour of the day before 8 am. It was some through-the-looking-glass shit, and Richie loved it.

He sent Eddie a text asking Hey if you want any novelty LA airport souvenirs now’s your last chance.

He was unsurprised when his phone buzzed back an almost immediate response.

How novelty are we talking here?

Richie smiled and replied, Looking at a really great magnet of the Hollywood sign right now.

Wow, hate to pass on that but I don’t have a single magnetized surface in my apartment.

Smart, texted Richie. I hear magnets cause cancer.

All he received from that was a deliberate ellipsis. He put his phone back in his pocket, bought himself a breakfast sandwich, magazine, and a bag of combos, and was walking over to his gate when his phone started buzzing. He pulled it out, for some reason expecting it to be Eddie again, which he only registered by the disappointment he felt when he saw his assistant’s name displayed across the top. He answered it.

“Hey Julian.”

“Good morning, Rich – made it the airport?”

“You could almost call it night still.”
“I can see the sun rising from where I am, so I think it’s safe to say ‘good morning’ now. Airport?”

“Yup, airport. You want me to send you a picture of myself with today’s newspaper at LAX?”

“Headed to gate 36?”

“Actually just decided to say fuck it and book a trip to Vancouver, is that okay?”

“I don’t imagine you’d find Vancouver too interesting.”

“Very harsh, Julian, you don’t think I have any love for our Canadian brethren?”

“I can’t picture you contemplating nature for too long, which seems to be one of the main Vancouver activities.”

“I’m from Maine, Julian, I’m all about nature.”

“I would say I’m very well aware of your being from Maine.”

“I could be the next Thoreau.”

“Thoreau was from Massachusetts.”

“The poor man’s Maine if you ask me.”

“Gate 36?”

“Yeah yeah, I’m walking up to it now,” replied Richie, and he was. A full hour before it would be time to board, too. A new personal record for Richie, and a direct result of Julian’s personal booking of the flight, the car, and the many, many reminders and follow-up calls and texts. Which Richie couldn’t entirely blame the guy for. Julian had been his assistant for the past four years, and he’d been the longest lasting of Richie’s assistants for a reason. There was a professional pride he took to his work, the kind that would have made him an exceptional valet for some rich Edwardian asshole in another world.

“Excellent, thrilled to hear it,” said Julian, and although his tone didn’t seem to translate the same emotion, Richie imagined he genuinely was. “I know you said you didn’t want it, but I can still set up a car for you at JFK.”

“Pretty sure I’m still capable of calling my own Uber.”

“Alright. You have the hotel information I forwarded yesterday?”

“Yeah, I got that, I saw the agenda you put together, everything looks good.”

“Alright,” said Julian again. There was a slight pause.

“Yes, Julian? Anything else weighing on you? Thinking about tracking my phone?”

“No,” replied Julian. “Nothing else from me. Anything else from you?”

“Nope. I got a breakfast sandwich that’s getting cold.”

“Okay then,” said Julian, with the slight tone that four years of working together had taught Richie was bemusement. “Have a good flight, Rich.”
“Thanks Julian. Have a good Wednesday.”

He hung up and dug through his bag for his fancy noise-cancelling headphones and iPod classic, maybe his most treasured relic. He scrolled through his library, settling on some 90s punk as he often did when he needed music that could drive itself like a spike through his brain. He killed the rest of the time at his gate sending a text to Mike (knowing the response would come a day later in a multi-paragraph email), another to Bill, briefly reviewed the itinerary Julian had sent (a color coded excel spreadsheet converted into a PDF, bless him), jumped back and forth between Twitter and Instagram, and pretended to ignore the two other travelers who had definitely recognized him and were doing an abysmal job at taking a subtle photo of him. Breaking news, Richie Tozier also listens to music and looks bored when he’s waiting for boarding to start at his gate! So relatable!

He took the last bite of his breakfast sandwich – was there ever a joy so pure as an early morning breakfast sandwich, eaten in the bare, desperate morning hours at LAX? He could imagine Eddie giving him that skewed eyebrow and seriously dude? I could list like, twenty things better than the chemicals you’re eating right now. To which Richie would point out that Eddie probably ate more chemicals than anyone he knew.

Now you’re having conversations with an imaginary Eddie in your head, thought Richie, balling up the greasy wax wrapping that the breakfast sandwich had previously occupied. You really are going to need therapy if you keep that up.

It wasn’t the best part of first class – that would probably be all the legroom – but being able to get off the plane first after it had landed had to account for at least 30% of the ticket price. It was a sweet victory to be halfway to the baggage claim while some sucker in 25F was probably still waiting on someone up in 10C to finish wrestling with the overhead bin. He pulled out his phone and scrolled through his contacts – almost five o’clock here, there goes the day – and tapped Eddie Kaspbrak. The phone rang twice before he heard Eddie’s voice on the other end.

“Hello?”

“Hey!” replied Richie, feeling self-judgment prickle within. Did he sound all right? Was he already making it awkward? “I just landed – I know it’s last minute, but are you free to get dinner tonight?”

“You’re not jetlagged?”

“It’s three hours earlier in LA, why would I be jetlagged?” replied Richie, dodging around a family that had parked themselves and their six rolling bags in the middle of the walkway.

“Oh – yeah. Well, general plane fatigue, you know. Your body gets dehydrated being that high up and then that makes you tired.”

“Great, so now I need to get hydrated. Dinner?”

“You’re not plane fatigued?”

“You know, when a normal person doesn’t want to get dinner they just say ‘I’m busy.’”

“I’m not busy!” insisted Eddie. “I can get dinner, I’m just making sure you’re not fatigued!”

“I’m doing cartwheels across the terminal right now, that’s how not fatigued I am.”
“Well it’s going to be difficult to get dinner together after you break your neck at the airport.”

“Great point, I’ll stop with the cartwheels – although just so you know I really did them, and they were very impressive.”

“Great. I’m very impressed.”

“All right, dinner – you’re the New Yorker so you pick the place.”

“Me?”

“This is your town, Eds! Anyway, you’ve got time. I’ve gotta get to my hotel, drop all my shit off. Just text me a spot when you’ve picked something and I’ll meet you there. Seven good?”

“What do you feel like eating?”

Richie could imagine all the little neurons whizzing in Eddie’s brain, coming up with a list of restaurants and cross referencing the quality of food with how likely it was that each restaurant visit would somehow result in their death.

“Anything dude, I’ve had nothing but ginger ale and pretzels for like six hours,” replied Richie, failing to mention that he could have had a first-class provided meal, but for whatever weird reason his stomach had rebelled at the idea of real food. It wasn’t until he’d stepped off the plane that he was starving.

“Okay okay, I’ll think of something – where are you staying?”

“Somewhere in Midtown if my assistant is to be trusted.”

“Alright, I’ll find something around there.”

“Great, see you then, Eds. Gotta find my luggage now.”

He hung up, feeling lighter, and joined the waiting crowd that hung around the luggage carousel, an experience that always reminded Richie of farm animals being drawn to the trough. And here was another profound lesson from the airport – it didn’t matter where any of them had sat on the plane or how much legroom they had, they all ended up waiting at the baggage claim.

Richie dug out his phone and opened his messages with Eddie.

RT: Just in case you’re wondering I did make it to the luggage carousel alive

RT: lmk if you want a novelty new york mug or magnet

RT: Also just saw a chihuahua wearing a service dog vest.

RT: 1, wtf is a chihuahua gonna do for anyone in any situation, and 2, the vest didn’t even fit. It was too big for the dog!

RT: If any dog needs its own service dog, its probably a chihuahua

The service dog in question was about fifteen feet away from him, quivering slightly in that constant way all Chihuahuas seemed to do. His service was pledged to an elderly lady with a thick mass of gray curls and wearing a fuzzy purple coat. His phone buzzed.

EK: Don’t get me started on that.
EK: Think I found a spot for tonight, I’ll send you the address

Richie grinned at his phone as the address for the restaurant came in. He imagined Eddie probably had some very strong opinions about the surge in service animals, or rather the surge in the purchasing of service animal vests with zero other consideration or training involved. He’d have to remember to get him started on that.

Dinner, with Eddie, In New York City. Funny how something so normal could also be so unbelievable. This would be the first time he’d hung out with one of them outside of Maine. Outside of a fifty-mile radius of Derry, even. Another slow step in seeing how they fit with one another outside of that mean little town in Maine, in seeing if they could fit.

There had been some of that in meeting Bill’s wife, Audra. They had all overlapped for a day in Bangor and had ended up getting lunch together in a little diner, just the three of them. Mike couldn’t make it for lunch, so he would join Bill and Audra for dinner. They’d invited Richie to that, too, but he passed. He could have made it, but something kept him from the idea of it, some instinct that he didn’t quite understand but felt was for Audra’s sake.

He’d met Audra and Bill outside of the diner. Richie had Hollywood in his backyard, but that didn’t mean he was totally immune to the slight shine of meeting Audra. She might not have been an A-List star, not yet, but that future seemed to shimmer around her, the notion that this was someone who could have *Oscar nominee* introduce her name in a trailer one day. It was a little funny to have Bill go through the usual greetings and introductions, as if Bill was just an old friend from college introducing Richie to his normal non-movie star wife.

And it was weird, weird in the way it had been to meet Myra. Proof, different from the college degrees and bank accounts and glowing magazine profiles, that after that summer and the circle they had continued to live and grow. Walking, breathing, blood-pumping proof that someone else knew this friend, had known them while he hadn’t.

With Myra he couldn’t deny a streak of something he didn’t want to look at it, a slippery, ugly feeling. With Audra, it was different. Starting with the fact that he was meeting her at a restaurant instead of an ICU, and her husband hadn’t triggered a landmine of acknowledging twenty-seven years worth of repression.

The hostess who sat them – young, probably a college kid – had gone wide-eyed at the sight of Audra and led them to their table with a nervous smile, coming back multiple times during their meal to ask if everything was okay. Their waiter, an older man, regarded them all with an equal and oblivious politeness. Audra and Bill sat on one side of their booth, Richie on the other, and about halfway through the meal Richie was surprised to discover that he actually enjoyed Audra.

Richie met a lot of people, most of whom he pretty much tolerated at best. People who were good for about five minutes worth of conversation at a party before he was sure that he’d have a more enlightening time smashing his head against a wall. But Audra was actually interesting. She shared salacious anecdotes, laughed at Richie’s stories and would respond with some unexpected comment. She would poke light fun at Bill and then tilt her head at Richie in a way that said *you get it*, then flash an unapologetic smile that coaxed out tiny wrinkles from the corners of her eyes. She held herself like someone who knew the ways life could both knock you down and pick you up.

And she loved Bill. That was clear, as much as he loved her, too. Richie didn’t find most love to be interesting, either. Most of the couples he knew seemed to be crossing something off a list, practicing a kind of bare minimum love with the same enthusiasm as teenagers working a summer job. Sometimes they’d break up, which was no big tragedy. Sometimes they’d get married, which
was only a tragedy if the wedding didn’t include an open bar.

But Bill and Audra were the real thing. That fantasy love. The type that everyone hoped for but only a handful of people ever really seemed to brush against.

*If anyone can survive us surviving this, maybe it’s her,* Richie had thought at the time.

“You’re in LA right?” she had said when they were saying their goodbyes. “I’m there all the time, we have an apartment in the city. We’ll have to get together again.”

“Yeah, we should,” Richie had replied, and found himself actually meaning it for once.

He made it from JFK to the hotel in good time. Richie loved the West Coast, loved his California driver’s license and the palm trees that dotted the side of the wide roads, but he had plenty of room in his heart for New York, too. And this was the first time he’d looked at it all – the crowded sidewalks and huddled apartments and reaching skyscrapers – and thought about it as Eddie’s city. This was where Eddie had come and stayed and flourished even.

He had a few hours before seven, which he spent showering off the airplane feeling, reviewing his emails again (Julian had sent a new one that included a recommendation of which outfit to wear for which meeting, which Richie didn’t know whether to be offended or relieved by), and exchanging a few texts with Beverly. As was often the case, he spent most of the time leading up to seven anxiously awaiting seven, and then getting distracted to the point that he realized he was now going to be late for dinner. At 6:55 he snatched up his phone and ordered an Uber, grabbed his jacket, and headed down to the lobby.

Eddie had picked a spot called *Gordie’s,* which seemed nice enough from the outside. It was in an active part of midtown, a good level of New York City crowded. Not sardine packed with tourists like Times Square, but a healthy bustle, the after-work Manhattan crowd. Richie walked into the restaurant a quarter after seven, entering into a sleek, low-lit interior that was about halfway full. The hostess standing at the front smiled and asked how she could help him.

“I’m actually meeting someone,” said Richie, craning his head to look past her and around the restaurant, and – there. There he was, sitting at a two-top to the side, studying the menu in front of him with a slightly furrowed brow, projecting the underlying concern that he seemed to apply to everything in life. “Aaand I see him – thanks.”

As he walked towards the table in the back he felt a warm, fizzy feeling in his stomach, like he’d just swallowed too much champagne. That little kid feeling, ready to believe that magic was real and good things were possible. He realized he was smiling for no good reason and quickly cut that shit out.

He was nearly to the table when Eddie glanced up and saw him. He looked at Richie the way he had the first time after twenty-seven years, as though someone had just explaining the basic principles of a smile to him five minutes earlier. Richie thought he looked good for a man who had been put in a mini coma after having his chest blown apart by shape-shifting evil.

“Hey,” said Eddie, “Sorry if I don’t get up, it’s kind of a whole fucking production.”

“I can see that,” said Richie – and he could, from the left leg that was still in a cast and the set of crutches leaning on the wall behind Eddie’s chair. He fell into the seat across from Eddie and grinned over at him. “How the hell are you? You look good, all near-death experiences considered.”
“Oh, thanks,” said Eddie, his tone sarcastic. But Richie meant it, he looked a little closer to the man who’d sat beside him at that restaurant on their first night back in Derry. Not entirely like him, but maybe that man wasn’t the one to be compared against anyways.

“Really! You look like a functioning human and everything.”

“Barely,” said Eddie. “I’ve got like twenty different doctors and follow ups and whenever something goes wrong, no one’s ever really sure why exactly because every other part of me is so fucked up. It’s like looking for a needle in a haystack, if the whole haystack is made of needles.”

“Well you sound back to normal.”

“Not sure what the fuck that’s supposed to mean.”

Richie grinned. “Nothing. Just means I’m glad to see you.”

“Oh. Yeah. Well, you too.” Eddie glanced at the menu in front of him, and started to ask “How was your flight” at the same time that Richie asked “So what is this place?”

“What do you mean?” answered Eddie, as Richie said, “Pretty much fine.”

They paused for a moment, and Richie pointed at Eddie, “You first.”

“No no, what do you mean ‘what is this place?’”

“Just like, so what’s the deal with this restaurant?”

Eddie shrugged, “It’s a fusion restaurant.”

“Fusion of what?”

“I don’t know, everything’s a ‘fusion restaurant’ these days.”

Richie laughed. Their waiter appeared and introduced himself, and Richie went ahead and ordered a beer and whatever two appetizers the waiter would recommend. And when Eddie said “I’m fine with water, thanks” to the waiter’s offer of a drink, Richie turned on him.

“You’re gonna make me drink alone?”

“Are you peer pressuring me right now?”

“Fuck yeah I’m peer pressuring you. I have to make up for all the years I wasn’t around to peer pressure you – kind of seems like you didn’t get enough during your formative years.”

Eddie rolled his eyes but checked the menu again.

“I’ll just get the house red,” he said, and the waiter smiled and disappeared to get their drinks.

“House red,” said Richie, grinning. “Real party animal.”

“It’s good for your heart, you know. In moderation.”

“The old red wine party line.”

When their waiter reappeared to get their orders, Richie continued to ignore the menu in front of him, instead painting a general picture of his culinary taste and asking for a recommendation based
on that. Eddie examined the menu with all the detail of an archeologist, despite having probably
read everything on it front to back five times over, asked their waiter about five different questions
about caloric content and cooking oil – which did make Richie want to see if he could hang himself
his cloth napkin – before finally settling on a salad.

The waiter collected their menus, disappeared, and Richie lifted his glass towards Eddie.

“Cheers,” he said. “To not being dead.”

“I don’t know if we have to keep cheering to that,” said Eddie, clinking his wine glass against
Richie’s glass tumbler.

“As long as I keep not being dead, I’m gonna toast it,” replied Richie, taking a sip of his beer and
thinking, as he always did, that they weren’t in the middle ages anymore and beer was no longer
the only alcoholic option and he should probably stop ordering a drink he didn’t really like.

He replaced his drink and smiled at Eddie. “So other than the millions of doctors, how’s life
treating you?”

“Oh, you know. It’s good, it’s mostly good. Some things aren’t, but most things are.”

Richie looked at Eddie. Eddie was hyper-focused on his own drink, his fingers lightly spinning the
stem of his wine glass on the table.

“That is the most non-answer answer I’ve ever heard,” said Richie.

“Well,” said Eddie, sounding a little agitated. “Well, it’s Myra.”

“Yeah?”

“We’re separating.”

He might as well have said I’m giving it all up and going to clown school in France for as prepared
as Richie was for that. His body flashed hot and then cold at Eddie’s words, and he felt very aware
of how he was holding himself, what expression his face might be making. Luckily Eddie was still
intensely focused on his wine glass, as though the glass might get up and make a mad dash off the

“Oh shit,” said Richie.

“It’s okay,” said Eddie, taking another sip of his drink. “It’s because of me – I mean, I started it. I
asked for this.”

“Yeah?” prompted Richie, remembering the woman who sat by Eddie’s bedside in the hospital and
held his hand with the determined desperation of a sailor clinging to the rigging in a storm.

“Yeah. I mean we came home, from Derry – from Bangor. And… I kept sort of waiting for things
to go back to normal. But it wasn’t that I even… really wanted them to? I was just waiting to see if
they would. You know what I mean?”

“Yeah.” Boy, did he.

“Yeah. And then, it wasn’t like before. I could remember Derry and the – everything. And I could
remember all of you.” He smiled a little half-smile. “But I couldn’t… ah, this is going to make me
sound like a real fucking asshole.”
“Hey, you’re talking to the king of assholes here, alright?” Richie gestured at himself with his glass. “I’ll be the one to pass asshole judgment.”

“Alright, well – ”

He cut himself off as a waiter appeared with their appetizers, dropping off two plates of calamari and roasted Brussels sprouts on their table. Eddie waited for him to walk away before resuming.

“Okay, so it was, it was… It’s like my life was a board game, and going back to Derry was like if somebody knocked the game off the table, and I’m trying to remember how to put the pieces back and reset everything but there’s just, there’s no point to that. That game’s over.”

“Bleak, Eds.”

Eddie made a clicking noise with his tongue. “I don’t mean game over. I’m still here. I just, I’m trying to explain it.”

“I got you,” said Richie, because he did. What had happened at the end of July had altered things in some irrevocable way. It was like the first time he’d gotten glasses, another one of those memories kept behind the fog. The way the world had sharpened into something beautiful around him, and he couldn’t believe this was what he’d been living in the whole time.

“So it’s like… god this is shitty. But it’s like I’m resetting the board, and I’m looking at Myra, and I just, I know that I don’t love her.”

Richie felt his stomach flip. He reached for the beer he didn’t want to drink and made himself take a sip.

“I kind of know that, maybe I haven’t loved her in a long time? Or – anyway. I can’t un-know it. And I know that makes me sound like an asshole.”

“People fall out of love all the time, man,” replied Richie, hoping he sounded casual as he reached over and snagged a piece of calamari. “I probably know more divorced people than married ones. You can’t be an asshole just for that.”

“Yeah, well.” Eddie was silent for a moment. The sounds of low restaurant chatter and a light generic jazz that came in through the speakers filled in the silence. Eddie continued. “So I realized, I didn’t love her, and I couldn’t – didn’t want to keep living with her.”

“Usually how it goes.”

“And I kept waiting for the feeling to go away, I thought, maybe it was just recovering from everything – when we came back, I was using a wheel chair mostly, and this is city is a real pain in the ass to deal with if you can’t walk. So she was helping with everything, and I thought, give it a week or two, wait until you go back to work, wait until you get the cast off, see what it feels like then. But…” He closed his eyes for a minute, gave a little half laugh.

“What?”

“Don’t say any smartass shit,” said Eddie. “But it felt like when I decided to move out of my mom’s house. The first time. Except you’re supposed to grow up and move out and get your own place. You’re not supposed to leave your wife, right? Especially not when she hasn’t done anything?”

Richie shrugged. “I know a lot of people who have left relationships for way less than ‘I don’t love
“Yeah,” said Eddie, taking another sip of his wine. “So I made it two weeks. And then it all came out.”

“Shit.”

“Yeah.” He took another sip of wine. Richie was thinking he should have ordered something stronger. “I was kind of ready for her to, to fight it. To kind of fight me on it? Which still makes me sound – ”

“Like an asshole,” said Richie, grinning. “I get it, you don’t have to keep clarifying.”

“Okay, okay.” Eddie smiled back at him, then shook his head a little. “So she did sort of fight me on it, for a minute. But then she was pretty quickly telling me to get out, and that’s when I thought, shit I should have at least waited to get the cast off before doing all this.”

Richie threw back his head and laughed. It was the type of laugh that just exploded outward, no chance of containment. Eddie glared at him, and Richie laughed harder.

“What?”

“Sorry, sorry man – that,” he had to take a moment to laugh some more before he could speak. “Now that is kind of an asshole move.”

Eddie stared, then laughed himself a little. “Yeah – well I only thought it! And I did leave! I stayed in a sad hotel that night and everything.” He shrugged. “And then she moved out.”

“Damn,” said Richie. “So this was all just happening, and you didn’t talk to anyone about it?”

“I talked to Bill a little bit,” confessed Eddie. “Just because…”

“Because he’s Bill.”

“Yeah. Well, he’s Bill, and he’s the only one of us who seems to be both alive and in a maybe functioning marriage.”

“Touché,” replied Richie, tipping back the rest of his drink. “So you’re getting divorced?”

Eddie made a face, “I guess so?”

“You sound confident.”

“It’s like, as much as I don’t want to get divorced, I don’t not want to get divorced even more.”

Richie screwed his face up in exaggerated concentration, repeating Eddie’s sentence to himself as he pointed at the air, as though he had Eddie’s words on a chalkboard in front of him to parse out the double negatives.

“Alright, fuck you,” said Eddie. “So that’s me. I’m getting divorced. How’s your love life?”

He asked it sarcastically, and Richie saw the flash of recognition across Eddie’s eyes one second after the words had left his mouth, the unsaid oh shit that told Richie that for that moment at least, Eddie had forgotten what Richie had admitted in Bangor. And why wouldn’t he? In all their catch up phone calls and texts, Richie never brought it up. And it was easy to skirt around, like a pothole in the road. That moment he’d forced out a nervous confession because he couldn’t say good bye to
Eddie without saying *something*, and that was the closest he could get.

Richie laughed, but it sounded too loud even to himself, as authentic as a Hollywood set. Eddie was focused on stabbing another Brussels sprout with his fork.

“It’s fine,” said Richie. “Stuck in development hell.”

“What does that mean?”

Richie was about to try to figure out what the hell that did mean when their food appeared. The waiter left, and Richie vaguely wondered if this was his out as a pool of silence began to fill up at the table.

“I mean,” said Eddie eventually, and Richie felt himself bracing. “You’re still gay, right?”

Richie barked a laugh, and Eddie scowled.

“What?” snapped Eddie, and Richie had to love how only Eddie could be irritated that someone else wasn’t baring their soul quickly enough.

“Nothing, sorry. Yeah, that’s still the working theory.”

“Okay,” said Eddie. “But you’re not…” He paused for a moment as another beer blessedly appeared at the table for Richie. “You’re not dating any guys?”

His voice tilted up in a question at the end, in a way that reminded Richie of high school Spanish class, never really knowing if what you were saying was the right thing or if it even made any kind of sense.

“No,” said Richie, and even just talking about this felt like he was walking into the crosshairs of something, inviting a spotlight to focus in on him. He felt aware of the tables around them, which ones were full and which weren’t, how close the nearest table was to them.

“So…” said Eddie. “Nothing’s changed.”

“Oh man,” said Richie, taking a deep swallow of his drink. He hadn’t even touched the burger in front of him yet, just as Eddie hadn’t started on his salad. “Okay. You know how this is weird for you?

“I didn’t –”

“Well, it’s even fucking weirder for me.”

“I didn’t say it was weird for me!”

Richie looked at Eddie, indignant and agitated as always, and smiled and shook his head. *Sure Eds.*

“Right, I forgot your natural state of being is like a squirrel.”

Eddie glared at him and finally did pick up his fork. “So how is it weird?”

“Dude, how could it not be?” replied Richie, trying not to think too hard about the truth of that. *Nothing’s changed*. And nothing had, but also everything had, the world had sharpened again, and he didn’t know how to convey that. Even though he had made a pretty successful living out of conveying shit.
“It’s like what you said before,” said Richie, “About the board game. Same thing.” Although in his case, maybe, it felt a little like he’d knocked over one game and picked up an entirely different board. “I’m just trying to figure it out.”

“How much is there to figure out?”

Henry Bowers and Belch Huggins and Victor Criss chasing him through the aisles of Freese’s department store like a pack of hounds. Henry Bowers, twice his size and strong and mean, shoving him against a locker, snapping the frames of his glasses in two. Henry Bowers coming around the corner into the arcade, chasing him out with a hot shame and fear. A fear Richie thought he had outrun, only to realize he’d been living in the mouth of it the whole time.

“Plenty,” said Richie. “If this was easy I would have figured it out sooner.”

He could sense Eddie wanting to ask something else, as though he was still searching for some type of understanding, a point of clarity. How much is there to figure out? He was on top of a mountain, Eddie, and he didn’t know how to get down.

But Eddie didn’t ask whatever it was he’d been considering, and they both let the subject change, falling into that old adult stand-by of how’s work and other safer, benign dinner topics. Eddie had been easing back into work remotely, though next week he was going back into the office for the first time in months. Something, he admitted, that he was actually looking forward to, much to Richie’s amusement. Work was its own all-consuming little world with its own set of stakes, a world that Eddie understood and that he was good at. There were no hungry, reaching monsters in the insurance industry – at least, not the extradimensional child-eating types.

“What about you?” Eddie asked. “What’s going on with you, did you reschedule all those shows you had to cancel?”

“Sort of,” said Richie, when the answer was largely no, and he still remembered the conference call with his agent, Stevie, and the cool, cutting way she’d said Let’s not have this happen again, okay Rich?

“I’ve got a couple of new things lined up, but we’re mostly focusing on next year’s tour now.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah, should be some time next fall.” If he’d been having this conversation with one of his other LA comedian friends, or someone else who was industry adjacent, they’d be sharing their own touring news, maybe reminiscing, remembering acts they’d opened for, asking questions about venues. Conversations that Richie was happy not to be having now.

“And I’m working on some new material,” he said. So many times, he didn’t know what he was going to say until it was out of his mouth. It wasn’t a lie, but it was a bit of an exaggeration. More than anything it was that he’d looked at his old jokes, his classic bits, the stories and sets that had made him a comedian to watch and earned him a little bit of fame, and they’d felt stale. Embarrassing.

Eddie looked at him as if to say okay cool, isn’t that your job?

Richie added, “I mean like, entirely new, like a style I’ve never really done before.”


“I guess so far it’s a lot of talking to myself in the mirror.”
“And that’s, a new thing for you?”

“What kind of a human do you think I am?” asked Richie around a mouthful of food.

“You really want me to answer that?”

“I’d love to know your expert assessment.”

Eddie rolled his eyes. “I’m sure you already know it.”

Richie smiled, part of him hoping Eddie would pick up the thread and ask him more about his current writing. Ask him more about that process (which, honestly, really was a lot of talking to himself in the mirror, ending with and who do you think you’re fooling asshole?), ask him more about how it was going. He hated when people who didn’t know him asked what do you do and then followed that up with oh, really? Tell me a joke! but he would have loved nothing more than for Eddie to say okay so tell me some.

But he didn’t. Richie finished the last bite of his burger, licking his fingers and then wiping them against a cloth napkin, much to Eddie’s discomfort judging by the way he wrinkled his nose.

“So Bev told me she’s thinking of going to therapy,” he said, his brain once again deciding to fast track all thoughts past think this comment over and go straight to his mouth.

“Oh really?”

“Yeah. She said Ben suggested it.”

Eddie nodded. “Bill kind of mentioned the idea to me – or, he said ‘do you think you want to talk to somebody about all this?’ When I was telling him about Myra. And I said yeah well, I’m telling you aren’t I? And that’s when he said, ‘No, I mean a professional.’”

“Are you going to?”

Eddie made a face. “Look, I’m sure it’s helpful for some people, but I don’t need some stranger just sticking my brain under a microscope.”

Richie imagined someone taking out a wide knife and slicing off a little slab of his brain, like a piece of pound cake, and what kind of images it would reveal. Probably a lot of whatever was running on TNT at the time.

“Right, we already know you’re clinically fucked up.”

“Fuck you. I just don’t see the point. I don’t get how talking to someone who’s just going to sit there and nod a lot is going to do anything for me.” He took a sip from his wine. He was still on his second glass, while Richie was into his third drink. “Why? Are you going to?”

“No, no I was just talking to Bev yesterday, asking her about her and Ben – ”

“Yeah, what’s going on there?”

Richie waved a hand. “Nothing new. Still figuring it out.”

“Right, I mean, aren’t we all.”

Richie considered that for a moment, then continued. “Anyway, that’s how it came up. And she wasn’t super into the idea of it, but she said she’s going to try it.”
“Well, okay sure,” said Eddie, shrugging a little. “Bev, that makes sense.”

“Bev makes sense?”

“Yeah, well I mean…” Eddie trailed off for a minute, searching. “We all know her dad – wasn’t a good person, right. All of that – it’s probably a mess. And then it doesn’t seem like the guy she married was so great either.”

Richie nodded at that. Beverly Marsh, the coolest girl he’d ever known. Who could out spit him, out yo-yo him, call him out on his shit like the best of them but never hit him in his weak spots. Who had deserved a lot more than the bullies that breathed too close to her, the girls that whispered cutting words after her. More than the dark, peeling apartment she called home.

Richie looked across at Eddie, who deserved more than the mother he’d had and the marriage he got. Who thought it made sense for Beverly to see someone but not himself, and Richie remembered his own reaction on the phone yesterday. Why the fuck would I go?

“Maybe it makes sense for all of us,” said Richie slowly.

“Why? Because of - It?” He’d just tripped over the sentence slightly, and Richie had seen the way his eyes darted quickly to the side before he’d said It, like it was a nightmare, and it had been horrible, but they were awake now. As though It wasn’t a topic appropriate for middlebrow Manhattan dining establishments. And maybe it wasn’t, but they were here, and

(they would drag It with them wherever they went, a long and bleeding smear of a shadow trailing behind them)

they were here in spite of It.

“No,” said Richie, “And I don’t think you should make an appointment with anybody to start talking about the killer clown we beat up over the summer. I mean all the stuff that wasn’t Pennywise.”

“Like what?” asked Eddie, sounding wary, because he knew what Richie knew. Like Derry.

“Like Henry Bowers. Most bullies copy your homework, call you names. Maybe the really bad ones beat you up a little. Bowers stabbed Ben and tried to kill Mike every chance he got.”

Eddie shrugged. “Everyone deals with bullies.”

“Again – tried to kill Mike. Repeatedly. And what about kids missing your birthday party, because they were dead, except no one ever wanted to admit it?”

“You know my ma didn’t let me throw birthday parties.”

“Well, what about your ma?” said Richie, conscious of his brain scrambling to grab back the reins. But they hadn’t called him Trashmouth as a kid for nothing.

“What about her?”

“I mean Eds, look at who you married.” Whoops.

“Hey, fuck you,” said Eddie, sharpening the phrase to a different edge.

“Eddie – ”
“You think you’re the first genius to make that joke?” said Eddie, his voice a vicious whisper.

“No, no, wait, no I didn’t mean –”

“You think you figured it out? You think you figured everything out, here’s my problem and here’s how to solve it?” Eddie shook his head, his brow furrowed. “I’m figuring things out fine on my own, you know? I’ve got a fucking handle on things. I don’t need some bozo with a hack degree fucking around in my head and I don’t need you to do it either.”

It was like Mrs. Kaspbrak had risen from the grave to sit at their table and decry the medical profession. Richie suppressed a chill.

“Eds, I’m sorry, really,” he said. “I didn’t mean – well, I don’t know what I meant actually so, I’m sorry for being an asshole.”

Eddie glared.

“What!” said Richie. “I said I’m an asshole, what else do you want?”

The glare lessened.

“But also, how many times did you say you moved out of your mom’s house before it took?”

“Beep beep asshole.”

Richie laughed and took a relieved gulp of his drink. He felt a little like he’d just managed to escape quicksand. That was the other part about friendship. No one knew how to destroy you like your friends did.

Their waiter came back and cleared away their plates. He asked if they’d like to see a dessert menu, and when they both waved him off, Eddie gave Richie a questioning look.

“What, I don’t have much of a fancy sweet tooth.”

“What does that mean?”

“Means I’d rather have a twix bar than a $15 sorbet.”

“Twix bar? Jesus. You know how many chemicals are in those things?”

Richie smiled to himself, remembering the breakfast sandwich he’d eaten that morning – a lifetime ago.

“What?”

“Nothing, I thought of everyone you’d be the one to appreciate a good mix of chemicals.”

It took Eddie a second to understand Richie’s meaning. “Uh, there’s a difference between prescription drugs and a Kit Kat bar.”

“I don’t know man, CVS stocks them both.”

They were still having this debate when their waiter reappeared with the check, which Richie snatched up before Eddie could, leading into a new argument over who should pay. In which it didn’t matter what Eddie said, since Richie had already slipped his credit card into the check book and held it back up for a passing waiter while Eddie was trying to make the point that Richie was
the one visiting and Eddie had picked the place so it made sense for him to pay.

“Relax man, you can pay for dessert,” said Richie. “I saw a Duane Reade over on the corner.”

“Are you serious?”

“Absolutely.”

Which was how, about half an hour later, they were both in Richie’s hotel room, Richie upturning a plastic bag on his bed, sending a cascade of freshly purchased candies on top. Kit Kats and Crunch bars and Twix bars and boxes of nerds that rattled like a rain stick as they tumbled over the comforter. Gummy worms, sour gummy worms, a pack of twizzlers, a bag of warheads. A couple of twinkies and a pack of snoballs for good measure, although glancing at them now Richie realized he’d only picked them because of Myra.

“You cannot eat all of this,” said Eddie, but he was laughing. “You’ll put your body into shock.”

“What are you talking about?” asked Richie, ripping open the twizzler bag with his teeth. “You’re going to help me.”

“I’m not touching anything in here.”

“Eddie! Dude! What’s the point of defeating our childhood monster if not for this?”

“For eating candy at midnight in a New York hotel room?”

“Bingo kid – help yourself.”

“I’m serious man, there’s not a single real, organic item in these things.”

“Ask me if I care,” said Richie, biting off a piece of twizzler. “Hasn’t killed me yet!”

“That’s called the normalcy bias,” said Eddie, “And that – ”

“Oh my god Eddie,” groaned Richie, turning around with the remote control and flicking on the TV, “Wish I had known you in high school, bet you were great for copying off of.”

“Dude, no, I was not good in high school.”

“I mean you have to have been smart, don’t you have an NBA or something?”

“MBA, jerk. College was easier – at least you could pick what you wanted to study. High school? I mean, I was terrible at English, that never made any sense to me.”

Richie laughed as he moved through channels. “That’s the only one I was ever okay at.”

He found a channel showing Armageddon and left it on that, lowering the volume and placing the remote control by the television before turning back around. Eddie was sitting on the edge of the bed, leaned slightly over the candy pile, deliberating like a chess player not wanting to touch a piece until he knew the move he’d make. Richie watched his hand drift over the brightly colored boxes and wrappers, and felt aware of his heart’s beating. He could feel it thumping, and felt that if he looked down he’d see the shape of it pressing against his chest, like in those old Looney Tunes he used to watch in the morning, where love was a physical force that sent your heart running out far ahead of you.

(You wouldn’t want anyone to pick truth though would you Richie)
Ah shit.

(We’ve got the eye down here, the one that crawls)

This wasn’t what the trip was supposed to be.

(Gonna getcha Tozier)

He had half-wondered if that feeling he’d gotten from seeing Eddie in Derry was just Derry, their pasts and presents crashing into each other and sucking him into a nostalgic whirlpool. Welcome home, Richie, here’s the old house you used to live in. Here’s the arcade you used to waste time in. Here are the friends from your forgotten childhood, and here’s the monster that tried to kill you and is still trying to kill you.

The first time they had beaten back Pennywise they’d been children, and they had had to bring some part of that back to defeat him again. So maybe that was all it had been – childish shit, a leftover feeling. There was no reason to think that that tiny, pilot light flicker of affection would still be there in the real world, in his adult life, far away from that haunted town.

Except one look at Eddie, one look at his friend who was unable to tolerate anything and yet endured everything, and Richie’s heart slipped a little and he knew he wasn’t done, just a dog toy in the jaws of the truth.

Eddie looked up at him, asked him a question. Richie didn’t hear it, he was realizing he had one last piece he had to keep behind the wall.

“What?” he asked, his voice sounding far away to himself.

“What’d you even major in,” repeated Eddie, his brow beginning to furrow. “Are you okay? See, what did I say about this stuff!”

“Relax,” said Richie, making himself bite off another piece of twizzler. It felt like a piece of tire rubber in his mouth. “Communications.”

“Huh?”

“I majored in communications. Barely. I think I probably had the lowest GPA they’d still let you graduate with.”

“That doesn’t surprise me.”

“Well, Eds,” said Richie. “I guess you just know me too well.”

He was in the cistern that night, and it was worse, worse than usual. Eddie was dying, of course. The dark shapes around him were shouting to leave him Richie, leave him, we have to go, leave him, because the world was starting to crumble around them. Richie opened his mouth to shout that they couldn’t leave him, were they fucking kidding they couldn’t fucking leave him, when Eddie’s eyes snapped open. His hand shot forwards and grabbed Richie by the front of his shirt. His face was split by a wide, horrible grin, his lips stretched too far back, his gums raw and blood filling in the lines of his teeth.

“Kiss me goodbye, Richie,” he said, and it was the clown’s red and garbled voice that came out of his mouth. “One little kiss to remember me by. Don’t you want to?”
Richie wanted to scream but it was like his throat was full of tar. It was a skeleton’s hand that was pulling Richie closer now, the walls shaking and starting to fall in, and terror was filling his insides like slow pouring cement, but he couldn’t pull away. That slow, horrible dream reaction that cut off the screaming between his brain and his body had him in its grip, and all he could do was let himself be pulled in towards Eddie's awful face, and it was awful that it was awful, and there was laughter, the clown’s laughter, and then –

Richie jerked awake in his bed. His heart was beating frantically, his skin cold and muscles tensed, ready to run. He snatched up his glasses from the bedside table and shoved them onto his face, knowing but not knowing if there was something else in the room. He breathed in great gulps of air. He sounded like he’d been running a marathon. He remained still, sitting up, breathing deeply, and the rest of the dream seemed to slowly ebb away, the cave and the terror and an Eddie that wasn’t really Eddie. And then it was just him, alone in a dark hotel room, wide awake while the clock at his bedside blinked 4:23 am.

He reached over for the remote and turned on the TV, dialing the volume back to 3 so that the sound came out as a low murmur. And though he didn’t reach for his phone and kept his eyes closed and tried counting his breaths and focusing on ocean waves, sleep didn’t return for the rest of the night.
New York City felt different with Richie in it. It was the proof of Bill’s promise that everything would be okay this time, that the fog from before wouldn’t roll back over them. Even after crossing the Penobscot County line, after leaving Maine entirely, they were still there. And they were closer than they could have been before, in the days when they’d been peeled away from one another. Now their voices were a text message, a phone call away.

And for the past week, Richie had been even closer. Which was great, even if it was wreaking hell on Eddie’s sleep schedule, always leaving him dealing the next day with a morning that wasn’t interested in being forgiving – and mornings were unforgiving enough in general now.

Mornings used to mean waking up first and leaving Myra, still asleep in bed, to go on a light jog around the city – not a run, nothing as strenuous as that, on account of

(because you're delicate Eddie you have to be careful)

his asthma. A light jog, enough to help keep his heart healthy, to wake up the blood in his body and remind the whole system that this was how it worked. He would come home when the sky had taken on a pale, buttery shine, just before it tilted into full blue. Myra would be up by then, scrambling some eggs and bacon for herself, with another egg boiling in a small pot of water in the corner of the stove for Eddie. His breakfasts had evolved over the years, based on doctor appointments and Myra’s recommendations and whatever articles he read about lactose or nut butters or “good” carbs. Breakfasts that would probably make Richie cry to hear about it.

Now mornings, like everything else, had thrown the rulebook out the window. Now Eddie woke up slowly, alone and in pain on an air mattress in the apartment’s spare room. The first night without Myra, he had leaned against the doorway to their bedroom in his flannel pajama pants and gray undershirt for ten minutes before turning around and digging their air mattress out of the hall closet. It was still in the box, something they’d purchased five years ago along with the apartment, because it seemed like the type of thing a home-owning married couple would have on hand. He’d cut through the tape along the lid of the box, unpacked the pump, and rolled out the wrinkled plastic that promised itself to be a bed. It had taken five minutes for the mattress to inflate, and he’d been sleeping on it every night since.

Picked a great week to go back into the office, thought Eddie to himself that morning, sitting at the apartment’s little kitchen table and listening to the coffee machine gurgle along. He’d been the one who had insisted that he would go back to work that week, and the insurance firm he worked for wasn’t going to do too much in the way of telling one of their senior risk managers who’d already been out on almost two months of unexpected medical leave to take some more time, if he thought he needed it.

And not that he’d ever confess to it, but he had probably needed it. One more week, at least, and it wasn’t just the late nights with Richie, but everything going on with his still lawfully wed wife, too.

He’d last seen Myra two days ago. She was staying at her friend Tracy’s house, a friend he hadn’t even realized she was that close with, but he supposed that circumstances – like having a husband who’d decided he no longer wanted to be married to you and needing a place to stay like, immediately – might reveal the real mettle of a friend.

He’d already been to visit Myra at Tracy’s apartment once, and the one visit was all he had needed
to be sick of it, with its mismatched décor, its stacks upon stacks of newspapers and magazines in the living room, and its two small dogs, one of whom had obsessively humped his good leg the last time he’d been by. Or maybe he was just sick of Tracy, who didn’t call off the humping dog and looked at Eddie with steel eyes and folded arms, as if to say one word from her and I can squash your head like a melon with my bare hands.

He didn’t want to visit Myra at Tracy’s anymore, and Myra didn’t want to come to their old apartment, and after enough back and forth he’d finally gotten her to agree to meet him at a café. He’d felt a small bite of guilt when she had, knowing how much she preferred to avoid going out. I always feel like everyone’s looking at me, Eddie, she’d admitted once, in a rare moment. Like everyone’s waiting for me to do something wrong.

But they had to talk. And Eddie didn’t think it could be on the phone, though he couldn’t have explained why. So neutral territory it had to be.

They decided on a diner two blocks away from Tracy’s brownstone. Eddie had arrived first and got their table, leaving the bench seat along the wall for Myra because he knew she preferred it. She had arrived five minutes later, searching the restaurant with a slightly wary look and appearing only temporarily relieved when she spotted Eddie. She took off her coat as she approached the table, and Eddie noticed that she was wearing a dark blue dress he didn’t think he’d recognized on her before. When she sat down across from him, he saw she was wearing lipstick, too, and some kind of dark makeup around her eyes. It wasn’t that he hadn’t seen her in makeup before, but her current look was bolder than he was used to.

“You look good,” he said, because it seemed polite, and she looked at him as though he’d insulted her. “What?”

“What do you want to talk about now, Eddie?” she said.

Eddie was trying to figure out how he’d possibly already fucked up less than five words into their conversation when a waitress walked over to ask if they wanted to order anything. Myra ordered a coffee, Eddie a glass of orange juice, adding “That’s all for now” when the waitress glanced between them, as if expecting something further.

“I think there’s a couple of things we still have to talk about, Myra,” said Eddie after a while.

“Such as what?”

This Myra, who sat silent across from him and regarded him with hard eyes and a mouth set in a line, threw him. He could only think of one other time he’d seen her like this during their whole marriage. It would have been over five years ago, because it was when they were still living in that miserable walk-up in Queens. He’d brought in the mail and handed off a letter from it to her. He only later realized something was wrong when he heard her from the other room, her voice low and whip sharp. He’d walked into the kitchen to find her holding the phone in a white-knuckle grip and whisper-yelling into the receiver. The envelope was open on the table, the letter in her other hand, and there was a true fear-driven anger in her eyes.

Later he learned she’d been on the phone with the one aunt she talked to, the one in Missouri. The letter was from the family that he hadn’t thought existed, and that was when he learned that they lived somewhere in the Bronx. And when he’d tried to ask her more about them, about why she hadn’t mentioned them before, she looked at him the way she was looking at him now over the beige linoleum tabletop in this diner two blocks from Tracy’s.

(such as is that all there is was that all we were are we really done)
“Such as the apartment,” said Eddie. “I’m not trying to leave you out in the cold, okay? I’m thinking… I’ll sell the apartment, move somewhere cheaper, and then you can get a place and I can help pay for that for… for a while.”

Myra regarded him. Neither of them had touched the drinks in front of them. They may as well have been figures in a wax museum.

“Eddie, do you want to be married to me or not?”

Ice spread in his chest. “I – you know what I – I think it’s over.”

“Then don’t be married to me. Don’t try to act like we’re married.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I don’t need your money, Eddie!”

“*Myra,*” said Eddie, feeling a vague relief. “What are you talking about, you don’t *have* any money, I’m just trying to help!”

“Well don’t!” she snapped. “Sell the apartment, sell everything, I don’t care.”

“How are you going to *live* – ”

“I’ll live!” she said. Her eyes were glassy but there was no sign of tears, which distressed Eddie more. “I can live without you.”

“Myra,” said Eddie. He felt like he was trying to get a grip on a rope that was slipping out of his hands. Some part of him wanted to say *sorry,* but some other part held it back. Whatever it was that was waiting to hear an apology for itself.

The fire in her eyes seemed to flicker for a moment. There was a slump, almost familiar, to her shoulders, and she was silent for a while.

“There are a few things I want to get,” she said eventually.

“Of course.”

“I’ll come by the apartment some time.”

“Right. I mean, anytime. I can be there. Or not be there. Whatever is uh, whatever you want.”

They sat there for a while. Maybe there wasn’t actually that much to talk about, Eddie reflected. Just the ruined remains of their marriage, drifting between them like so much flotsam and jetsam. Nothing much to discuss, only things to be pulled away from the tide and regarded silently, unsaid apologies on both sides. They sat like that, without a word, for who knew how long. Eventually Myra stood up. She pulled on her coat, did up all the buttons, then looked at Eddie.

“Please don’t call me,” she said. The stone anger from earlier was gone. This was a small, pink voice, a plea. A sound he knew. “If it’s something about finances, or something legal, talk to Tracy. Just don’t call me right now. I’ll be the one – ” She faltered, closed her mouth for a moment before opening it again. “I’ll figure out get when to get the things.”

Eddie nodded.

“Sure Marty,” he said, his voice also soft. He sat there for a few minutes after she’d left, before
gulping down his orange juice and leaving a $20 bill on the table.

The walk back to his apartment was just under a mile and he was supposed to be making an effort to walk everyday, so he picked up his crutches and slowly made his way home, thinking of his body as a house that probably should have been demoed but here it was, still standing somehow. *You’re very lucky* he’d heard people to say to him, as though that was supposed to mean something against the pain and uncertainty, the remaining lung that had to expand, the red web of scars along his chest like the orange netting around a construction site.

When he reached the lobby of his building he nodded at the front desk, took the elevator up to the third floor, walked into the apartment and felt the emptiness collapse over him again.

Five years ago, after meticulous searching and three different realtors, he and Myra had settled on the apartment he was currently standing in the entryway of, fumbling for his aspirator in. It was in, what the realtor assured them, a good part of Manhattan – which meant quiet and white in the coded language of rich, educated New Yorkers. Low crime rate, manicured trees dotting the sidewalks, only a block away from the train – not that either of them ever took the subway these days. They lived on the third floor, which they’d long ago agreed upon being the perfect floor – high enough to avoid being disturbed by young people and vandals, low enough to give them the ability to safely escape in case of an emergency. Two bedrooms, two bathrooms. An open-concept floor plan with a living room that actually had a view and connected to a kitchen that might have been on the small size in the suburbs, but was luxuriously spaced by New York standards.

He remembered signing the deed. He remembered Myra’s anxious excitement, how the first night in their new home she’d become convinced that they had made a mistake, and how he’d known that she would be convinced that they had make a mistake. The way he’d anticipated and been prepared, with the TV and couch already set up in the living room and one of her favorite movies (*Bridget Jones’s Diary* if he’s remembering right) in hand. He’d gotten a carton of ice cream from the bodega on the corner, as well as a small tube of sprinkles and a jar of the Smuckers hot fudge she liked, the kind that could be warmed up in the microwave. The day they had moved in had been nice weather, too, and they’d sat on the couch together that evening with the window open a sliver, using moving boxes as a coffee table. They ate their ice cream out of paper bowls because Eddie couldn’t be bothered to unpack all their flatware, and when the movie had ended they had gone to their old bed in their new bedroom and had sex in the apartment for the first time and it was just fine, the way sex always was, and before they’d fallen asleep he had told her see? See, wasn’t it all going to be fine?

*And I don’t know if I loved her*, Eddie had thought to himself, clutching his aspirator. In that moment he didn’t know if he had any idea about what love was.

His phone’s high-pitched ringtone cut across the memory, pulling him back from his thoughts and placing him squarely within his kitchen. Friday morning, October sunrise spilling in through the windows, coffee sitting freshly brewed in the coffee pot. His phone was sitting on the table, and Eddie reached across and plucked it up. *Richie Tozier* said the name across the front, along with a photo that Richie had taken himself upon the ‘horrific’ discovery that Eddie hadn’t assigned anyone contact photos. Eddie smiled to himself and answered.

“Hello?”

“Hey Eds! Did I wake you up?”

“What? No, it’s like, 7:30. It’s a work day.”
“Work days are a little abstract to me.”

“Fuck off, you know what a 9 to 5 is.”

“I do, want to hear my rendition of it?” said Richie, jumping into, “Tumble outta bed and I stumble to the kitchen –”

“Jesus Rich,” said Eddie, pulling the phone away from his ear, “Stick to jokes.”

“Alright, tough crowd. So what are we doing tonight?”

“Oh, no ritzy celebrity dinners tonight?”

“You know what, Alec Baldwin did ask if I was free but I told him sorry, it’s my last night in the city and I already got plans with a very prestigious risk manager.”

Eddie laughed, and before his brain could properly vet the idea six ways to Sunday and ultimately throw it out, said, “Why don’t you just come over here tonight?”

“Here where?”

“To my place. I can make dinner,” said Eddie. “Unless you want to see another Broadway show.”

Richie laughed on the other end. Eddie had been Broadway-free for twelve years until this past Sunday, when Richie had broken his streak by dragging him to a matinee for the most hackneyed, treacly form of torture. Richie had enjoyed every minute and bought the cast album at intermission.

“I wouldn’t do that to you,” said Richie. “Well, again. Well, I wouldn’t do it to you again so soon.”

“Never, is the correct answer.”

“Alright, alright, sure, dinner at your place – can you even cook?”

“Of course I can cook.”

“Let me amend the question, can you cook anything that actually tastes good? Because, because –” continued Richie, dodging past Eddie’s protests, “I’m not really living a sugar-free, fat-free, salt-free, carb-free, meat-free, everything-free sort of diet.”

“Yeah, well, neither am I, I’m just careful about –”

Richie groaned on the other end.

“Hey, do you know what the leading cause of death is in this country? Heart disease, asshole. Someone dies every forty seconds from that shit. You know how you fuck up your heart? By stuffing yourself full of hamburgers and chocolate bars.”

“But Eds, what life is worth living –”

“Oh fuck off.”

Richie laughed again. “Okay, dinner sounds good, I trust you.”

They chatted for a few more minutes, agreeing Richie would head over after his meeting in Midtown had wrapped up. Eddie gave him the address, and Richie threatened that he was not above ordering McDonald’s for delivery if Eddie tried to hit him with anything too healthy.
Eddie hung up, feeling a little lighter, and got ready for work. He took a cab into the office, checking his email and discovering a new one from Mike. Mike, it turned out, functioned better in emails and phone calls than text messages and group chats. He wrote pouring paragraphs, vivid letters that even when viewed on a phone or tablet screen had an old and vellum feeling.

Eddie enjoyed these emails, but there was always an element to these communications with Mike that was like speaking with an astronaut, someone wandering in another world. He was still in Derry, and that made Eddie a little nervous. Get out of there Mike he always wanted to write in his replies, and he knew Mike was trying, that he would tell Eddie what he had been telling all of them, that he was going to leave, after he fixed up the library, after he figured out what to do with his parent’s house and the farm, after he had sold his own house. After, after, after.

The cab put on its blinker and came to a stop in front of a soaring office building in downtown Manhattan. He flagged the email to reply to later and carefully maneuvered out of the cab and headed into work, the one place that despite its chaos and toxicity and penchant for being represented as a villain by every bleeding heart college student getting their MFA at Columbia University, had offered a soothing refuge to Eddie.

Work was a place where it didn’t matter that his mother had pulled him out of gym class every year of his public school education through a combined attack of doctors’ notes and bellowing, in-person visits. It didn’t matter that he wasn’t classically handsome or particularly good at small talk at the boss’s Christmas party. And oh sure, those things helped – the insurance world was full enough of good-looking, smooth-talking men who’d been fraternity members at NYU and Harvard and had used that to smirk their way behind big desks with disgusting salaries. But if you were sharp and vigilant, if you could sniff out the deals, grab them by the neck and sink your teeth in deep, you could get that desk, too. Eddie wasn’t part of the same boys club, but he was keen, he chewed through policy renewals and indemnification provisions and negotiations, and he liked it. Or he had, before. Like every damn thing from the before, he couldn’t settle back so easily into this, either, his old life fitting him like a shirt that had shrunk in the wash. That day in particular it was hard to look at the work in front of him and summon any semblance of caring, knowing that Richie would be visiting that night. Shit, before this week, when was the last time he’d really looked forwards to something? Whatever part of his brain that was in charge of eager anticipation was well out of practice and had pretty much hijacked the entire limbic system in its enthusiasm. He glanced at his watch and thought about going home early, an action once unheard of for Eddie Kaspbrak.

Returning to the apartment these days was unpleasant. The world would slowly settle itself back on his shoulders as he made his way uptown, where the emptiness hung in his home like a rank and heavy smell. If he didn’t have Bill and Ben and Mike and Bev and Richie, he always thought during his trips back home, he would have fucking lost it by now. Would have lost his mind, coming back every time to his newly empty apartment where the truth would start to shiver and break over him again every time he entered

(what you did)

like an angry wave and sometimes he had to fumble out his aspirator

(alone alone)

before he could even get fully into the entry way, his lung fighting as his mind screamed over the truth at him

(what if you choke on your breakfast what if you slip in the shower crack your head on the tile what
and he would administer a dose, knowing and not knowing it did nothing, because it seemed to do something. Sometimes – sometimes – when the attacks came, when his brain started to go all static fuzz and his breathing thinned, he would try to put off the aspirator. He would close his eyes and grip his left wrist in his right hand to hold onto something and remember the restaurant that last night in Bangor. Try to feel the gentle pressure of Richie’s hands against his shoulder and on his leg and try to find his voice telling him to breath in, hold, breathe out.

Sometimes he could last a while before finally digging out his inhaler and sticking it in his mouth, finding relief before he even pulled the trigger.

That day he came home, brought his groceries he’d ordered upstairs (with the help of one of the front doormen, Marcus, who was definitely getting a little more cash than usual in his Christmas envelope this year), and was halfway through unpacking them in the kitchen before he even realized he hadn’t had a breakdown yet. He hesitated at the countertop, a bunch of celery in one hand, as though he expected the thing that stalked him to suddenly step forward and go right right, almost missed you today, one moment please and grab onto his throat.

But he felt objectively okay. Who the fuck knew what okay was supposed to mean for most people, but for him it meant balancing in his kitchen and unpacking his groceries, his breathing smooth, a friend on the way, no clowns waiting in the drainpipes. This was okay.

Richie arrived twenty minutes after they’d agreed, which confirmed for Eddie that this was who Richie was as an adult – a late person.

“Hey, Eds,” said Richie when Eddie opened the front door. Richie was holding a paper grocery bag and grinning broadly, as though this was the most natural thing in the world and not the first time he’d visited Eddie at home since the first George Bush was president.

“Hi,” said Eddie, moving to the side, and then Richie Tozier was standing in his apartment.

Eddie thought Richie looked right in New York City. He had a presence about him, an easy confidence in the way he carried himself that insisted he be looked at twice, even if you didn’t know who he was exactly (and there were plenty of people who knew who he was, given the small handful of them that had approached Richie for a picture while Eddie was with him). A Richie Tozier in Derry was like a seal in a tiger exhibit, a Richie in Manhattan made sense.

A Richie Tozier in his moderately sized Manhattan apartment – Eddie didn’t know if that made any kind of sense at all. But there he was, standing in the living room, looking around with a peculiar smile on his face.

“Wow,” he said, “You did alright for yourself.”

“Thanks,” replied Eddie from the kitchen. “Not sure how much longer I’ll be living here.”

“Why? Where you going?”

“Nowhere exactly. But I got this apartment with Myra, and it feels weird without her. Plus, if she moves into some place and I have to pay rent on that…”

“Shit, is that what’s happening?”
Myra’s face, angry and snapping *I don’t need your money Eddie*, flashed across his memory.

“Well,” said Eddie. “Maybe not. But I’m just thinking, it could happen, and I’ve been supporting both of us for so long and I’m – I’m the one who’s messing everything up, I don’t want to just be like okay bye! I’ve ended our marriage, I’ve kicked you out, so good luck!”

“Wow, remind me to get divorced from you. Sounds like a sweet gig.” When Eddie just glowered, Richie laughed. “I’m saying, that’s nice of you! I mean, I don’t know if there’s any nice way to get divorced but, you know, that sounds pretty nice.”

“Yeah I don’t know that it’s *nice* either, I just kind of feel like shit about the whole thing.” He shook his head. “Anyway, whatever, I feel like half of what I’ve been talking to you about is this fucking separation.”

Richie shrugged. “You can talk about it if you want.”

“No no, I’m sick enough just thinking about it all the time. What’d you bring?” he asked, nodding towards the brown paper bag Richie had brought.

“Ah. *Provisions*,” said Richie, walking over to the countertop that divided the kitchen and living room and plopping the bag on it. First, he pulled out a bottle of red wine and a new Sudoku book.

“This is a thank-you-for-your-hospitality gift,” he said, pushing the book towards Eddie. “Since you apparently think this number torture is fun.”

“It’s relaxing,” said Eddie, pulling the book towards him. “Plus logic puzzles are supposed to help offset dementia.”

“Sounds like some pseudo bullshit to me,” said Richie, reaching back into the bag again. Eddie shook his head.

“You brought more?”

Richie performed an impressive eyebrow waggle, waited a moment, and pulled out a bottle of Hendrick’s and another of prune juice. Eddie stared for a moment, and then started laughing.

“For your signature cocktail!” insisted Richie.

Eddie smiled, remembering the night before all hell had broken lose and they’d all met back up at the library in Derry, when he’d shown up with the exact combination Richie had just supplied tonight and how the Losers had laughed then, too.

“Listen,” said Eddie, “I stand by it, but unless you really want to try it I’ll just stick with the wine you brought.”

“Alright,” sighed Richie dramatically. “Maybe after dinner – prune juice cocktail. Do you have a name for it?”

“It’s just prune juice and gin. Do you want wine, too? I’ve got a bottle of white, or some beer in the fridge.” Beer that he had specifically picked up earlier that day for Richie and would probably never get around to drinking himself otherwise.

“Sure, I’ll take a beer,” said Richie. “Actually, I’ll grab it, why don’t you sit down?”

“I can get it, you’re the guest.”
“Yeah, but I can walk.”

“Fuck you,” said Eddie, before sitting at the small dining table that faced the kitchen. Admittedly, it was always a bit of a relief to sit down. He’d gotten good enough at navigating through his apartment, but it didn’t change the fact that everything took more effort and energy and his left leg wasn’t the only thing he was still recovering from.

“What are you drinking?” asked Richie, opening the refrigerator and pulling out a beer.

“You don’t have to be like, my waiter.”

“It’s called being a charitable and considerate friend – what are you having?”

“Fine,” said Eddie, shaking his head. “Guess I’ll try the wine you brought. There’s a bottle opener in the drawer behind you.”

Richie retrieved the bottle opener in question and found two glasses in a cabinet above the sink. He poured his beer into the pint glass, a generous amount of the wine into the wine glass, and brought the latter over to Eddie.

“Cheers!” he said.

“Cheers,” replied Eddie, clinking his glass very carefully against Richie’s because Richie had filled his way too high.

“So what’s for dinner?” asked Richie.

“Salmon on salad and quinoa.”

“You’re going to make all that!?”

“Yeah?” Eddie scowled. “What?”

“Nothing dude, that just sounds like a lot of standing. How much cooking have you been doing?”

None was the answer to that. He’d done some small things around the kitchen, but the majority of his meals had been coming from pre-packaged meals and restaurant delivery. Because it was difficult to cook an entire meal in the kitchen alone while forbidden from bearing any weight on his left leg, and the absolute last thing he wanted to do was further fuck anything up. And he’d been aware of all of that when he’d invited Richie over for dinner that night.

“Well,” said Eddie, letting the word hang there. He didn’t know how to explain to Richie that yes, it did sound like a lot of standing considering one leg was out of commission and no, he wasn’t sure what the fuck he’d been thinking.

“Alright,” said Richie, clapping his hands together. “Let’s tag team this bitch.”

“What?”

“You and me, Long John Silver. We’re gonna cook! I’m going to help you – and if everything sucks, you can blame it on me.”

“Uh, okay I guess,” said Eddie, grinning a little. “How much cooking do you do?”

“I’ve been known to pop a tart or two in my day.”
“You mean – you’re talking about pop tarts?”

“Yeah, when you explain the joke it makes it even funnier.”

“Okay so, nobody should be eating pop tarts, but anyone with a digestive system more than ten years old should definitely not be eating them. I think those things are made out of glue.”

“I don’t know Edward, I have heard they’re part of a nutritionally balanced breakfast.”

“You know just because something says fruit-filling on the box doesn’t mean there’s any actual fruit involved?”

“Hey are we gonna cook or what? Huh? You think I came by here just to have your pretty face talk shit about pop tarts? I’m hungry!”

“Okay, okay,” said Eddie, “Let me like, recalibrate shit here.”

With Richie’s help he unpacked the rest of the groceries, moving most of them to his prep station at the kitchen table, where he could comfortably sit and chop vegetables while ordering Richie to do things like pull out a baking sheet or start boiling water – tasks he imagined even Richie had to be capable of. He followed through in typical Richie fashion, occasionally snapping an exaggerated salute followed by an “Aye Aye Captain!” which was simultaneously annoying and endearing, a delicate dance that only Richie could really pull off.

“You want to put on some music or something?” asked Richie.

“You can play something if you want,” replied Eddie. “Speakers are over there, by the TV, you can just connect your phone.”

“Granting me full music selection privileges? Wow.”

“Yeah well, great power and great responsibility, all that.” Eddie looked up from the onions he was chopping to point the knife at Richie. “No Broadway shit.”

“You’re a heartless man,” said Richie, getting up to check out the speaker situation. Eddie was blinking back stinging tears from the onions when Richie exclaimed “Dude!” causing Eddie to start slightly.

“What the fuck man, you can’t just shout when I’m using a knife here!”

“Dude!” said Richie again, almost as though he didn’t care that Eddie really could have slipped and lobbed off half of the pointer finger on his left hand which, really, was the last thing he needed after everything else. Eddie turned in his chair to see Richie bent over and picking up a book that was resting beneath the coffee table, the cover visible beneath the table’s glass top. He held it up, and Eddie saw it was a hardback of Joanna by Bill Denbrough, with Bill’s face – a little less lined, a lot closer to 20 than he was now – looking solemnly out from the back jacket. Eddie’s bookmark was sticking out about halfway through the book, where it’d been sticking out for three weeks now.

“Did you get this before or after remembering who the hell Bill is?” asked Richie, turning it over in his hands.

“After,” replied Eddie. “I’m not really a big reader. I’m still not. But when I remembered Bill was Bill you know, I had to try.”
“Not your thing?” asked Richie, regarding the bookmark.

“Sort of. Not because it’s bad – it’s not bad. Have you read it?”

“No, I haven’t read anything of his yet. Saw that movie adaptation though.”

“Oh yeah. Yeah, well, it’s Bill, he’s…” Eddie looked at the book in Richie’s hands. “He’s fucking good at telling a story. There’s just – parts in that book.”

“What do you mean?” asked Richie, raising an eyebrow. “Things get a little raunchy?”

“No, what are you, twelve still? And I mean, yes, but that’s not …” Eddie frowned. It was a horror novel, like all of Bill’s books were. This one, the first one he’d gotten published, was about a high school girl who dreamed about the same labyrinth every night. Every night she returned to the same place where she’d been before waking up, and every morning she felt more and more tired. Eddie had read through the first half quickly enough, finding it entertaining even. He didn’t read or watch much of anything these days, let alone horror. But horror in particularly he didn’t see the point of, not when he had the carbon monoxide detector in the living room and the reports on the cable news networks. His horrors were real and they were present, and he didn’t see any need in bringing fictional disasters into the picture.

But in the last chapter he’d read of Bill’s book, before he’d put it down for the day, and then the week, and then nearly a month, there had been a creature. It talked to the girl and offered her a way out, and it was the way Bill had written about its voice and its breath, the hot, sick-sweet scent on the edge of its words. Words that had gone rank, spilled from a long, slimy tongue that seemed to grow longer as it spoke, that now fell a foot out of its mouth. How had she not noticed this before? She felt that she should move backwards, especially because the tongue, that green-black thing that fell heavy like a splat of mud from its mouth was on the ground now. How was it still able to speak around it? Its jaw was growing longer and its skin grew tighter. The tongue was nearly at her feet, and where it touched the ground a stinking pool rose around it, the slab of it turning the surrounding dirt into a wretched sludge.

“It won’t do you any good to run,” it said.

Eddie had shut the book then, hard enough for it to cough up a whoomph sound as the two ends of it thwacked closed. Maybe if he hadn’t known the author, if it was just some random bestseller passed on to him by a coworker or left over from Myra’s book club (not that her club would ever read something like this), his heart wouldn’t be beating so hard. But it was Bill Denbrough who had pulled out those words and pinned them to the page, and they had started to tug out a piece of Eddie, something that had made the stitches along his torso itch and his leg ache worse and the breath in his lung feel stale, small, and vanished.

“It was just too scary,” said Eddie eventually with a half shrug, turning back to the cutting board.

“Too scary?” repeated Richie, a smile in his voice. “No offense, Eds, but that doesn’t tell me too much coming from you.”

“Are you kidding me?” said Eddie, turning towards him again. “You think I don’t know scary? Real scary? After what we all lived through, the shit we saw?”

“Hey I’m not saying we haven’t seen some terrifying stuff, just that you cast a bit of a wide net maybe.”

“Fuck you.”
“Sure thing. Are you going to finish this?”

“No,” he said. “You can take it if you want. Early Christmas present.”

Richie tucked the book under his arm and went back to figuring out Eddie’s speaker system, and a few moments later a jangly punk sound started to pump through the apartment. Eddie glanced up.

“Do I know this? Who is this?” he said.

“Man I hope so,” replied Richie, placing Bill’s book on the counter and returning to his station in the kitchen. “It’s The Ramones.”

“The Ramones… are they British?”

“Holy fuck, and you call yourself a New Yorker!”

“Okay, so they’re not.”

“They’re from Queens dude – shit, aren’t you from Queens? Maybe you went to high school with Johnny Ramone!” Richie paused. “Actually, no because I think he was like twenty years older than us. But yeah, they’re from Queens, and they’re great, so you should know them.”

“Well I know them now,” said Eddie. “What’s the deal with that water, is it boiling yet?”

Everything was so strangely comfortable, as if Richie coming by to visit Eddie on Thursday was a long-standing tradition of theirs. They talked about the inane things that the world spun around, like the baseball season – which Eddie followed, and Richie did not – and upcoming Oscar contenders – which Richie watched, and Eddie did not. They talked about the seasons changing, autumn settling it, and what it was like to remember fall in Maine.

And in between Eddie prepared the fish, instructed Richie to put the salmon in the oven, to keep an eye on the quinoa cooking on the stove top, to help put together a salad. He wasn’t sure when was the last time he’d cooked like this, in a way that wasn’t out of mere utility but some kind of harmony with another person.

They cleared off the dining table and set it up for dinner, Richie taking the lead on doling out quinoa and salad, and laying the salmon on top.

“Plating is key!” he said.

“Five out of five, chef,” said Eddie, smiling.

Richie sat down at the dining table across from him, and it occurred to Eddie how infrequently that table had been used. He had eaten most of his meals at the countertop, usually standing up, just on his way to doing something else, while Myra often ate in the living room. The dining table had become a place for sorting through bills, taking phone calls, scrolling through the New York Times on a tablet. It was nice to share a dinner at it again.

“You know what dude,” said Richie, halfway through the meal. “This is actually good.”

“You get to take credit for that, half of this is you.”

“No no, I was just doing what I was told.” He tipped his third glass of beer towards Eddie in acknowledgement. “You’re not bad at this though.”

Eddie shook his head. He wasn’t good at cooking, the way he knew his mother had been from how
she could appraise what they had in the refrigerator, the cabinets, and make a whole cloth meal out of that. He didn’t do substitutions, and he didn’t do recipes with notes like “a dash of seasoning to taste.” He needed his recipes to read as exact as furniture assembly instructions, and he had a couple of solid ones that he could execute with confidence, like a tourist who knew how to perfectly produce a handful of questions and couldn’t understand the language beyond that.

“I just know enough to scrape by,” said Eddie.

“That’s all you ever need, man.”

They were still sitting at the table and talking long after the meal had been eaten when Richie suddenly sat up, clapping his hands together.

“Holy shit, can’t believe I almost forgot,” he said. He spoke with an urgency, but that could mean anything with Richie. Whatever thought came to him always took immediate precedence, until the next one popped in. There was no take-a-number system in his mind.

“What?” asked Eddie.

“After dinner cocktails Eds.”

“Oh,” said Eddie with a half-laugh. He’d already had more wine that night than he usually would, and gin on top of that was not going to make any other part of his body happy in the long run. He wasn’t so keen on a queasy stomach and headache tomorrow just for Richie to have his joke.

“Hey I’m serious,” said Richie, rising from his chair. “Don’t get up. I’ll take care of it.”

“Come on Richie – we get it, ha ha, Eddie drinks prune juice so healthy and disgusting.”

“If you think I’m leaving this apartment without trying this thing – we need to come up for a name with it dude.”

“I don’t think we do.”

“Eddie’s Gin and Tonic,” said Richie, pulling out two fresh glasses.

“Jesus.”

“Or just Eddie’s Tonic. Prune and Fizz?”

“Dude.”

“Okay, instead of a Tom Collins... The John’s Callin’.”

Eddie wrinkled his nose.

“The sip and shit.”

“Dude,” said Eddie, as Richie cracked up over his own bad joke. “That’s disgusting.”

“You’re the guy mixing prune juice and gin!”

“Yeah, ‘cause I’m telling you, it’s not bad!” insisted Eddie. “But I don’t need you to drink it!”

“Too late,” said Richie, who had the gin and prune juice on the counter. He unscrewed the cap on the prune juice and took a delicate sniff.
“Smell those tannins,” he said.

Eddie frowned, “Are there tannins in prune juice?”

“What am I, a sommelier? Look it up.” Richie turned around for a moment to press each glass to the icemake against the refrigerator, the grinding clack swallowing up all the other sounds. “Okay, what’s the ratio here?”

“Of what?”

“Juice to gin my man.”

“Depends what you want to do more – be drunk or stuck in the bathroom.”

Richie busted up then, his laughter loud and open, and Eddie found himself nervously smiling along and then laughing, too.

“Little more gin then,” said Richie, pouring a hefty amount of liquor into each glass, followed by a careful dash of prune juice.

“Did I tell you I used to be a bar back?” he said, opening the cutlery drawer and pulling out a long spoon.

“No.”

“Bar back to the stars,” said Richie, grinning.

“Really?”

“No, just for a scummy bar in East LA. I did that gig for like less than a year.” He used the spoon to mix up the concoction in both glasses, before plucking them up and sitting back down at the table, placing one of the glasses in front of Eddie.

“Cheers,” said Richie.

“You’re really into cheers,” answered Eddie, but he knocked his glass against Richie’s and took a deep swallow as Richie did the same. The drink was familiar – burning, flavors at odds, leaving an unpleasant taste behind. A familiar type of hideous.

“God,” gasped Richie. “Eddie – what the fuck?”

Eddie laughed, “I told you! Man, I told you not to.”

“Dude,” Richie took a gulp of water then reached for the beer he’d been drinking before, still a quarter full. “What the fuck? How did you even come up with this?”

Eddie looked at his glass and grinned to himself. How to explain that the drink had something nostalgic to it, even comforting? If it didn’t, it wouldn’t have been what he’d shown up at the library with, on that last night before it all ended.

“Well I’m used to prune juice,” he said. “Growing up, ma pretty much only let me drink that, milk, or water. So that didn’t bother me. And that was all we had – well, my ma always kept some coca colas on top of the fridge, but I wasn’t supposed to touch those.”

Richie snorted. Eddie nodded.
“Yeah. Anyways, you remember high school? When you’re stupid and you’re just trying to try whatever’s been left around, whatever you can kind of get away with without your parents noticing?”

“Yeah.”

Eddie shrugged. “So that’s what I used to get away with. I mean, I was still a kid right, I knew you were supposed to mix liquor but I didn’t know with what. And that’s what we had, so that’s what I used to get away with.”

“That’s a tragedy,” said Richie. Eddie prickled.

“You’re the one who wanted to try it.”

“And I have! And now I never will again! In fact,” he leaned over and swiftly dumped the rest of his cocktail into Eddie’s glass.

“What the fuck!” squawked Eddie.

“My palate’s not refined enough.”

“Yeah, but you already drank from it! Germs!” added Eddie at Richie’s look of confusion.

“Germs? You’re scared of getting germs from me, from taking a sip of that?”

“It’s cold and flu season, dude,” replied Eddie. “Plus you’ve been traveling, you were on an airplane last week.”

“Okay, well, I think if I got something from the airplane it would have shown up by now.”

“There’s different incubation periods for things! You could be asymptomatic!”

“I think that concoction,” said Richie, pointing at Eddie’s glass, “Will kill any germs. Really.”

Eddie shook his head, looked at Richie and said, “You know that’s a waste of good prune juice.”

Richie cracked up again. It was a good feeling to make Richie laugh. Eddie took another sip of his wine, figuring in addition to the issue of germs he’d probably had enough gin from his one gulp. Outside it was nighttime, whatever that counted for in New York City.

“So you’re really going to move out?” asked Richie.

“Are any of us really ever going to do anything?” replied Eddie, feeling the wine heavy in his mind.

“What?”

“Nothing. Yeah, I better. I don’t think I could stay sane here.”

“And you’re barely hanging on as is!”

“Beep beep asshole.”

“I’m kidding,” said Richie, smiling at him. “A little. We’re all barely hanging on.” He paused. “Hey, you could move out to L.A!”

“And live on a fucking fault line? With one lung and that shitty air quality? No thanks.”
“Okay, okay. Will you visit a fucking fault line?”

Eddie considered. “To visit you?”

“No, to tour Hollywood, the thing you’re obviously obsessed with.”

“Fuck you.”

Richie shrugged. “Yeah, to visit me. Or Bill, he’s around sometimes. Or his movie! I forgot – his movie’s coming out next year, bet they’ll have a premiere.”

“Movies come out everywhere.”

“I said premiere – I wonder if Bill could get us on the list.”

“A Hollywood horror movie premiere? No thanks.”

“I’ll let you hold my hand during the real scary parts.”

“Hilarious.”

Five years in this apartment, and it had never felt like this exactly. Like the danger was still out there, the way it always was, tapping at the windows and lurking under the doorway, but maybe it didn’t demand his constant attention for the moment. With Richie sitting at the little table between the kitchen and the living room, laughing openly and cracking jokes, it felt like the danger could wait. *I'll get back to you, some part deep in the recesses of Eddie’s mind said. Memo to the darkness, will return to deal with you later.*

“Hey Rich –”

From the countertop, Eddie’s phone began buzzing. He frowned a little, sure he had put it on *do not disturb*, because otherwise work would be disturbing him all night.

“One second,” he said, getting up to grab his phone. He felt the alcohol tip heavily within him as he stood up and walked over to the counter. He plucked up the phone, finger hovering near the off button that would refuse whoever was calling, until he saw Myra displayed cleanly across the screen.

“Uh,” he said, battling years of instinct against immediately answering his phone. He glanced up at Richie. “Sorry,” he said, “It’s Myra.”

Richie waved a hand and Eddie answered the call.

“Hello?”

“Hi Eddie,” said a familiar voice, a voice that didn’t make hope leap or his heart glow but did leave him feeling as though the stairs had ended one step sooner than he had expected.

“Hey Myra,” said Eddie. “Is everything okay?”

“Of course it is. I’m fine.”

“Okay. So what’s going on?”

A breath on the other end. “I have to get some things from the apartment so – I’m going to come by tomorrow afternoon for them. You’ll be at work then, right?”
“Probably,” replied Eddie. *She doesn’t want to see you dumbass.* “I won’t be home until six or seven.”

“Okay. Good.”

There was a long pause. He knew she hadn’t hung up because he could hear her breathing on the other end.

“Anything else?” he asked. He hoped it didn’t sound rude, but he’d been made aware that his tone of voice defaulted towards *why are you even bothering me with this?*

“Eddie…” She said it in that old way, cradling his name. His mother had done that, too, trailing out that last _ee_ sound like a line of treats to a crate for a lost dog.

“Yeah, Myra?”

Another long pause, and eventually. “Nothing. Never mind.”

“Okay, well…” See you later? Talk to you later? “Good luck.” *Good luck? You fucking moron.*

“Thank you,” she said, voice small, and then the breathing was gone. She’d hung up.

Eddie turned around and saw Richie was looking at one of the few pieces of art hung on the wall, wearing the same expression they’d all had as kids whenever Eddie’s asthma attacks would come on. He glanced back at Eddie as Eddie moved back to his seat at the little table.

“Myra?” asked Richie, even though Eddie had told him so.

“Yeah,” said Eddie. How long had their conversation been? A minute at most? A minute to come in and kick his evening in the teeth.

“How’s she doing?”

Eddie offered up his empty hands. “I don’t know. I don’t know how I’d be doing, no idea how she is.”

Richie seemed like he was about to say something, but – in a rare turn of events – appeared to rethink it and toss it out. Eddie looked at the table, at the empty plates, a fish skin left on his. The water glasses and drink glasses, the used napkins and little placemats. Myra hadn’t had to call, she could have just come by tomorrow while he was at work, while she knew he was at work.

“What were you going to say before?” asked Richie

“What?”

“Before your phone rang.”

“Oh.” Eddie frowned. “I don’t know. I can’t remember.”

Richie’s music was still playing. Eddie didn’t ordinarily have music playing in the apartment. Myra would often have the television on in the background, and if only Eddie was home then it would usually be silent. But it was nice, the streetlights and other apartment buildings lit up outside, while his own home glowed and the music played.

“I should probably be heading back,” said Richie.
“Right, yeah. What time is your flight tomorrow?”

“Early,” replied Richie, stretching one arm above his head. “And it’s probably six hours past your bedtime.”

Eddie glanced at the digital readout on the microwave. Nearly eleven. Which would actually make it the earliest night for the two of them.

“I usually go to bed by ten,” said Eddie reflexively. Richie grinned.

“Okay. One hour past your bedtime.”

He pushed his chair back and took his dishes over towards the kitchen, rinsing them in the sink and loading them in the dishwasher, despite Eddie telling him he didn’t have to. Eddie handed him Bill’s book at the doorway.

“How much do you think his signature is worth?” asked Richie, tucking the book under his arm.

“How much is your signature worth?”

“ Probably like thirty bucks.”

“Thirty bucks? That’s not a lot.”

“You have to be wildly famous and dead for a signature to be worth anything. That’s show business. Plus it depends what you’re signing.” Richie grinned, “You want one? Next time I see you, I’ll bring a 5x7 glossy just for you.”

“What the hell would I do with that?”

“Keep it on your desk at work to remember me by.”

“Or I could sell it on eBay for thirty bucks.”

Richie laughed.

“I’ll see you soon Eds,” he said, clapping a hand on Eddie’s shoulder. “Thanks for putting up with me this week.”

“Anytime,” replied Eddie. His empty apartment waited numbly behind him. When would soon be?

“Have a good flight tomorrow.”

He got the door for Richie and watched him disappear back down the hallway, around the corner towards the elevator bay. They’d forgotten about his phone’s Bluetooth connection to the speakers, and suddenly the music in the apartment became garbled and stuttered as Richie moved further away, until it finally cut off. Eddie shut the door and walked back into the apartment, silent and empty. He had always relished this moment before, when the night was winding down and whatever social engagement he’d been roped into had finally ended. It felt more bittersweet that night.

He looked at the baking trays crowded on the stovetop, a few more dirty dishes waiting to be rinsed off and stacked in the dishwasher. Usually a stickler for cleaning dishes right away, he considered these ones, then went around turning off the apartment lights before heading to his makeshift bedroom in the office. They could wait until tomorrow.
He could remember leaving Derry.

He remembered the rest of that summer, how after the fight and the circle and the promise, the seven of them had never been together again. And then they’d started to leave. Bev had been the first, her aunt in Portland taking her in. After that they were six, and even then it was rare for the six of them to meet up. Somehow, they kept just missing each other. And when they were together, they didn’t speak of It, the rank thing that might still lurk down, down beneath them, and the more they talked but didn’t talk about It, the easier it was to leave it forgotten. Time moved forward, the calendar days slipping towards fall. *Back to School* deals were showing up in the shop windows and Eddie was getting his arm cast off when his ma decided she’d had enough of it all, and told him they were moving away, to Queens, to *New York City*, and a young Eddie had seen his death sentence written out with her decision. *New York City? Hub of dirt and disease and crime and murder?* He was a goner.

He had told Richie first, because he had run into him first. Eddie had been walking down West Broadway, the one nice piece of real estate in Derry. He liked the big houses with their clean, little white windows with not a bit of paint chipped, and he often walked down this street when he wished there was something like an inhaler for his whole life, something that could create calm in the middle of this insanity. That was the problem with being a kid, you were just like a marble in one of those plastic toy sets that Ben had, with nowhere to go but the course that had been built for you.

He found Richie when he turned from West Broadway towards the Tracker Brothers depot, walking over on the off chance there’d be a baseball game happening in the back lot – not that he’d ever play, much as his legs sometime itched to, but he liked to watch. He didn’t find a game, but he did find Richie, kicking up dust along the field. He spotted Eddie and waved him over.

“What are you doing?” asked Eddie, walking over.

“Just looking,” replied Richie. “Sometimes the older kids forget things after their games, or lose stuff that falls out of their pockets when they’re running.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know, all kinds of things. One time I found a pack of Camels that still had three cigarettes left.”

Eddie wrinkled his nose. He didn’t like it when any of them smoked. Richie noticed the disapproval.

“Next time I find one I’ll let you try a puff, let you see what being a man feels like,” he added. “They do wonders for your lungs, Eds.”

“No thanks,” muttered Eddie. “Hey, you want to go down to the Barrens?”

Richie glanced around the field and shrugged. “Yeah, I don’t think I’m gonna find anything anyways. Most of the games have stopped by now.”

And the best hitter that summer had disappeared under mysterious circumstances that only seven kids knew the real cause of. Eddie waited for Richie to get his bike, and they walked past the chain link fence down the sloping hill into the Barrens. Ever since Henry Bowers had gone totally
fucking psycho – and they didn’t talk much about that either – there’d been less use for their underground clubhouse, and they’d been able to roam the Barrens freely again, now that the town bullies were either dead or locked up in Juniper Hill. Not that they did roam it much these days. Eddie realized he didn’t even remember when he’d last wandered down here.

As they navigated towards the Kenduskeag, Eddie told Richie the news.


“Yeah.”

“Why?”

“She knows someone there who can get her a job I think,” replied Eddie. “But I don’t get it because it’s like, the most disgusting place in the world, and people are getting mugged or murdered like, all the time and I’m pretty sure that’s where AIDS started and – and – ”

His chest was tightening. He stopped walking and scrabbled at the fanny pack at his waist, hand closing around his inhaler and as he did so, a small voice in the back of his mind breathed remember Eddie. It's all in your head Eddie.

The voice was a whisper every time he reached for his inhaler now, and every time he ignored it because if something worked then it worked. And the voice seemed to grow even softer as time passed.

Hopefully, he thought as he brought the inhaler to his mouth and pressed down, it would stop speaking up all together.

“I mean, there’s some cool shit too, right?” said Richie.

“Yeah I guess, if you think leptospira is some cool shit.”

“I don’t know what the hell that is,” said Richie. “But I bet it’s still cool. Way cooler than Derry at least.”

Eddie didn’t say anything. There was no saving Derry with well-meaning platitudes like Derry’s not that bad. The summer they were still living in, and already couldn’t talk about, was proof enough that it was that bad.

“That’s where everyone’s always going in the movies anyway,” added Richie. “People are either going to LA or New York to make it, you know?”

“Make what?”

“A life, man! Make it big. Maybe you’ll get discovered or something.”

“Yeah, like dead in a river.”

“I mean like for a movie or something,” replied Richie, leaning over to nudge Eddie. He put on a voice that sounded like an old-timey carnival barker, which Eddie guessed was supposed to be his New York talent scout voice. “I need ya to go out there and find me a star! We’re shooting tomorrow and our lead’s gone missing, go out and find me the smallest little girly boy you can!”

“Shut up Richie.”

“I’m just saying! You could be famous!”
“I don’t want to be famous. I don’t want to be a star,” said Eddie. “They have shitty lives anyway, they all get addicted to drugs and alcohol and get divorced and OD in hotel rooms.”

“Sounds like a good time.”

They’d made their way to the edge of the Kenduskeag. Down here by the stream, with the poorly-named Barrens running wild and green on either side, it was easy to imagine you were anywhere else. You could be lost in the jungle, like the kind that Indiana Jones explored. Or you could be hundreds, thousands of years in the past, before there were people to even think about the idea of Derry, Maine, and dinosaurs still walked around.

“Maybe you should go live in New York,” said Eddie, sitting down on a good rock he’d found.

“We can swap places! You give me your fanny pack and I’ll start wheezing everywhere and your mom will never know the difference.”

“I wish we really could swap places.”

“Nah, you don’t want to stay in Derry,” said Richie, poking at the dirt with a sizable stick he’d found. “Derry blows.”

Eddie watched Richie making lines in the dirt. Yeah, Derry did blow, and it was dangerous, but it was the only home he’d had, and it was where his friends were. And something had shifted, and Bev had already moved away, but couldn’t they deal with all the rest of it, grown-ups and high school and whatever else was lurking in the future, if they were together?

“I bet we’ll still come back,” said Eddie. “To visit Bangor at least. One of my aunts is there.”

“Yeah!” said Richie, perking up a little. “You can even come stay with my family, I bet.”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah, like a sleepover!”

“And maybe you can come visit us in Queens.”

“Really?”

“Yeah,” said Eddie, catching onto Richie’s excitement. Why couldn’t they? They were almost all thirteen – that was when your parents were supposed to start letting you do stuff anyways. “All of you! I bet if you all brought sleeping bags, it’d be fine.”

“That’d be awesome,” said Richie, grinning up at the sky. “We’d be like The Warriors!”

“Okay, well, no, not like the warriors, we’re not going to run around New York City at night. I think that’s exactly how you get killed in New York City.”

“E-E-Eddie! Come out to pla-a-a-y!” said Richie, doing his best David Patrick Kelly.

“Ugh, stop, that’s creepy.”

“Uh yeah, that’s the point.”

They hung around in the Barrens for a little longer, searching the stream for turtles or frogs, and Richie had some comic books in his backpack when they gave up on that. They’d already read all of them, but Eddie always liked re-reading them, lingering over the panels and expressions. Richie
liked the X-Men best and Eddie liked the Hulk.

They spent a few easy hours just hanging out in the Barrens, the burbling stream hiding the far away sounds of slow Derry traffic, the grass turning golden as the sun started to come around the other side. Eddie felt something he hadn’t known all summer. It was whatever the opposite was of that sudden, driving panic that an asthma attack brought on. It was like that strength that Bill would carry to things. A certainty, just for a moment, that everything could be okay.

Seven o’clock rolled around, and Eddie knew his mom would be checking the clock at home, then the windows, standing in the doorway, watching for him to be home any second. He stood up, dusted the seat of his shorts, and handed the comics he’d been reading back to Richie, who packed everything all up in his backpack.

“Where’s your bike?” Richie asked as they walked up the hill, back into the world of stoplights and shop fronts and evening news.

“My ma won’t let me use it,” replied Eddie. “I just got my cast off, she doesn’t want me to break my arm again.”

“But you didn’t even break it on a bike last time.”

“Well she’s just thinking ahead!”

“Oh geeze,” said Richie. “You want a ride?”

It was riskier to ride off the back of a bike than ride on your own. One time Eddie’s mom had seen him getting a ride on Bill’s bike and she told Eddie it had almost given her a heart attack – you almost killed me Eddie, I worry so much it pains me, why are you trying to hurt me Eddie? Not listening to his protests, insisting that it wasn’t bad and he didn’t mean to make her worry.

“Sure,” said Eddie. He climbed on after Richie, feet resting on the bike pegs, hands on Richie’s shoulders. This was how he wanted to remember Derry, the houses moving swiftly on the side, the road a ribbon beneath his feet. We’ll still be friends, he thought. Friendship doesn’t go away, just because a friend does.

It was easy to believe it from the back of a bike someone else was pedaling. With the high summer sun just starting its slow, downward climb and the memory of that horror sinking slowly into the pit where forgotten things went, it was when a kid would want to believe in something good. That in spite of what had happened, and this town, and the parents that couldn’t see past the literal, that things could still work out. That the answer to Stan’s question from the club house – will we all still be friends? – could still always be of course.
Chapter 5

Richie was working on new material, which was why he was actually unloading his dishwasher. Or standing in the produce section of the grocery store, contemplating a vegetable that he hadn’t known existed until that moment. Or calling Julian for the third time that day to ask him a scheduling question that could have just as easily been sent in a text or an email. Or meeting up with a couple of other comedy friends for happy hour on a day during which he had done no work and was probably undeserving of a happy hour. Or sitting on his sofa, checking his phone every three seconds to see if one of the ten people he’d texted in the last minute had responded.

Okay, so he wasn’t exactly working on new material. He was…working on working up to new material. Which at that moment translated to standing in his kitchen, ignoring his fancy bar stools as always, and leaning with his elbows against the counter. He was scrolling through the Notes app on his phone, trying to see if there was anything to mine from the scattered thoughts he’d collected in it. Usually this was how he’d find the beginning of bits, jotting things down as they came to him and revisiting it all later, like a desperate comedy prospector trying to pan for anything funny through his scattered and murky subconscious.

But lately there had been a changed quality to the silty sand of his mind. There were so many unwritten remember whens prefacing the notes he had jotted down. The time he got detention in sixth grade for putting fresh paint on the teacher’s chair. The afternoon trying to learn the lindy hop with Bev in the park. The feeling of being fifteen and standing in his empty room one last time, the moving truck grunting outside of the house. The time he’d pretended to drop and break Stan’s binoculars, and Stan had almost started crying (still felt a little bad about that). Watching Willow at Bill’s house and carefully preserving the image in his mind of Val Kilmer in his open black tunic and flowing long hair on his way home.

Man, who did you think you were kidding?

He was supposed to be stringing together new material because he had a few shows lined up and now all he wanted was to take everything he had, the entire set he’d been piecing together and tweaking and performing and honing for his big tour next year, and throw it in the dumpster. Because now the jokes felt stilted and wrong in his mouth, like he was doing another comedian’s bit.

And that would be one fun, self-inflicted wrench in the works on its own. But Richie never did anything in moderation, and he had another metaphorical tool clogging up the gears. A fear that sat in the back row of his mind, the idea that Bev had mentioned in passing on the phone. Could they be so lucky twice?

Sure, some amount of reinvention was necessary to survive in the utterly insatiable and eternally bored world of American entertainment. But it was more than reinvention to realize that there had been a rot in the foundation, a rot that required tearing the whole thing down and building it up new.

His phone buzzed in his hand.

Thank god, a distraction, he thought to himself, though that relief quickly gave way when he realized it was from Camilla, a woman he’d known for about five years, the sort of friend who moved easily in and out of his life. They’d slept together a few times, when they were both single and bored, and the message she’d sent him now said Hey, how’s it going?
He stared at the text for another moment, then slid his phone into silent and flipped it over on the counter. He pulled his laptop towards him instead, but the un-answered text glared like the after-image of the sun against the back of his eyelids.

*Hey how’s it going* was innocent enough. But if he responded it could roll into *we should catch up*, which could become *want to grab dinner* which would turn into *8 pm sounds good* because the alternative was to say *no not really*. And then he’d be meeting her at *Salina’s*, this funky little outdoor restaurant they both loved that served amazing tacos from an airstream driver turned food truck. And she’d have a margarita, and he’d have at least two coronas, and then it’d be time for one of them to ask the other if they wanted to come over. It’d be past 10 pm on Saturday night and he’d have no excuse at that point, because why else would he even have agreed to meet up with her if that wasn’t where he wanted things to end?

And it wasn’t where he wanted things to end.

Now that was a fucking joke. Richie Tozier, who had turned a penchant for dick jokes into the type of money that paid off a luxurious Los Angeles apartment – not only had he *not* gotten laid since July, but he was trying to figure out how to actively avoid it.

He rubbed a hand across his face, under his glasses, the way he did whenever he wished he could reach into his mind and throttle it just to shut it up for a second. But it was too late, the text had set it off, that suspicion that buzzed fruitlessly inside of him like a fly against a windowpane.

It had been a little over two weeks since Richie had watched Eddie deliberate over a pile of drugstore candy on his hotel bed and realized that no, he hadn’t grown out of whatever that sweet, small affection was. That thing from when they were kids, the feeling Richie didn’t know what to do with other than needle at Eddie and crack jokes about his mom. It had been a small thing then, pale and delicate and then forgotten for twenty-seven years.

Now it was back and it was as though Richie had discovered a fucking jungle within himself, a feeling that was overrun and overwhelming. That was a problem for about, oh, a hundred different reasons, but mostly because Eddie was his *best friend*. Newly returned to his life best friend. Getting divorced from his wife best friend. Got turned into a Pennywise shish kabob for Richie’s own sake best friend. Not a person who deserved to be dragged into the mess

*but when I listen to love songs I think of you*

of Richie’s heart.

He picked up the phone, about to type back *good, what’s up with you?* when his email pinged, reminding him for the five thousandth time that he needed to figure out what stupid notification setting he had accidentally switched on that made his email ping so that he could switch it off. Nothing made him feel quite as old as grumbling at the technology that gave him a headache.

He turned back to his computer and saw a new email had just come in with the subject “*Thanksgiving?*” sender: Ben Hanscom. He was more used to seeing emails from Mike, whose preferred method of communication was to send novella-length updates. He replaced his phone on the counter, reply text unwritten, and clicked open the email. Ben had sent it to all of them.

*Hey guys!*

*Hope everything is going well with you. I know this is last minute, but if you don’t already have plans, I wanted to invite you to my home in Nebraska for Thanksgiving. Bev and I will be there, plus her friend Kay, and there’s more than enough room for*
all of us.

If you can come great, if you can’t no pressure. Just thought it might be a nice way for us all to get together again. Also, I know I sent out this email kind of late and the airlines are big on gouging people this time of year, so let me know and I can spot you money for the ticket if that helps.

Happy Halloween, see you around.

Ben

Richie read over the email again one more time to make sure he’d understood it correctly, then started to get excited. He’d missed having something to look forwards to, and Thanksgiving made sense. It hadn’t been a real holiday for him in so long, probably not since his mother had died ten years ago, but back then it had been his favorite one. There was no better way to honor their country and its fabricated, storybook past than to gather loved ones together, gorge yourself on a bird that took all day and ten different kinds of prep work to make appetizing, and fall asleep in front of the TV as young men inflicted irreparable brain injury upon each other.

He reached for his phone and tapped open his contacts, instinctively bringing up Eddie, then hesitated. He thought about it, then hit the back button and scrolled back up through his contacts to find Mike Hanlon and hit the dial button, glancing at the time on his computer screen. It should be nearing 7:00 for the librarian.

“Hello?”

“Hey!” said Richie. Even if caller ID and contact lists weren’t a thing, they wouldn’t need to introduce themselves. “How’s it going, Mike?”

“Well you caught me right when I was getting dinner going, so I’d say pretty good.”

“Oh shit, well I can call you back later.”

“No no, I’m just cooking. I usually listen to a book, I can just as easily listen to you. How’s life?”

“Good, good. What book you listening to these days?”

“A Man Called Ove. Been on my list for a while.”

“Never heard of it.”

“It’s good,” said Mike, and ordinarily Richie might have asked for a little more detail, but he had an agenda this time. Time enough later for a detailed Mike Hanlon review.

“Did you see Ben’s email?” asked Richie.

“Maybe, when did he send it?”

“Like, five minutes ago?” Probably more like two.

Mike chuckled. “I don’t check my email every ten seconds, Richie.”

“Well let me catch you up. He’s basically inviting us to all spend Thanksgiving together, at his place in Nebraska.”

“Wow.”
“I know,” said Richie, fiddling with a pen in his left hand. “What do you think? Do you already have plans?”

“For Thanksgiving? I guess not.”

Richie waited for Mike to say more, but that appeared to be all he had. “And?”

“And what?”

“So do you think you’ll come to Ben’s for Thanksgiving?”

That chuckle again. “I have to think about it for a second. You’re just telling me about it, I haven’t looked at the email, or my schedule. The library’s closed on Thanksgiving weekend, of course, but not the whole week.”

“Ah, fuck the Derry library.”

“The library’s all I’ve had for a while,” replied Mike benignly, but Richie thought he could hear an edge underneath, an unsaid watch yourself. “And it’s still recovering and I’m still in charge of that, so I have to check a few things before I take off. Not to mention plane tickets.”

“Hey I can help out with tickets if you need it.”

“Oh, I can afford a ticket,” replied Mike. “It’s not the price.”

So what is it then, Richie wanted to ask, and somehow managed to keep back.

“I assume you’re planning on going?” continued Mike.

“I don’t really have a reason not to,” said Richie, who might very well have had reasons not to that he just wasn’t aware of being in the calendar. That was a headache for future Richie, and also future Julian and his manager. “Not that I’ve ever dreamed about visiting Omaha or anything, but seems alright for Thanksgiving.”

Mike was silent a moment. Richie could hear a faint sizzling and shuffling sound.

“What are you making?”

“Pasta. Pasta and some meat sauce.” Another pause, and then Mike said, “You know I haven’t left Maine since I was in high school.”

“Mikey, you gotta get out more.”

“You’re not the first person to tell me that.”

“I bet Nebraska’s a good way to acclimate,” said Richie, “If your first trip out of Maine was some place like New York or Vegas – ”

“Los Angeles?” added Mike, the hint of a smile in his suggestion.


“Have you ever been to Nebraska, Richie?”

“I’m familiar with it,” said Richie, who had been to airport in Omaha once or twice. “Anyway, this
is about you. Like, a warm up to moving out.”

“Yeah, it could be a warm up,” agreed Mike. “You know I’ve never actually been on a plane, either.”

That surprised Richie, who sometimes had three or four different flights booked in one month. But it hadn’t been like that when he was a kid, had it? He hadn’t ever been on a plane himself until he was nineteen, after his family was living in a different state. Derry was a town that inspired dreams of leaving it, but the gravitational pull was much stronger.

“Last time I was out of the state,” continued Mike, “was when my dad was still alive. We drove up to Canada in his truck.”

“All the more reason to come to Ben’s,” said Richie, “And don’t listen to anything Eddie says, planes are safe.”

“Oh, I know. I haven’t been avoiding them, I just haven’t gone much of anywhere.”

He spoke of it casually, as though getting of town, taking a vacation across the country was something he just hadn’t gotten around to doing in a while.

“Are you still thinking of traveling? After you leave?”

“I think so,” replied Mike. “I’ve got a pretty long road trip planned out in my head. Plenty of ideas about where I want to go, no idea where I’ll stop.”

“Well at least anywhere you end up, it has to be better than Derry.”

“Maybe,” said Mike, a reluctant shrug to the word.

“Maybe?” repeated Richie. “How many other small towns with kid-eating murder clowns living in the sewers do you think there are?”

“Better the devil you do know, is all I’m saying.”

“Alright Mike,” said Richie, and asked him more about the book he was listening to. He didn’t really care about the book and he’d probably never read or listen to it, but it was nice just to listen to Mike. Talking with any of them was comforting, a little like digging out an old coat and pulling it on to find it still fit just as well.

Mike wouldn’t promise that he would be able to make it to Ben’s – a promise was too serious a thing, he said – but when they hung up so that Mike could eat dinner, Richie felt a certainty that he would be there. In the empty silence of the ended phone call, he felt like calling Bill, then maybe Eddie, but the thought summoned an image of Mike, alone in a library office after dark, working his way through a list of names and phone numbers. He flipped his phone face down and pushed it away from him. He could give them a minute.

Eddie – Eddie had to come. There was no way he had Thanksgiving plans – a man with no family and on the verge of divorce? Even if he had to drive to Nebraska, Richie felt the same certainty that Eddie would be there, too.

He stopped fiddling with the pen in his hand. Eddie would be there. Eddie would be there, and Richie couldn’t deny the truth anymore because every day there was less and less to deny, like a shore growing longer as the tide receded.
It wasn’t just a matter of being gay and admitting to the role he’d been desperately playing at for a long time. It was about being forty years old and looking at Eddie and realizing he’d never felt this way before. With him, Richie could be sitting at the kitchen table in Eddie’s Manhattan apartment on a regular Thursday night, saying nothing and wanting nothing but to stay sitting at that humble little table until the sun came up. Eddie made him conscious of the blood circling in his veins, the heat in his face, the movement of his throat when he swallowed. It was something amazing and something terrifying, because it was a feeling he didn’t remember surrendering to but that was how it was. Like his heart was riding a mechanical bull.

Sounded like another problem for future Richie.

Richie turned back to the email and hit reply.

***

In the cab on the way to the airport, the ghost of Mama Kaspbrak returned with a vengeance. Eddie could imagine her shrieking and pleading with him the whole way there, shouting about the danger of going up in one of those glorified tin buckets, the risk he was taking flying in the state you’re in, recounting historical airplane disasters. Faulty mechanisms, sloppy upkeep, inexperienced pilots! It only took one bad time on a plane and that was it, over, curtains. Your last moments alive, staring down a shrieking, inevitable death. Is that how you want to go?

He sat in the backseat, clutching his aspirator in his hand, head pressed against the cool glass of the cab and trying to ignore the voice that told him that was unsanitary and what if the driver crashes Eddie and that glass is going to shatter and go straight into your brain!

He was trying out another trick Richie had found for him, grounding himself by describing what he found surrounding him. Or in this case what he found the cab driving past as it zipped its way towards JFK. Skyscrapers against a steel gray sky. Dog owners wrestling with poop bags on the sidewalk. Paper turkey decorations taped in storefronts. Plastic green garlands wrapped around lampposts that marked the creeping beginnings of Christmas, even though they were still a day away from Thanksgiving.

The rest of them – Richie, Bill and Audra, and even Mike – were already in Nebraska. Eddie was the masochist who would be flying on the dreaded Wednesday Before Thanksgiving, a hell that he had to keep reminding himself was of his own design as his cab drove into the Departures section of JFK. Your choice, he told himself as he was pulled along with the waiting sludge through the TSA, an extra bitch and a half with his left foot in a boot and the portable oxygen concentrator he had to bring along this time. You made this happen he reminded himself, dodging past the caravans of families wheeling their luggage and hanging onto their children by virtue of leashed backpacks. As though his being responsible for this nightmare scenario made it any more bearable.

At first it had been a question if he should even go. He hadn’t left New York since arriving back in it, and even that long drive down from Bangor to Manhattan, Myra at the wheel the whole way home, had been a fucking trial. The type that suggested once you get your ass back home, keep it there.

He had spoken to his regular doctor, his fancy new doctors, his physical therapist, expecting at least one of them to agree with the ghost in his head and say Are you kidding? A little over three months out from an indefinable evil punching right through you and now you want to get on a plane to Omaha? But they hadn’t. They hadn’t exactly jumped up and down with glee and patted him on the back about it, but none of them had acted as though it was an impossibility. And by that point his left leg had transitioned out of a cast and into the boot and he was starting to use a cane, and no it wasn’t a day at the park but it would be better than navigating the airport with crutches.
So then it had been about how to get there. He had seriously debated taking a train to Omaha, even though the trip would have been far more expensive and taken a day and a half, and it wasn’t as if he never got on airplanes. But it was hard to explain what it was about them. He flew for work once or twice a year, and he hated that, too, but it was the fact that it was a work trip that made it seem a little more okay in his mind. Getting on a plane to go somewhere he didn’t even want to be felt safer. Getting on a plane for a trip he was actually excited about – that felt like fucking with fate.

A direct flight from New York to Omaha would be three hours. The answer was obvious. He hadn’t even shared his train versus plane dilemma with Richie because he knew what he would say. *Pour yourself a drink and book the flight, Eds.*

Bill had laughed when Eddie shared this imagined response with him this on the phone.

“Probably,” Bill had said. “Richie always has s-s-s- has a thing to say.”

“He’s probably right in this case,” Eddie had replied.

“I think if you take a p-p-plane, you’ll be okay. I think we’re entitled to old age.”

“What?”

“We survived It. We won.”

Everyone kept saying that, like what had happened underground was the same as a carnival game, and every time it rubbed Eddie the wrong way. Won wasn’t the right way to say it, and if anything, Pennywise proved how little any of it fucking mattered. There was no such thing as entitlement in a world where he had to face a child-eating, sewer-dwelling monster twice in his life. No wheel coming around, no thing like karma balancing the scales. Of course they could survive everything, just to be the one in three billion to die in a plane crash. Just when it seemed things were good and safe enough to poke your little head out of your hole, that’s when life liked to dig the long claws of irony around your neck and squeeze.

But maybe karma was saving him for the return journey, because the flight from New York City to Omaha, Nebraska went smoothly, or as smooth as a flight could go for a man with one lung and deep fear of flying – and if karma was waiting, well, he would rather go down on the plane that tail-ended his vacation than began it anyways.

He touched down in the unfamiliar airport a little after eleven, alive and buoyed by the temporary adrenaline rush that coursed through him every time he took a plane that successfully landed. An adrenaline rush that he needed to drag himself off the plane and down to the baggage claim, joining the hordes of people returning from places like Chicago and Atlanta and Austin and San Francisco, leaving behind their overpriced coffee shops and crowded sidewalks and cultural hubs to return to Nebraska.

Ben was picking him up from the airport. He told Eddie to watch for a red truck at the arrivals section, and when Eddie had asked for more details, Ben had just answered in a strangely proud sort of way, *I drive a red truck, you won’t miss it.*

And he didn’t. It was much colder in Omaha than in the city, so he was waiting bundled up inside, luggage sitting patiently on a cart beside him, when he saw a bold, red beast of a vehicle come swinging into the arrivals section. It was nothing like the slick, overdone trucks in modern car commercials. Those trucks were like teenage boys on steroids – this truck knew its business and had seen some sights. It angled to a stop at the curb, threw on its blinkers, and Ben Hanscom
hopped out of the driver’s side, searching for Eddie.

It had been roughly two months since Eddie had seen him last, and somehow it felt like twenty-seven years all over again and just yesterday at the same time, and maybe it was always going to feel like that. Eddie walked out into the crisp cold, carry-on slung over his shoulders, luggage left inside (god he hoped no one tried to steal his shit or report his shit in the two seconds he was gon). Ben smiled wide when he saw him, and Eddie felt himself smiling back.

“Eddie!” said Ben, walking over to him. He looked over him – the leg in the boot, the cane in his hand, the ghost of everything that had happened, and his smile didn’t falter. “You look great! Can I hug you? I don’t want to break you.”

“Yeah, yeah, of course.”

Ben pulled him into a close hug, and Eddie felt the gentleness in it, Ben genuinely not wanting to hurt him. He hugged him back.

“It’s good to see you man, I’m so glad you made it!” Ben pulled back, grinning widely still. He was a little scruffier, a full beard filling in along his jaw and chin. “And you got on a plane and everything – how was the flight?”

“Fine – I think it might be easier to travel with a gun than a fucking oxygen machine in this country but you know, fine.”

“Well, I appreciate you making it out here. Where’s all your stuff? I know Eddie Kaspbrak didn’t show up here with just a carry on.”

“It’s on a cart inside, asshole. I’m working with limited capacity.”

“I’ll get it.”

Ben went through the automatic doors and retrieved Eddie’s luggage off the cart, grabbing one bulging suitcase in each hand. He came back out and walked them over to the back of his truck. He had a cap on over the bed, and when he opened the back to slide Eddie’s luggage in Eddie could see a pile of brown Whole Foods grocery bags.

“Stopped at the store to stock up before getting you,” explained Ben, “I’m about an hour outside of Omaha so figured I wouldn’t waste a trip in – we’ve only got two Whole Foods in Nebraska.”

“How do you live?”

Ben closed up the back and walked over the front, swinging his keys easily in his hand. Eddie walked around to the passenger side, admiring the truck and feeling that itch that wanted to slide over to the driver’s end and wrap his own hands around the wheel. The cab was high enough he had to grab onto the door frame with his hand and properly hoist himself up. Eddie still didn’t like planes, but he did love the height that came from sitting on the long bench seat in a truck like this, lording over the mere four-door sedans and smart cars.

“This is some truck,” said Eddie.

“Thanks. She’s an ’84 Chevy Blazer, I’m pretty fond of her.”

“1984?” said Eddie, both impressed and wary about being driven around in a truck that was almost as old as him.
“Don’t worry – I take good care of her so that she’ll take care of me,” replied Ben, and Eddie knew if Richie was there he’d have made some joke like holy shit you guys I think Ben is fucking this truck.

Ben put his key in the ignition and started up the truck. It came to life with a satisfied growl that evened out in a purr, and Eddie felt grateful for the wave of heat that started to roll out through the front vent. Before they started driving, Ben reached into the foot well and retrieved a blue, bullet-shaped thermos and a small white paper bag.

“Here,” said Ben, offering both. “Coffee and a gluten-free carrot muffin. Wasn’t sure how you take your coffee so, it’s just black, I hope that’s okay?”

Eddie stared as though Ben was casually offering him a gold bar. “You brought this for me?”

“Yeah? Is carrot okay – man, do you not like carrot? Are you allergic or something?”

“Carrot is great,” replied Eddie, taking the bag and thermos. “I just – thanks. That was really nice of you.”

“It’s not a problem,” said Ben, shifting the truck into drive and puling away from the curb. “I’m always hungry after I fly.”

“I’m always just relieved to be alive.”

Ben laughed. “Richie almost came with me, until I pointed out that that would make it a pretty cozy ride up here, and I figured that might be the last thing you wanted after being on a plane.”

“Good call,” said Eddie as he dug out the muffin, thinking that he probably wouldn’t have minded too much. He ate the muffin with the bag open underneath to catch any crumbs that might fall.

Riding in the passenger seat of Ben’s truck was the exact opposite of driving through New York City in every way. Driving in New York was a matter of survival. Eddie drove with a knife in his teeth, back against the wall, driving to get somewhere or to get out. Out here, it seemed, you could drive just to drive. Or that was how Ben approached it anyway, pulling off the highway and telling Eddie, “This way takes a little longer, but it’s more scenic.”

Eddie couldn’t have told Ben when he had last opted for the scenic route. But he could understand it as they pulled away from the city in a truck that was hungry for road, the world opening up around them. Eddie took it all in with the mild appreciation of someone who was used to living his life block to block in a neat and chaotic grid. All of this, surrounding them now – it was like something more than a postcard or a movie screen, because there was no edge to this. Yellow cornfields bitten low stretched on forever, joining the sky at the horizon. The truck sped along, and the outside world moved slowly in response, barely shifting but for the occasional patch of trees or farmhouse that dotted the outside.

The drive was filled with a leisurely conversation as Ben caught Eddie up on things like when everyone had arrived, how they were all passing the time. Bill had already told Ben he should rent his place out as a writer’s retreat, saying the ones with more money than talent would eat this shit up (“And then Audra, she kind of rolled her eyes and said right, this from the same man who insisted we only buy a house with the perfect writing room.”)

“It’s pretty funny,” said Ben. “I sort of procrastinated on inviting everyone because I wasn’t sure if you guys would want to come. And now everyone’s here.”

“Why wouldn’t we want to come?”
Ben shrugged, a small half-smile on his face. “Oh, I don’t know. It was just me not thinking.”

The last five miles were over a cracked and bumpy road. Ben turned left from it onto a long, thin stretch of gravel that wound its way through a nest of trees to reveal a large, beautiful house.

Eddie didn’t know how to describe the house exactly, and it wasn’t just from his lack of architectural knowledge or real estate language. Maybe he would have called it a modern sort of farmhouse if pressed, but it didn’t seem to adhere itself to one type of style. It was grand but not obnoxiously so, with a politeness to its neat black-shingled roof and its blue window trimmings. The bright, open windows, the wrap around porch, and brick front patio all suggested openness, too, a kindly quality that invited someone to pull up a chair, sit for a while. Eddie wondered how often anyone took the house up on that offer all the way out here in fuck-all Nebraska.

“Wow Ben,” he said as the truck trundled to a stop at the end of the driveway alongside the house. “Did you….do this?”

“I designed it all myself,” replied Ben, turning off the engine. “Helped out with most of the build, but I had a contractor in charge of all that. What do you think?”

“I think you’ve definitely come a long way from damming up the Kenduskeag.”

Ben laughed. “Give me a second to unload everything here and then I’ll give you the full tour.”

“Oh sure, I can help,” said Eddie, opening the door and stepping outside. There was a clang behind him and he looked over his shoulder in time to see the thermos had slid onto the floor and under the bench seat. He sighed and bent down to reach for it. As he did so he heard the distant sound of a door opening, and then Bev’s familiar voice carry clearly across:

“Oh dammit, June – June! Come back, come June! Come!”

Eddie’s hand found the thermos. He straightened up and turned around just in time to have something massive and furry jump up on him.

“What the fuck!” exclaimed Eddie, stumbling back against the truck. The thing – the dog – had its front paws on his chest and was making every effort to get at his face and eat it.

There was a sharp whistle and the dog immediately hopped off of Eddie, barking and trotting over to the back of the truck where Ben was standing.

“What the fuck?” exclaimed Eddie

“This is June,” said Ben, kneeling down on one knee to rub the dog behind her ears. “And she’s really sorry about jumping on my friend like that with no warning at all, right June?”

She raised one paw and placed it on Ben’s knee, as if to say right Ben, I really am.

“She’s just really friendly,” said Ben, giving her one more scratch behind the ear before standing up and pulling Eddie’s luggage out of the trunk.

“What the fuck?” said Eddie again, staring. “You have a dog?”

“Lots of people have dogs.”

“Sorry, Eddie,” said Beverly, who had made her way over to them. She was wearing a long wool coat, unbuttoned, and thick socks but no shoes on her feet. “She only really listens to Ben – it’s
good to see you.”

“You too,” said Eddie, stepping forwards to hug her.

He felt a pressure at his leg and glanced down to see June wagging her tail and grinning up at him as if to say let’s let bygones be bygones, yeah?

“I don’t know about you,” muttered Eddie, who received no response from the dog. He didn’t know what type of breed she might be, just that she was a big one. In New York most of the dogs ranged in size from a football to a bag of potatoes. This one was large enough that just shaving her thick, tri-colored fur would probably leave you with enough hair to make another dog.

“Aw, June’s a sweetie,” said Bev, stroking the dog’s head.

“Sure, of course.”

“You’re not a dog person?” asked Bev, smiling slyly.

“I’m a no-animal-at-all person.”

“Give her a week,” said Ben, appearing beside them. “I think she can win you over. Right June? C’mon.”

The dog barked and followed after Ben as he took Eddie’s luggage towards the house. Eddie watched him, remembering how when Richie had walked into Gordie’s to meet him for dinner that first night Manhattan, Eddie had thought to himself how this made sense. He had the same thought now about Ben Hanscom, loping over towards his big ranch home in his gray sweater and worn blue jeans, an open blue sky above him and the green-gold fields and trees stretching wide around him while his dog trotted at his side.

“I’m glad you made it,” said Bev, smiling over at Eddie. There was still the edge of a hunted look around her eyes, but she held herself differently out here, like someone who had finally been able to lay down a heavy load. He suddenly wondered what he must look like to her.

“Yeah. Me too.” He looked around. “Where’s everyone else?”

“Richie’s inside, so is Kay – I’ll have to introduce you. I think Bill and Audra and Mike are walking around somewhere – there’s a lot of space to walk around here.”

“They’re walking? It’s cold.”

“It’s like forty-five, it’s nice!”

“Colder if you factor in the wind chill. But I guess if you want to get pneumonia that’s your right.”

“Alright if you’re so delicate, let’s get the groceries and go inside.”

“This isn’t a me thing, it’s just an objective truth that it’s cold outside!”

Ben reappeared to help with the groceries, and to drop off the sneakers Bev had neglected to slip on before going after June. As they walked up to the porch, Bill, Audra, and Mike appeared from around the corner of the house, and Eddie’s brain had to process that he was looking at a movie star walking between his two old friends. They all reunited in the entrance of Ben’s home, and were soon joined by Richie and a woman Eddie didn’t know.

“Eddie!” said Richie. His voice was cloyed and his eyes red and watery.
“Jesus, what’s the matter with you?”

“I can’t help it, I get so emotional seeing you!”

“He’s allergic,” said Beverly sympathetically, while the furry culprit of Richie’s congestion wagged her tail beside the group.

“Oh!” said Ben, digging in his sweatshirt’s front pocket and retrieving a small paper bag, which he threw over to Richie. “Got it.”

“God bless and keep you,” said Richie, sniffling as he unpacked the little box of allergy medication.

The woman Eddie didn’t know was the previously mentioned Kay, who Beverly introduced as “basically my sister.”

“Nice to meet you!” said Kay, smiling. She was a little taller than Eddie, dark-skinned with bright eyes and a friendly handshake. But there was a flash, something, that reminded him of Myra’s friend Tracy, the hint of a vicious loyalty that was liable to fuck you up if you fucked with it.

“Nice to meet you too,” he said.

Ben led Eddie to a bedroom at the end of a wide, window-lined hallway. It was moderately furnished, with a full-sized bed, dresser, end table, and a little corner desk. There was a small collection of books along the desk and a few pieces of art on the wall, but it wasn’t a room that had been lived in.

“It’s like a hotel,” said Eddie.

“Well, I haven’t really had many guests out here…”

“Oh – no, I mean it as a compliment,” said Eddie, turning to look over at Ben. “Like, super put together. How many bedrooms does this place have?”

“Seven proper, three down here and four upstairs, but there’s plenty of other spots I could squeeze someone in if I needed to.”

“Wow. And it’s just you out here?”

“Well, me and June. And I’ve got you guys now.” He stood with his hands tucked into his back pockets, his gaze drifting across the view offered by the window in Eddie’s room. There was a soft, far away look on his face, and he didn’t have to say anything further for Eddie to guess at what he was probably thinking. Seven rooms in the house he had designed himself and built up in the state he’d learned to call home after Derry, Maine. More strange proof of the way something in them had escaped with the truth and held it close for all those years. And the idea that Eddie shouldn’t have been the last one to arrive, that they should have been waiting on one more.

“Anyway,” said Ben. “I don’t know if you wanted a moment to get settled, relax? Or I could show you around the house real quick?”

“Yeah, yeah, give me the tour,” insisted Eddie.

There were two bedrooms on the side of the house they were in now – his and Richie’s, he learned. Bill and his wife Audra had the third bedroom on this floor, and the four bedrooms upstairs were occupied by Mike, Kay, Bev, and Ben. Bev has her own room, Eddie almost wanted to ask, since
he’d assumed she’d be sharing Ben’s room. But that, he decided, was really none of his fucking business, so he kept the question back.

Ben’s house spoke of someone who prized warmth and craftsmanship. He had a story to go with almost every little feature – how the ceramic tile backsplash in the kitchen had been procured from some tiny village in Italy; the story that went with the small tapestry that hung near the dining room, his sole token from a semester of grad school spent in Japan; how he had procured the stones that created the beautiful fireplace that was the centerpiece of the living room. Commenting on anything – a pillow, a shelf, a trinket – risked prompting a winding story about its origins, as though inside of Ben was a library nobody had been to visit until now.

Save for a few little lived-in pockets, like a corner of the kitchen or the sun-filled room that served as Ben’s studio, Eddie sensed that same fresh-pressed, new-hotel feeling from his bedroom in the rest of the house. It was like the house had been waiting, holding its breath and keeping the table set for a long while. And now, with eight people bustling around and living inside it, opening cabinets and blowing off dust and waiting for hot water to come through the pipes, the waiting might be over.

There were little signs of the stillness starting to be eroded, evidence of new occupancy. A forgotten half-filled coffee cup left perched on a windowsill in the living room. An unfolded blanket, sprawled halfway off the couch. A collection of shoes in an arrangement near the door, some paired neatly beneath the bench positioned next to the entryway, others more haphazard, holding the position from when they’d been toed off and abandoned.

And the people themselves. Here they all were, Eddie realized, or most of them anyway. Pulled together, and not by some dying town like flies drawn to a carcass, but just for the sake of each other. It felt as though this was a longstanding tradition, with Thanksgiving on the horizon and all of them gathered together in Ben’s kitchen while Ben pulled together lunch and Audra shared a story from the great beyond of Hollywood. It brought back scraps of memory, the warm summer days wandering the edge of the Kenduskeag, the quiet moments in the clubhouse they’d all built, when the only sounds came from comic book pages being flipped and Richie’s portable radio, softly jamming.

It had been a month since he’d seen Richie, longer than that since he’d seen everyone else in Bangor, and after the tour of the house they all seemed to have things to catch one another up on, to share with the group now that everyone was there. Big things, like how Ben was drafting a proposal for a new cultural center in Lincoln. And small things, like what the fuck everyone had been up to since arriving in America’s heartland, the answer to which was a leisurely type of nothing and more catching up and Thanksgiving preparing. Bill and Audra had apparently put themselves in charge of the turkey, which was currently brining in a big cooler out on the back patio.

“Brining’s the trick,” said Audra, munching on a piece of watermelon from the fresh fruit assortment that Ben had thoughtfully put out. “I know everyone says it every year, but it’s because it’s true. World of difference.”

“Yeah but see, this is the problem with Thanksgiving dinner,” said Richie. Eddie caught Bev’s eye, and she smiled and rolled her eyes. “You have to do like, doctorate-level research and start all this prep work hours in advance to make a dry ass bird taste even half as good as a hamburger.”

“Okay, here’s the thing, you’re completely wrong,” replied Audra while Bill laughed. “A perfectly prepared Thanksgiving turkey, with that crackly golden skin and gravy and stuffing? Blows any burger out of the park.”
“With gravy and stuffing. Take that away, dry ass bird.”

“Well, you’re talking about a hamburger that p-p-probably has a bun and toppings and things, too, right?” said Bill.

“Good point,” said Audra, smiling at Bill.

“Okay yeah, but my original point is if we are talking about the ratio of work involved to satisfying meal? Again, hours of work for okay turkey. Hamburger is ten minutes driving to In-N-Out, ordering, boom. Hamburger.”

“Richie, please tell me you do know how to feed yourself,” said Bev.

“I do a mean bowl of cereal if you’re ever in town.”

There was a collective groan for Richie’s poor dietary soul and the conversation shifted. Sitting in his chair with his glass of filtered water, surrounded by the aimless conversation and easy laughter, Eddie didn’t feel nearly as conscious of the obvious ways in which he was mending, the exhaustion in his body. He wasn’t thinking about Myra, who he had worried about facing the holiday alone and had left a note for through Tracy, just telling her that he would be out of town through the end of November. It still didn’t seem that he could go somewhere without reporting it to somebody.

They had sandwiches for dinner – “Keeping it light tonight,” Ben had said, with the wide grin that added because we won’t be tomorrow. He had all the sandwich fixings laid out, bags of chips (the expensive, organic type from Whole Foods, Eddie noticed), a vegetable tray, some replenished bowls of fruit. The kitchen opened into a wide dining space, one wall of which was floor to ceiling windows. Outside the trees were inky silhouettes, the sky streaked with orange and purple that would soon turn to pitch black, and Eddie wondered what the stars looked like out here.

They assembled their sandwiches in the kitchen, Eddie scooping some extra fruits and veggies onto his plate, and then drifted towards the large dining room table where the conversation ran on. Eddie learned about how Bev and Kay had been friends since meeting through the same work-study job at Columbia college, where they had bonded over an existence that largely subsisted of coffee and hardboiled eggs, pinning their hopes on elaborate dreams that they had never imagined coming true. “There’s no way I’d be here today without Kay,” Bev had said at one point, to which her friend had laughed and said “That might be true, you did drink a lot of tequila in junior year.” Bev had laughed and then they were all talking about their college days and the days after, back to coloring in all the years in between that they were still just beginning to get a picture of.

Mike was the first one to get up from the table, looking over at Ben and asking him if he had gotten the yeast, which prompted Ben to say “oh yeah!” and also stand up from the table, leading Mike back into the kitchen.


“No need to panic, Eddie, I think he’s got it under control,” said Richie.

“Not bread,” replied Mike, “Cinnamon rolls. I’m just prepping them tonight.”

“Holy shit, did everyone become a master chef?” said Richie, as though it was a betrayal that any of them would reveal the slightest hint of competency in the kitchen.

“Hey, you’ll be happy about it tomorrow,” said Mike, while Ben helped fetch bowls and measuring cups from their various hidden spots. “It’s my mom’s recipe. She used to break them out.
for holidays and birthdays, so I can’t have Thanksgiving without them now.”

“Not to steal Richie’s shtick, but I’m impressed,” said Bev, smiling. “I think I tried to bake a loaf of bread one time? It didn’t go well.”

“I remember that,” said Kay. “That thing was like a bone.”

“Yeah, although I doubt even June here would have eaten it,” said Beverly, smiling as the dog in question lifted her head at the sound of her name. She was curled up on a rug near the glass doors that led out to the back patio.

“You could make these,” said Mike. “They’re not so hard. And Eddie?”

“What?”

“I’m gonna be straight with you, they’re not gonna be healthy.”

There was some appreciative chuckling around the table and Eddie rolled his eyes. Everyone liked to laugh until their doctor was putting them on Lipitor.

Bill and Audra got up to check in on the cooler full of brining turkey, and Kay reminded Bill that he and Richie had both promised her a game of Clue that evening. Eddie turned down the invitation to play, but he said he’d watch them for a while.

“It’s been about fifty years since I played Clue, but I don’t remember it being the most exciting spectator sport,” said Richie. “Unless you want to help me cheat.”

“Nuh-uh, no cheating with Clue,” insisted Kay, dropping her plate off in the kitchen.

“Alright, alright – I probably need to remember the rules anyway before I can willfully ignore them.”

“No cheating!”

It was already encroaching upon Eddie’s bedtime, especially factoring in the time difference. He left Ben and Mike talking in the kitchen and wandered into the living room where Kay and Richie had moved to set up Clue. Kay was sitting cross-legged on the floor besides a beautiful wooden coffee table.

“Yeah, but don’t let Ben hear you mention it or he’ll go into a thirty minute explanation about how he made it,” said Richie when Eddie commented on the table. Kay shook her head.

“He made this?” said Eddie.

“I know, he’s resourceful as fuck. If the zombie apocalypse hits I think Ben’s the only one of us making it out of that.” Richie nodded at Eddie as he shuffled one of the decks of Clue cards.

“You’re probably the first to go.”

“What!? You’re obviously the first one dead. You can’t cook, you hate to drive – you’d probably die of like, food poisoning after eating some bad take out you found in a dumpster.”

Richie was laughing as Bill finally walked in to join them, and Kay was quick to get his opinion as a horror author about how his friends would survive in a zombie apocalypse. Just because Bill had a full-time job making shit up, Eddie didn’t think that made him any sort of expert in judging who would best survive a post-apocalyptic scenario, and anyway why would anyone even want to
speculate on that kind of shit, but he was quickly shut down. And ultimately a little grateful when Bill went so far as to agree that hands down, Richie would be the first of them to go out in the zombie apocalypse.

“Maybe the zombies will appreciate comedy,” said Richie, “And I’ll outlive you all.”

“If that’s the case,” said Eddie, “then you’re definitely the first one dead.”

Richie clapped a hand against his heart and staggered backwards, looking at Eddie in betrayed horror. Bill and Kay laughed.

The house felt comfortably alive, full of warm light and conversation drifting in from other rooms. Eddie was tired in that good way, that bone-deep relief that settled in at the end of a small journey. He watched Bill, Kay, and Richie playing Clue, which of course Richie was incapable of doing without overcommitting to an enthusiastic British accent for Colonel Mustard and shouting Tally-ho every time he moved his token. He got up during their second game to examine the built-in bookshelf along one wall, which Ben kept alphabetized by author and was mostly full of titles Eddie recognized from the New York Times best-selling non-fiction list. There were a few he even remembered reading summaries for and thinking he’d wanted to check out but never did because who had the time to read?

Outside it was fully black, and he stood by one of the windows for a moment, trying to see if he could make out any of the night sky. Living in New York City for so long, the stars had become the same sort of hazy concept he imagined the ocean might be for people who lived their whole lives out here in land-locked Nebraska. He couldn’t get a good view from inside the living room; the glow from indoors interfered with his view of the night, and even if that wasn’t the case there were a few trees planted close by on this side of the house. He’d probably have to go outside to really get a good look.

Don’t you even think about going outside there Eddie it’s below freezing and you’ll get hypothermia you know it takes less than five minutes for hypothermia to set in Eddie less than five minutes and you won’t even know it’s happening until it’s too late Eddie!

He turned away from the bookshelf and walked over to the hallway closet, which was larger than the bedroom closet back in his Manhattan apartment. He would only be outside for a minute or two he reasoned, but he also didn’t fuck around with pneumonia. He pulled out his coat, scarf, and hat and dug around in his coat pocket for his gloves.

“Leaving so soon?” called Richie from his spot in the living room.

“Just checking out the sky,” replied Eddie.

“To make sure it’s not falling?”

“To see the stars, asshole.”

He walked out the front door and onto the porch, shutting the door as he did so. It was eerie the way the world seemed to close behind him with the door, the dice clacking and kitchen mixer whirring and conversation all quickly falling away as easily as though he’d turned down a dial. The silence was heavy and still around him, the sort of silence that he couldn’t ordinarily achieve without earplugs. It was cold, the temperature probably hovering around freezing if it hadn’t dipped below it, and dark, darker than he’d realized. They were surrounded by total blackness, and it was easy to feel like Ben’s house was a ship, adrift at sea with all of them aboard.
“Hey.”

“Shit!” said Eddie with a start, looking over to his left where he’d missed Beverly. She was curled up in a porch chair, feet tucked underneath her, cigarette in her right hand. Through the window over her left shoulder Eddie could make out the second round of Clue being played, like a scene cut out from another world. Bev wasn’t wearing a scarf or hat, and the coat she was wearing hung open.

“Jesus, aren’t you freezing?”

“No,” she said, taking a drag on her cigarette and giving him a half smile. “I grew up in Maine.”

“More like you live in Chicago.”

“Same story. I don’t mind the cold. You look like you do, though.”

Eddie shrugged. “Yeah. Well I wanted to, uh – see if I could see the stars out here.”

Bev nodded. “You have to walk out further, away from the house, and wait a few minutes, for your eyes to really adjust. Like, ten or fifteen minutes I think.”

“Really? How do you know that?”

“Because I wanted to do the same thing my first night here,” said Bev, smiling at him. “Ben told me. There’s actually a really good spot up ahead, where he built a little patio. There’s a break in the trees and you’re far enough away from the house the light doesn’t bother you. I’ll show you.”

She stubbed out the cigarette and unfolded herself from the chair. Like earlier that day, she was only wearing socks, no shoes.

“Oh, that’s okay. I can see enough on the porch.”

“No you can’t. Come on.”

“You’re not going to get shoes?”

“There’s a little stone path, and these socks are thick.”

“Yeah but, your feet are totally unprotected, and it’s dark –”

“Eddie,” said Beverly, gripping his arm lightly and looking into his eyes. “It’s not a big deal. Okay? Come on.”

He almost asked should we tell someone where we’re going? and just managed to stop the little kid question before it could slip out. With Bev, there was still a bit of the awe from back then, from when he was twelve and small for his age and always coming in to school late with doctors notes, and never imagined a girl like this would talk to a boy like him. Now she was a fashion designer and founder of a successful clothing line, and he felt a little as though he was the only remaining Loser in the Losers’ Club.

I guess there might have been Stan, he thought to himself as he followed Beverly down the little stone path that led away from the house and into the night. He’d read an obituary for Stan, and learned through that that Stan had become a very successful accountant. Successful, but he didn’t think anyone found accounting to be that sexy, just as no one at Forbes was making a list for Hottest Risk Managers of Manhattan.
“Okay,” said Beverly, coming to a stop. The path led to a mini stone patio, complete with a yawning fire pit, a few chairs and a wooden bench. The house waited patiently far behind them, its windows aglow like tall and orange beacons. She tilted her head up. “This is the spot.”

Eddie craned his neck and stared up at a clear, star-filled night sky. It was a sight that swallowed him up, a sky that seemed to expand the more he looked at it, and he realized he hadn’t looked at a night sky like this since he was a kid. Not since he was living in a small forgotten blip of a town in Maine.

“Okay,” he said after a few long minutes of quiet. “I guess I can see why people are into this.”

“Ben pointed out some constellations when we were out here, but I can’t remember any of them,” said Bev.

“I bet Stan would know,” said Eddie. “He could probably name them all.”

“Yeah, maybe,” said Bev, closing her coat by wrapping her arms across her chest, and Eddie wondered why she didn’t just button it. The silence out here had a heft to it.

“Do you wonder about Stan?” asked Bev.

“What do you mean?”

“Just what he was like. What it would be like if he was here.”

“Yeah, of course,” said Eddie. Even now it still felt like he was just waiting for Stan to show up. “I think we all do.”

“I always remember him with his bird book and binoculars.” She paused. “It’s how I picture him, too, all grown up, but still with a book about birds. Even though it doesn’t really make sense, right? That’s what he was like when he was twelve, and... some things stay the same, but none of us are really like what we were when were twelve.”

“Yeah. Well, not entirely,” said Eddie.

His neck was starting to hurt and the rest of his body was also starting to lodge various complaints about the fact that he was still standing. He looked down at the ground, rolling his neck slightly, and saw the bench again. It was cold and dark, and the bench wouldn’t be comfortable, but Beverly was still looking at the stars and really, with his coat and scarf and hat, he could stand the cold.

“It just seems weird that he’s gone,” said Beverly as Eddie sat down at the bench.

He remembered the summer before, before the clown and the promises, when Georgie Denbrough was still alive and The Losers’ Club only tallied four members. Bill and Stan had gotten the idea to go camping for the night in the woods outside Derry, saying if they followed the Kenduskeag out they’d probably find a good spot. Richie was down for anything and willing to go, but Eddie had known that his ma would die before she let Eddie disappear, overnight, out of her sight, in the outdoors, where he could be eaten by coyotes or murdered by hoboes or just suffer a good old fashioned fatal asthma attack. When he told the group there was no way he could go, Richie had suggested he just sneak out, as if it was that easy. And maybe it was, maybe it could have been, except he knew that if his mother discovered him missing it would be his life to pay. No walking to and from school alone, no bike riding to the Barrens, no summer afternoons along the Tracker Brothers field.

So he hadn’t gone. He’d seen them off in the morning, biking with them a ways before turning
around to pedal back into town, alone. And he’d spent that night tossing and turning in bed, alternating between that bitter type of world-ending jealousy that could hit a kid whose friends were out doing something cool without him, and genuine worry because what if a coyote did find their tent and eat them all?

Of course, they were fine. They came back the next day with Richie raving about the whole experience, which made Eddie feel the jealousy again like a sharp tang in his throat. But then Bill recounted their adventures in his careful, determined way, telling it so that Eddie could see it all, feeling as if he had been there.

And Stan had brought Eddie a rock. It was an unusual chunk of rock that fit comfortably in the palm of Eddie’s hand, mostly gray but speckled with bits of blue and black like a bruise, and half of it a slightly shining purple. Eleven years old at the end of the summer, it was one of the most amazing things Eddie had seen. Stan didn’t know what kind of rock it was – if it was a bird, he probably could have named it in a heartbeat – but he had also found it pretty neat and kept it in his pocket to give it to Eddie.

That kid had become a man and that man was gone.

“Yeah,” said Eddie. “It is weird.”

He saw the outline of her face turn away from the night to look over towards him. Then she crossed and settled beside him on the bench and, really, if Ben could build a whole dream house out here Eddie thought he could at least have a comfortable bench in his front yard.

“I’m glad you made it out here,” said Bev.

“To the front yard? I’m not that frail.”

She nudged him lightly in the side. “Nebraska.”

“You’ve said that already. And it’s not like I really had other plans.”

“Mm,” said Beverly, and after a moment asked as casual as could be, “How’s your divorce going?”

“How’s your divorce going?”

“I asked you first,” she replied, and though it was too dark to really see it, he could hear the smile in her voice. Maybe the only other one of the Losers who could ask him about his divorce while smiling.

“Well,” said Eddie, feeling an old yellow feeling that lived down in his gut and brought to mind memories of sitting in a class he hadn’t done the homework for. “It is and it isn’t I guess.”

Beverly hummed sympathetically. Eddie frowned at the night.

“I mean, we’re separated at least. Not officially, not the paperwork part. But we’ve been living apart since - I don’t know, for I guess at least a month? But the actual paperwork part, with lawyers and contracts or whatever – that hasn’t started yet. Which – I know how it sounds.”

“It sounds about right,” said Beverly with a touch of amusement. “It’s not like this thing is easy.”

“No, it’s not.”

She looked over at him, then dug around her coat pockets for something – a cigarette, he realized,
when there was a *click* and he saw she had flicked a lighter in her other hand. She had the glowing flame held to the tip of the cigarette before it disappeared and she said, “Shit, Eddie – I’m sorry, I forgot about – about your lungs – I mean…”

His whole life panicking over his asthma, only to peel back the truth in time for life to knock him over with a genuine respiratory condition.

“My singular lung?” said Eddie, wishing he could add *it’s okay, you can smoke your cigarette, I don’t mind*, an instinct from the twelve year old in him who wanted to seem unbothered by this cool girl’s casual delinquency. But he only had the one lung, plus the years spent panicking about second hand smoke and the cancer-causing chemicals it contained.

“Yeah,” said Bev, “Yeah – How is that? How are you doing?”

“It’s fine, I’m fine. It’s not like I was running marathons before this, anyway.” And he could have been, he could have gone out for track in high school or done cross-country in college, he could have been running every day of his life if it wasn’t for what his mother had planted within in him.

But that way of thinking threatened to fan the embers he was trying to keep cold.

“How long have you been smoking?” he asked instead, remembering them as kids huddled down in their clubhouse, Beverly and Richie sharing a cigarette between the group that mostly ended up passed between themselves, each of them getting about three puffs in before one of them was holding nothing but ash between their fingers.

“Oh, I quit. But it’s a holiday.”

“Well, I’m sorry to ruin your holiday.”

She laughed. “It’s fine, it’s better if I don’t.”

She tucked the cigarette back into the pack, replacing it in her coat pocket. They shared the silence for a while, in that specific way only two friends could do in the dark. Like they’d slipped into some pocket in the universe, a sort of underwater cave. A silence that was its own type of language.

“I used to feel like such a hypocrite,” said Beverly eventually. “Forbes did a small profile on me once, a few years ago. You know. Hard-working, talented young woman, comes from nobody and nowhere town, puts in the hours, creates successful business, now she’s rich – that sort of thing. Of course, Tom was part of that, but the piece was just on me.” She spoke softly, face turned up towards the stars again.

“They asked all these questions, about making it in the business, about being a woman, a business woman in the industry. And I said a lot of bullshit about being confident, and knowing your self worth and all of that kind of stuff. Growing from failure, never giving up. Nothing that anyone wouldn’t have heard before. Everything you’re supposed to do if you want to be a woman in a man’s world. And then I would turn around and go home to Tom.”

She was quiet for a moment. Eddie had no idea what he was supposed to say, his mind flipping through responses, all of which sounded stupid even in his head. This was part of the murky realm they never touched on, the things they let live in the dark.

*(It was only for your own good Eddie)*

“I knew what we had wasn’t good,” she said. Her tone was deliberately casual. “Part of me always
knew that. People on the outside, who don’t understand, they think you don’t know that.”

“Yeah,” said Eddie, not sure what he was agreeing with but knowing he did.

“The problem is you don’t even know if it can be different. But you think it can. You always believe it will be – but you never believe too much, so you can’t be surprised when it isn’t.”

She still spoke with a slight shrug to her words, as if it was an old story she’d told before. But they never had spoken like this before, and Eddie felt her words dig into him, wrap around the truths he let fester in the cellars of his mind, and pull.

*It makes sense for Bev*, the ghost of himself said to Richie across from a table in a nice enough restaurant. As though Beverly were unique among them, like he could hold her separate from himself. As though they hadn’t been kids who had grown into adults that were sharing a bench beneath a starry sky and updating one another on their own divorces.

“Can I ask you something?” said Eddie.

“Anything. Unless it’s about how to succeed as a woman in a fast-paced and male-dominated industry.”

“No, not that,” said Eddie. “Richie told me you were going to go to therapy.”

Beverly laughed. “Oh, yeah. What about it?”

“Did you go?”

“I went two times,” replied Beverly. “It wasn’t for me.”

Something seemed to sink in Eddie at her response. “Why?”

“I just decided I didn’t need to pay a bunch of money for someone else to tell me what my problem is when I already know it.”

His mother’s voice like a crowbar in his mind. A memory of her washing dishes at the sink, her hands encased in their rubber yellow armor as she attacked the dishes with soap and a sponge. She was muttering something to herself and when Eddie, maybe not yet twelve, approached her to ask if she was alright, she had said *alright? Oh yes, oh I am perfectly fine.* And then, gripping the edge of the sink, glaring at the puffs of suds that were drifting down the side, *what do those shrinks know about how a mother should raise her son?*

“So why did you go – if you knew it was going to be useless?”

“Oh, Ben. He was the one who brought it up to start, and he’s been so patient with, with everything.” She sighed. “And it sounded good at first. I was tired. When we went to Derry, and everything came back, all the memories – I was sick of my own mind.”

Eddie didn’t know if he’d ever stood far enough apart from his own thoughts to think of them like that. For so long what he’d been sick of was his body, its tissue paper defenses and quick betrayal. All the little tricks and lies to it, and the way his mother’s voice would rise up to remind him of them. He was still sick of that, her words clawing through his defenses and how – ever since Derry – Mr. Keene’s voice followed after hers now, with its wicked sweet truth like a candy-coated razor blade.

“So what do you do?” asked Eddie. The question was out before he realized he was going to ask it.
"I deal with it," said Bev. "Like we all do."

"Do we?" wondered Eddie aloud, and he felt more than saw Beverly turn to look at him. Suddenly he had ten, twenty more questions to ask, the sort of things he didn’t know if he could say over the phone or type into a text message but maybe he could force out here, in the middle of nowhere.

"I think so," said Beverly. "I don’t think – I don’t know if we could, without each other."

The faraway sound of a door opening carried over towards them, followed soon by Ben’s voice.

"Bev?" he called from the house. "You out there?"

"Yeah," she yelled back, standing up. "It’s me and Eddie."

There was a jangling sound approaching them, as though someone holding a ring of car keys was charging towards them, and suddenly June was there, jumping on Bev and barking happily. Eddie quickly stood up so as to keep his face out of licking range from the dog.

"Hey girl," said Bev, scratching June behind the ears. "Yeah we’re coming, we’re coming June."

Ben gave a sharp whistle from the porch and June gave another bark before turning around and bounding off into the dark again. Beverly straightened up, glanced upwards at the sky again and then looked over at Eddie.

"It is getting cold," she said.

"Getting?" repeated Eddie. "It feels like it’s negative twenty degrees out here!"

Beverly laughed. "I doubt it’s lower than thirty, maybe."

"Okay, well. It’s fucking cold, so."

"Yes. We should go in."

And it had receded now, that small peace they’d held between each other. Gone as easily as a deer spooked by a passing hiker.

"I’m glad you made it out here, too, Bev," said Eddie. She smiled at him and squeezed his arm.

They followed the stone pathway back up to the house. Ben was waiting on the front porch, and he heaved the most tragic sigh when he saw Beverly’s shoeless feet.

"I’m surprised you didn’t make a fuss, Eds," he said.

"Oh don’t worry, he did," said Beverly, patting Ben’s shoulder and smiling at him. "Just a little one."

"I don’t think I made a fuss," muttered Eddie, following her into the house. It was so warm inside, it was only crossing the threshold that he fully appreciated how fucking cold it had been out there.

"I just told her to put on some shoes."

"God, your hands are freezing," said Ben, clasping one of Bev’s hands in both of his own.

"Sorry," she said, her voice soft. "I forgot gloves."

Eddie could see the way her hand seemed to curl so slightly around Ben’s own, so that she was
holding him as well. It was a small gesture, tender, and suddenly Eddie wasn’t sure where he was supposed to be looking, whether he should even be standing here still. He turned towards the closet to hang his coat and things back up, and at the same time June came barreling through the still-open door. Ben shut the front door and led June to the kitchen for a treat, while Bev added her coat next to Eddie’s in the hallway closet.

When he went to bed that night, not too long after his return from star gazing, sleep didn’t dodge him the way he expected it to. Even with his stringent bed time routine and medications, it had been more scattered ever since Derry. And he didn’t expect to sleep well in new places, especially places that were so eerily silent. But despite lacking the usual melody of late night traffic and loud-mouthed vagrants, despite being in the middle of a nowhere he hadn’t been before, the moment he sank into bed he fell fully into sleep. If he had any dreams, he didn’t remember them.

***

On Thanksgiving morning, Richie woke up at five am, wrestled his consciousness back into submission by six am because fuck that, and woke up again at eight. Eight am was not an entirely unreasonable time to be awake and he could smell the strong, earthy scent of fresh coffee, so he conceded defeat. He slipped on a navy Los Angeles Rams sweatshirt (a team he only knew was from Los Angeles because the city name was printed on the front), grabbed his glasses and exited his room. The low sound of voices drifted along the hallway, along with the warm smell of cinnamon.

Rubbing sleep from his eyes, Richie made his way towards the kitchen, where he found a nearly full pot of coffee along with Mike and Eddie talking. Mike appeared to be criminally put together before ten am on a holiday, in comfortable corduroy pants and a deep maroon sweater. Eddie was more on Richie’s wavelength, in checkered pajama pants, a fleece zip-up, and his normally straight-combed hair all stuck up in a way that Richie registered as adorable before he could stop himself.

“Morning, Richie,” said Mike.

“Surprised to see you awake now,” said Eddie.

“What, you saying I don’t strike you as a go-getter?” asked Richie, plucking a mug from a cabinet and digging out some creamer from the refrigerator.

“Not the type that gets up before nine,” replied Eddie.

“I live to defy expectation,” said Richie, pouring himself a cup of coffee. “Mike are those your cinnamon rolls in the oven? Because they smell fucking amazing.”

“Sure are,” said Mike with a grin.

“Honestly, I’d probably eat those for Thanksgiving breakfast and dinner.”

“I’m shocked,” said Eddie, smiling.

There was a small flat screen TV on one of the counters, pushed against the corner. It was currently switched on and broadcasting the beginning of the Macy’s Thanksgiving Day parade from New York City.

“You ever go see that?” Richie asked Eddie, nodding at the screen. Eddie made a face as though Richie had asked if he’d ever tried snacking on a cockroach.
“No, absolutely not. Why would I?”


Mike chuckled, Eddie shook his head, and Richie took a sip of his coffee and thought *keep it together buddy!*

He had spent the Eddie-free days in Ben’s Nebraska escape bracing for the beginning of the non-Eddie-free days by imagining an internal watchdog for himself. He envisioned a little pork rind munching rent-a-cop in his mind’s eye, sitting in the middle of his brain with his own swivel chair and multiple TV feeds and watching Richie watching Eddie. It was this imagined security officer’s job to start setting off alarm bells and flashing lights if Richie was getting too close and brushing up against thoughts like how legitimately cute this forty year old man looked standing in the kitchen in his flannel pajama pants and uncharacteristic bedhead.

Too close.

The kitchen’s backdoor opened and Ben stepped inside, face flushed and sweaty from his morning run. Exercising early on Thanksgiving morning? As criminal an offense as Mike’s being fully dressed and put together. Ben’s 150-pound dander machine trotted in beside him, tongue hanging happily outside of her mouth.

“Morning guys - smells amazing in here,” said Ben, walking over to the refrigerator door to pull out a water bottle.

“They’ve got about fifteen more minutes,” said Mike. June was sniffing around his knees, and he bent down to scratch her behind the ears.

“Fifteen? Alright, I’m gonna shower, I’ll be back in time for cinnamon rolls.”

He disappeared back upstairs, while Richie contemplated how he wouldn’t get out of bed to go running on any morning, let alone Thanksgiving morning, for anything less than significant monetary compensation.

Richie, Eddie, and Mike turned their attention back to the parade, which was currently featuring singers and dancers doing a performance from a Broadway show. Eddie made a comment about how at least they hadn’t seen whatever the hell *that* was, which prompted a follow up question from Mike. When Ben returned to the kitchen, freshly showered in jeans and a plaid button-up, Eddie and Richie were heatedly recounting the show for Mike – heatedly, if only because Eddie would follow up every comment from Richie to explain how nonsensical the whole thing was, as if that wasn’t the whole damn point of a Broadway show.

Cup of black coffee in hand, Ben started to get breakfast going in earnest, pulling out fresh fruit, a carton of eggs, some bacon and veggie sausage. Richie didn’t think the kitchen could have smelled any better, but then Mike took his cinnamon rolls out of the oven as Ben started frying up some bacon, and Richie could only be grateful that during the past twenty-seven years at least his friends had learned to cook.

Audra joined them, fully dressed and with the message that Bill was writing and would probably be a while (“Doesn’t he know it’s a holiday?” Richie asked her, and she just smiled and said “That’s Bill” before popping a cube of cantaloupe in her mouth). Kay and Beverly came downstairs together, and were both, Richie was happy to see, on team pajama. Beverly said good morning to the group and glided up to the fridge, opening it up and withdrawing a plastic gallon of cranberry
juice and two bottles of sparkling wine.

“My contribution to Thanksgiving breakfast,” she said with a smile, placing them on the island counter and turning to retrieve some glasses from the cabinet.

Soon Richie had a cup of coffee, a cranberry mimosa, and a plate loaded with fried eggs, bacon, and a fresh, soft cinnamon bun dripping melted icing. Bill finally emerged from his room, a pair of glasses perched on his head, and everyone cheered. The parade, endless as it was, carried on in the corner while they all talked over it, the coffee and food bringing everyone to life. Outside the pale blue sky was already giving over to gray clouds, and some couple hundred miles away Richie imagined it was another sunny, swinging day in Los Angeles but he didn’t care.

This was the first time in a long time that Thanksgiving felt like the holiday that the TV shows and movies always advertised, where happy little well-bred families endured minor hijinks to eventually come together over a beautiful turkey courtesy of whichever props department. It was the first time they’d ever gathered together like this, but it already felt like this was what it had always been. Maybe in another world it was, and even if this was only the beginning of a tradition in this one, there wasn’t any room in the bright and conversation-filled kitchen to feel bitter about the years that should have been.

Eventually the parade gave way to a Big Deal Dog Show, and breakfast dishes started to stack themselves in the sink as the terrier group trotted across the screen. Audra, Mike, and Ben became co-captains of the kitchen, clearing away breakfast, pulling out supplies from the refrigerator, the pantry, the cupboards. Richie paired his phone with Ben’s speakers, enacting his nefarious plan to subject everyone to his carefully curated Thanksgiving playlist.

“Does the DJ take requests?” asked Beverly. She had set up shop with Kay on the corner of the dining room table, along with the cranberry mimosa materials.

“The DJ considers them,” said Richie.

Bev requested a singer that Richie vetoed on the basis of his being a whiny, auto-tuned hack, who also didn’t have any songs that felt on-brand for Thanksgiving in Richie’s opinion. Beverly implied that his dedication to the playlist’s integrity would mean no more cranberry mimosas. So the whiny auto-tune hack won.

Richie’s plan had been to avoid any kitchen responsibilities by arguing that the Thanksgiving playlist was a full time job. Audra didn’t buy this and soon he was pressed into service, with Audra assigning him to potato-peeling duty.

“Unbelievable,” said Richie as Audra set a plate in front of him to catch the potato skins. “From headliner to scullery maid, that’s all I am now.”

“Richie’s a scullery maid?” asked Bill, re-entering after his second disappearance to go ‘do some writing’ or whatever. “Is that what I heard?”

“You’d be a good scullery maid,” said Bev. “You could have a little bonnet.”

“And a lacy little smock,” added Kay.

“I said a scullery maid,” said Richie. “Not a Party City French maid.”

“You can be whatever you want, as long as you peel the potatoes,” said Audra, already re-absorbed in some other kitchen task. Bill looked over at Richie’s set up.
“You’re going to peel the potatoes?”

“Why, you want to do it?”

Bill grinned. “No. I’m j-j-just excited to see this happen.”

“You don’t think I can handle a potato?”

“I’m more worried about you than the potato.”

“Dude,” said Richie. “I can peel a potato.”

Bill waved his hand in a by all means gesture and turned back to Audra to get his own culinary marching orders. Eddie, his hair now showered and combed, joined Richie at the kitchen island with his own cutting board and knife, having been put on vegetable chopping duty. Riche watched Eddie setting up his little station, prodding the watchdog in his mind awake. Since Eddie’s arrival yesterday they hadn’t really had a moment between just the two of them, and the watchdog was telling him to keep it that way. This was safe enough, the two of them sitting at this island with everyone else spread throughout the kitchen, while Patti Smith rasped out a song in the background.

“This is another kind of weird, huh?” said Eddie.

“Oh great, you don’t think I can handle a potato either?”

“I know you can handle a potato,” replied Eddie. “No, I mean like, I would never have guessed six months ago that I would be getting ready for Thanksgiving dinner with like, a movie star, and a famous author, and a famous fashion designer.”

“Really? Because this is pretty much every weekend for me.”

“Yeah, well, maybe it’s normal for someone like you.”

“I’m kidding, Eds,” said Richie, who had slowly but surely peeled a grand total of three potatoes so far. He was trying to do a precise job of it, and precise wasn’t one of the go-to qualities most people would use to describe him. It probably wasn’t even in the top ten. “It is fucking weird. Our childhood friend married a movie star who’s got me peeling potatoes. You don’t think I appreciate the fucking bizzare-o nature of that?”

“Yeah.” Eddie smiled to himself. “What do you usually do for Thanksgiving?”

Richie considered the question. Getting older, it was hard to even keep track of regular memories that hadn’t been swallowed up by the gray fog of Derry. Thanksgiving strung itself together in one long, endless parade of blithe interactions and turkeys of various quality. Last year – last year, he might have been seeing that one girl, Carmen. Which he mostly remembered because she had flown home to spend the holiday and he’d driven her to the airport, which was always so harrowing an experience as to be unforgettable. He’d probably gone to a friendsgiving last year, complete with a store-bought pumpkin pie as his own contribution. And it had been nice, if he was remembering right. It had probably been a perfectly nice time.

“Fuck all usually,” he replied. “Someone will usually invite me to something, and I’ll usually go. I’ll pretty much attend any event with free food and alcohol. What about you?”

Oh that was very clever, thought Richie to himself in response to Eddie’s silence. Ask the guy currently getting divorced about what his previous Thanksgiving plans looked like. Really sensitive
of you. His mental watchdog shook his head – no infraction there, just straight up insensitivity.

“Not much,” said Eddie after a moment. “I mean it was always just Myra and me, neither of us really have any family we’re close with, especially after my mother died. Sometimes we’d watch the parade in the morning – on the TV,” he said pointedly. “Sometimes we’d cook dinner, sometimes we’d just go out.”

Richie nodded, “You know, that really rocked my world as an adult, when I realized you could just go to a restaurant on Thanksgiving day.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah, I mean as a kid, my parents would always cook all day on Thanksgiving and Christmas – and it wasn’t like they ever made anything amazing. Then when I got older and I realized holy shit, you could just go to a restaurant? I mean, what a novel concept.”

“My ma didn’t cook on Thanksgiving after we moved to Queens,” said Eddie. “I remember that now – and when we lived in Derry we used to spend Thanksgiving with my aunts.”

“Yeah, I remember that too!”

Eddie nodded. “I hated it, because it meant taking the bus to one of my aunts, and the bus was already crowded and the traffic sucked. And I had to wear nice clothes, and they were always itchy. Anyways, she cooked then, but when we moved to Queens that all kind of stopped. We didn’t go anywhere and she didn’t cook on Thanksgiving.” He tilted one shoulder up. “But I didn’t have to wear any itchy clothes either, so I guess it all evened out.”

Eddie was focused on the vegetables he was chopping up as he spoke, creating perfectly even little carrot circles as he recounted his childhood Thanksgiving. Richie watched him chopping, and it was somehow different to sit and speak and look at Eddie in this moment. It was like looking out through a window that had been dirty for years and finally wiped clean, and he might have thought something else about the whole thing if the watchdog rent-a-cop of his mind hadn’t snapped to.

“That’s a guiding life principle man. Before I do anything I ask myself, how likely are itchy clothes to be involved in this?”

Eddie glanced up from his chopping board. “Is that why you went into comedy?”

“One of the best career paths when it comes to comfortable wardrobe options really,” said Richie. “Well, for stand-up at least. You start going down the world of sketch comedy? Now we’re talking costumes. Now we’re talking wigs, facial hair, spirit gum. But if you’re good enough at stand up, you can basically go on in sweatpants and a t-shirt and no one will care.”

“That’s not what you do, though,” said Eddie, and Richie looked over. “I mean, I’ve seen your special. You look pretty sharp in that.”

“Fuck!”

Eddie whipped his head up, “What, are you – shit, man!”

In what was maybe a tale of hubris for acting so cocksure about his untested potato peeling prowess (was that hubris? Richie had no damn idea), Richie had let the knife slip and sliced the skin along the back of his left hand, below his thumb. He dropped the knife and contaminated potato on the cutting board, his hand singing with a sharp, slick pain. The blood had only a few seconds to well up before paper towels were flying across him, and he realized Eddie was pulling
them off the rack and shoving them over Richie’s hand.

“Press it down, dude,” said Eddie, while also taking Richie by the arm and starting to pull him out of the kitchen, his cane left leaning against his chair.

“What happened?” asked Ben as they exited the kitchen. “Is everyone okay?”

“Totally fine!” called Richie.

“He cut himself with the knife,” said Eddie.

“I’ll get the first aid kit,” said Ben, and Richie thought he might have heard Eddie mutter something, which he’d be willing to bet his small comedy empire on being a derisive comment about his expectations concerning Ben’s first aid kit.

Eddie led Richie into their hallway’s bathroom, turning on the faucet and dipping his own fingers under it for a second before looking back over at Richie, standing in the doorway with his good hand clamped over his bloody paper-toweled hand.

“Put your hand under the water,” said Eddie. “Keep it there, I’ll be right back.”

Richie did as he was told, dropping the crimson-bright paper towels into the little trashcan beside the sink and sticking his bloody hand under the faucet, his new cut stinging as the water traveled over it. Eddie was back a moment later with a bag large enough to fit the winning terrier from the Westminster dog show, which he put on the vanity besides the sink.

“What’s that?” asked Richie.

“My first aid kit,” replied Eddie, digging through it. “Well, my travel first aid kit.”

Richie laughed because yeah, of course. Of course Eddie wouldn’t go anywhere without a first aid kit the size of a bag Richie might pack for a weekend trip.

“How’s the bleeding?” asked Eddie.

“Uh, I mean, still happening?”

Eddie leaned over to the sink. “Let me see your hand.”

Richie pulled his hand away from the water for Eddie’s examination. A thin line of red started to thicken along the cut as he did so.

“Give it to me straight Dr. K, am I gonna make it?”

“Yeah, you’re going to make it. Hold some toilet paper against it for a second, okay?”

Richie flipped the seat down on the toilet and settled upon it, yanking a couple of squares of toilet paper off the roll to press against the cut. Eddie shut off the faucet and finished pulling a few supplies out of his kit, just as Ben appeared in the doorway with a small white plastic case in hand.

“Hey,” he said. “You okay? I got the first aid kit.”

Eddie glanced up at it.

“Yeah we’re good,” he said, his tone saying oh_that’s what you’ve got in your medicine cabinet? That’s cute. “It’s just a small cut, we’ll be back in a second.”
“Small cut?” said Richie. “My thumb’s hanging on by a thread here!”

“Really?” asked Ben, looking concerned. “Do you need to go to the hospital?”

“Oh my god no, he’s just being an asshole. He doesn’t need a hospital.”

“Hey, take note,” said Richie. “Eddie Kaspbrak going against recommending a hospital visit.”

Eddie waved a hand, “We’re good, Ben, thanks.”

“Okay,” said Ben, still looking a little worried. “I’m just going to leave this here though, just in case. Let me know if you need anything else.”

He left the small plastic case on top of a hamper near the door and slowly left the bathroom. Eddie washed his hands in the sink, working the soap up into a lather and cleaning well past his wrists.

“Getting ready for surgery?” asked Richie.

“Fuck you, this is for you alright? You’re the guy with an open wound.”

Open wound made it sound like late night E.R. shit, as though Richie needed to be strapped onto a stretcher and hurdled into some emergency operating room ASAP. He almost said as much, until the memory of the last ER he’d been in smacked him upside the head. Not for the first time, he looked over at Eddie, drying his hands on a towel, and wondered how patched up he was under his sweater.

“Alright,” said Eddie, seating himself on the edge of the bathroom tub so that he could be across from Richie. He had a small array of materials at the ready beside him. “Give me your hand.”

“I can probably do it myself.”

“Just give me your hand, man.”

Richie hesitated, then threw the bloody tissue paper in the trashcan, gave his hand to Eddie, and the little rent-a-cop in his mind put on his hat and walked out the door because there was no point in his sticking around.

Eddie took Richie’s hand in his own, pulling it towards him and leaning over it, dabbing at the cut with a dry cotton ball and then one that he’d smeared with some type of ointment that stung across the cut.

Don’t do it, thought Richie, but the rent-a-cop was gone, and there was no better instinct to stop Richie from glancing up while Eddie was busy doctoring.

Their faces were so close. All the little details of Eddie were within a breath of him, and in that one moment that felt stretched out to an hour, Richie drank them all in. The bridge of Eddie’s nose where he remembered a ghost of freckles from when they were kids, unmarked now. His jaw, freshly shaved that morning. The little lines and wrinkles along his forehead, in the corner of his eyes. The slightly-raised and off-color line of skin that was the scar on his left cheek. His eyebrows, thin at one end and drawn tightly together in concentration on the other. And his eyes, where all that dark, furious intensity lived, cast down as he focused it all on Richie’s hand.

He applied a piece of gauze firmly over the cut, securing it with a strip of first aid tape.

“There,” said Eddie, leaning back and smiling up at Richie. “See? I told you you’d live.”
Richie met Eddie’s bright smile, felt his heart wobble like an overconfident handyman balanced on the top of a very tall ladder, and smiled back.

“Yeah, guess you did.”

It was well after dinner, with the little hand on the clock just inching past eleven, when Audra said she was going to bed now. She uncurled herself from the couch where she’d almost fallen asleep, leaned over to kiss Bill, and said good night to the rest of the group, graciously accepting a last round of compliments for how well the turkey had turned out. Kay had turned in an hour earlier after receiving a phone call that made her raise her eyebrows and smile over at Bev, who had mouthed wow back at her and made a well go on gesture. So when Audra got up and walked out of the living room, it left the six Losers together.

The night had felt like it was winding down. They were all gathered in the living room, done with their bowls and plates marked with pie crumbs and bits of melted ice cream, along with mugs of tea and coffee and drink glasses. Dinner had been delicious – the mashed potatoes had lived, despite Richie’s injury, the only sacrifice being the potato he’d been peeling when he cut his hand. The dining room table had looked like the front of a hallmark card, the kind Richie’s grandma would have sent with a pastel-painted scene of a table bursting with food and Happy Thanksgiving written on the front in looping, metallic gold letters.

After dinner they’d all been rendered happily soporific for an hour or two, until someone remembered dessert. Pies and cobblers had been sliced, coffee made (caffeinated and decaf, because Eddie had said there was no way he’d get to sleep if he drank any caffeine after 4 pm), a fire started in the living room. They’d ended up playing charades, delighting in the fucking corniness of it all, before giving up on the game to sit around and swap more stories, the songs from Richie’s playlist carrying them through the lulls. And then the night had started to feel like it was tapering off, and maybe it would have, if any one but Audra had stood up to leave the room.

First time during this trip that it’s just us, Richie thought, and he could feel the others realizing it, too. It was like the way the air changed when a storm was coming on, when nothing really looked different but some deeper, animal instinct could feel the shift. If they were back at his apartment in Los Angeles, Richie would have taken out the yellow Florecitas tin he kept under the end table, which he used to store his weed and rolling papers in. But he wasn’t and he couldn’t, so he took another sip from the mug in his hand – coffee and amaretto, on Ben’s recommendation.

“So, Bill,” said Bev. She sat with her feet tucked under her on one end of a loveseat, elbow propped on the armrest. And when she grinned, Richie saw some of the old salt in her, of the girl who could turn the other cheek while also sticking out a leg to trip you. “What are you writing these days? What’s coming next?”

Bill huffed a small laugh. “You been talking to my publisher? Because she asks me the same question.”

“How scary is this one going to be?”

“Well, if it exists, I don’t think it’s g-going to be scary at all.” He quirked a small smile. “Not the way they mostly are.”

“What do you mean?” asked Mike

“J-J-Just this one isn’t a horror book.”
“Oh good, Eddie can read it,” said Richie.

“Shut up Richie.”

“So what’s it about?” asked Mike.

“I think it’s a love s-story,” replied Bill, looking down at his folded hands. “I’m not sure if it will be any g-good.”

“Bill, at this point, you could publish a collection of all your grocery lists from 2016 and it’d be a New York Times Best Seller for ten weeks,” said Richie. Bill gave him a sideways look.

“I’m sure it’ll be interesting,” said Beverly. She smiled. “That is a bit of a twist, Bill Denbrough publishing romance now.”

“Well, it’s not, it’s not straight romance. It’s a drama, and I think there’ll be t-t-time travel, too.”

“Why is time traveling romance such a big thing?” mused Richie.

“Is it?” asked Ben.

“Based on all the terrible romantic comedies I’ve been dragged to over the years, I say yes. The Lake House? The Time Traveler’s Wife?”

“That Scottish show,” added Eddie, to Richie’s delighted surprise.

“What?”

“That show with the woman who goes back in time somewhere in Scotland, and then she gets with a Scottish guy in the past – what?”

“Nothing,” said Richie, grinning. “I’m just intrigued that this is ah, this is the TV you watch.”

“I didn’t watch it, Myra did,” insisted Eddie. “I’d just see it on. I don’t even remember what it was called.”

“Outlander,” said Beverly, grinning. “Great costumes.”

“They’re good books too,” added Mike. “I haven’t seen the show but the books are great.”

“So are you writing the next Outlander, Bill?” Beverly asked. Bill shook his head.

“No, I don’t think it will be like that, I…” He shrugged. “To be honest, I’m w-w-worried that I – that I w-won’t be able to write anything good again.”

“Not a problem Bill, you never wrote anything good to begin with,” said Richie.

“Beep beep,” said Beverly, leveling a look at him.


Bill was silent, and in one swift, sinking moment Richie realized he knew exactly what Bill meant. He recognized the hungry type of doubt that had burrowed itself within him.

“Richie could be right. M-Maybe none of it was good,” said Bill eventually. “Maybe the whole t-time it’s just been…”
Eddie stared at Bill, his expression perplexed. “Just been what?”

“Like… like, maybe our success wasn’t ever because any of just happened to be great,” said Ben, looking over at Bill as he spoke, “It’s like what Mike pointed out the first night we came back, how well we’d all done – that doesn’t happen to everyone who leaves Derry. Just us.”

It was like Ben had reached into Richie’s thoughts and pulled them out. Mike was looking at the drink in his hands. Beverly’s expression was neutral and Bill nodded, but Eddie was shaking his head.

“Okay, except, except barely anyone ever does leave Derry,” said Eddie. “And we’re all sitting in a house that Ben built. That doesn’t go away. The things we’ve learned or achieved, they’re not like, poof, gone.”

And Richie thought but it’s different, it’s different when half the time you don’t even know where the jokes or the words come from, like a source you got no control over and you’re worried one day someone’s gonna shut the whole thing off and what if It did.

“Right,” said Ben. “I just mean… I think I understand what Bill is saying. Sometimes I worry I won’t get anymore jobs, or that even if I do I won’t build anything memorable again.”

“What are you saying?” asked Eddie, “You think – what, you think we were only successful because of the fucking clown?”

“It just seems relevant,” said Beverly, with a shrug. “The six of us who left Derry – even Stan was doing incredibly well. We know it’s not just a coincidence.”

“Yeah but that’s, that’s different from what Bill and Ben are saying,” said Eddie. “That’s different from thinking that everything is over.”

“I think Eddie’s right,” said Mike, and Richie felt the way they all turned to look at him, like students tracking a teacher across a classroom. “What you’ve done, where you’ve gotten to – the things you can do. You can still do them.”

“You think so?” asked Bill, frowning slightly.

Mike held Bill’s gaze and nodded. “I always suspected that there was something that had some hand in your success, sure. But I don’t think, whatever it was, that it rigged the whole game. You all had that talent. You all worked hard. If something was a part of this, well – you all got lucky, I think that’s the truth – no one gets anywhere far in this life without a lot of luck on their side, that’s one thing I’ve come to believe.”

He leaned back in his chair and sighed. “There’s plenty we’ll never be sure of. Everything you succeeded in, whether that was It trying to keep you away, or maybe Some Other, some thing to balance the scales.” He smiled. “Something to make up for having such a shitty time of it early on.”

“If that’s the case then you should be winning the lottery any day, Mikey,” mused Richie.

Mike grinned. “Sure. Here’s hoping.”

“You really deserve it,” said Bev. She ran a hand through her hair. “I don’t know – how you stayed in Derry knowing everything. Sometimes it’s hard now, it’s just strange. Sometimes I’m going about my day, doing something totally normal, and it just hits me all over again. I remember remembering.”
“Yeah, it’s fucking weird,” agreed Richie, thinking of the memories that crowded the Notes app in his phone, the nightmares that gnawed away at his sleep.

“It is,” said Mike. “It is. But…”

He trailed off, considering, and Richie felt the strangeness of them sitting in the middle of Nebraska and talking about Derry. It felt a little like poking a dead animal with a stick, testing to make sure it really was dead.

“This is different. We’ve got each other now,” continued Mike. “I was, I was actually a little worried coming out here. Before, at the end of the summer, I was worried that maybe, despite everything, we really would forget again. And then I was worried we’d all come back together and, and there’d be nothing there.”

“Like we were only friends because of It,” said Eddie in a low voice, and Richie looked over at him, surprised.

“But we didn’t forget,” said Ben. “And we are here. Together. We really did make it.”

“Most of us,” said Richie, and felt a small twinge of regret as he saw the smile fade on Ben’s face. But the others were nodding, and Richie couldn’t feel too much regret when the truth sat there, empty as the chair to his left.

“Yeah, most of us,” echoed Bill.

They were all silent for a moment, and Richie wondered if they were all thinking the same thing. How some days were hard but some days were kind; some days, their different worlds seemed to melt together more easy. Like this one.

“I sold the farm,” said Mike.

Everyone turned to look at him.

“You did?” said Ben.

Mike nodded and took a drink from the near-empty beer bottle in his hand.

“Yeah. Letting it go for less than it’s worth, but it’s hard to sell anything in Derry even when the town hasn’t gone and blown half itself up. I’m putting my house up for sale when I get back, but the farm was the big thing.” He looked up at them and smiled. “I’ve decided I’m officially gone come January.”

“Wow,” said Bill. “Good for you.”

“Yeah. Well. Let’s wait and see until I’m driving across the county line for good. Derry’s got its ways of getting its hooks in you.”

_Hook line and sinker_ thought Richie.

“Where are you going?” asked Bev.

“Everywhere, I hope,” said Mike.

“Hell of a time to start a road trip,” said Richie. “The middle of winter?”

“Yeah. But the beginning of the year – feels sort of right,” replied Mike. “I’ve been thinking –
thinking I’d go to Atlanta. To see Stan.”

“To see –” began Eddie, cutting off his own question as Mike’s meaning became clear to him.

“I don’t know when I’ll end up there exactly,” continued Mike, “I don’t plan on driving a straight path. But… I wanted to make it an open invitation.”

“Atlanta,” said Bill, looking at his hands. Then he looked up at Mike, and smiled a full Bill smile, the type that let the skinny kid on the too-big bike shine through. “That sounds nice.”

“Could be,” said Mike, smiling back. And then they were all adding their own affirmations, so that it became obvious, if not quite clear, that Atlanta was where the Losers might reconvene next. And then Bill was asking do you remember when… and talking about a time before the summer, and a moment in the cafeteria with Stan that only Richie and Eddie would have been there for, but they were all nodding and laughing, remembering it or being told the story for the first time.

And for a while at least, the past was alive in a kinder way. Like a dog rescued from the streets, the sort that probably had fleas and worms and fucked up teeth that would cost hundreds of dollars to get fixed. The type of mutt that only knew how to bite and growl at first, but with patience and kindness could maybe learn how to be a dog again. That potential was there in the laughter they shared, and whatever they’d discovered at the end of July felt real here, with the last log in the fire starting to turn into gray ash and the coffee in their cups long cold. Something else, something more important than fears of financial success or internet trolls or New York Times reviews, was strong between them. Strong and growing stronger.

The rest of the trip went too fast. It slipped by between more late nights and early mornings, between delicious lunches pulled together from Thanksgiving leftovers. Between fires that Ben built on the back patio, and daily doses of allergy medication so that June didn’t cause Richie to choke to death on his own congestion and suffer an embarrassing funeral due to dog allergies. Between avoiding too many one-on-one moments with Eddie and ignoring the rough beating of his heart. Between more board games with Kay, who played a vicious game of scrabble (QUALMY for 52 points, give him a break), and a long walk along Ben’s property with Mike, and Industry Talk with Bill and Audra, and a few sneaky cigarettes along the side of the house with Beverly. Between soaring prairie days and restless nights that always ended up with Richie falling asleep after midnight to the sound of some movie playing softly on his iPad and jerking awake near sunrise.

And suddenly it was Tuesday morning, the day he was supposed to fly home. It was a sleepy, dusty sort of day, the sky outside cloudy but metal-bright. Richie squinted against it from the sunroom, where he was sitting alone and listening to an indie rock band sing about putting dreams away for now. It was all very malcontent-teenage-girl of him, he thought.

“Hey.”

Richie twisted around in his chair, popping out one of his ear buds as he did so. Eddie, to his delight and dread, was standing in the doorframe and looking at him with a mixed expression that Richie couldn’t quite read.

“Hey,” said Richie.

“You look pensive as hell, dude.”
“I’m not allowed the full spectrum of human emotion?”

“Definitely not what I said,” said Eddie, walking in and sitting down in a chair to Richie’s left. Richie regarded him. From this angle, he couldn’t see the scar on Eddie’s cheek. Sitting there, casual as could be, Richie doubted anyone would guess this was a man who’d been laid up in a hospital on the brink of death a few months ago. The only obvious hint of something was the plastic brace he had on his left foot.

Eddie looked over and caught Richie staring. He fixed his face into that familiar scowl.

“What?”

“Nothing,” said Richie, and then, “Just thinking how fucking crazy it is that you’re alive.”

Eddie exhaled loudly and raised his eyebrows in a sort of well, what can you do way, as though they were discussing some mundane inconvenience like a delayed flight or health insurance premium.

“Yeah,” said Eddie. “I think about it, too.”

“Hey I meant to ask…” said Richie. It was a question that had been nagging him ever since Thanksgiving, but no moment had really seemed right, since he’d been avoiding this exact one. But if it was going to happen anyway, well. What the hell. “So you watched my stand up?”

Eddie looked at him as though he was the tiny, impossible-to-read line on an eye chart.

“What?”

“Yeah you just, you said something about it. On Thanksgiving, right before I cut open my hand?”

“No, I remember you cutting open your hand.” Eddie shook his head. “Yeah. I went back and ended up watching your special. I mean, Myra’s not around to tell me to turn it off.”

“Silver linings?”

“The silver lining to getting divorced is watching your comedy?”

“Well, I hope it’s a silver lining instead of whatever the hell the opposite of a silver lining is.”

“Opposite of a silver lining… probably just more bullshit.”

“Okay, well, I hope it wasn’t just more bullshit then.”

“No, it wasn’t bullshit.” Eddie was quiet a moment. “It was funny, you’re a funny person. But it was weird, too, you know. It was like a different version of you.”

Richie shrugged, feeling a wave that was both hot and cold flash through him. Standing up and telling jokes for the validation of a crowd of strangers was one thing. Asking about it from someone whose opinion actually mattered to him was a totally different one.

“Well it’s a performance,” said Richie. “So it’s me, but not me. Like you said, it’s a different version. Plus that special’s like, two years old now.”

Eddie didn’t say anything for a moment, and Richie thought it was real rich that this guy had decided to come in and call him the pensive one.
“What?” prodded Richie.

“What?” prodded Richie. “I just mean that, it was kind of weird, because I know you, but I was watching you from when I didn’t know you. You know?”

“I’ve got a head ache.”

“I’ve got a head ache.”

“Alright, whatever.”

“Alright, whatever.”

“No no I’m kidding, I got it. I do know what you mean.” Richie took out his other ear bud and wrapped up his earphones. “That’s all of us man. We’re all performing different versions now.”

“Huh,” said Eddie. Richie reconsidered what he’d said.

Maybe a different version wasn’t entirely right. But they were different, they had to admit that, or else none of them would even be here together in Ben’s home in Nebraska, and Eddie and Bev wouldn’t be leaving their spouses for greener pastures, and Mike wouldn’t have sold the farm and Bill wouldn’t be worrying about ever writing another bestseller. And Richie was pretty sure that if he went back and watched his special again, it was more than just a difference of two years and his stage persona that would ring as hollow to him.

“A little at least,” said Richie. “I don’t know. People don’t usually come to me for introspection.”

Eddie looked over at him, smiled and shook his head. He was quiet for a moment, and Richie was worried that now Eddie was doing some introspecting, but when he spoke again it was just to say, “This was a good trip.”

“Yeah,” agreed Richie. “And I never thought I’d say that about Nebraska.”

“Me neither.”

“I think Derry kind of lowered the bar a little,” said Richie. “For one thing, none of our meals ended with a bunch of nightmare creatures birthing themselves out of the dessert, right?”

“Sure. And no one’s stabbed me in the face.”

“Or the chest.”

“Yeah. No one’s tried to kill any of us, actually.”

Richie snapped his fingers. “That’s why it’s been so relaxing.”

Eddie laughed, and Richie did his best to ignore the way Eddie’s laugh loosened something in his chest.

“Man,” said Eddie, grinning. “We’re all so fucked.”

“Yeah, but we’re all fucked up together. That’s the beauty of friendship.”

“I guess so.” He paused. “Are you going to come to Atlanta? When Mike goes?”

“Sure, don’t see why I wouldn’t.”

“Yeah. When Mike said that, I just felt like, like of course. Like why haven’t I gone already?”

“This makes more sense,” said Richie. He got along with genuine sentiment about as well as he did
LA’s public transportation system, but he had to begrudgingly allow a moment for Stan. “It’s Stan. So it should be all of us.” He looked over at Eddie. “I think he’d be really honored to know you’re going to get on another plane for him.”

“I’m not getting on a plane. I can drive to Atlanta, thanks.”

“You’re gonna drive that!?”

“It’s probably like fifteen hours or something. That’s easy.”

“Wow,” said Richie, grinning, and as was often the case with his hamster wheel brain, went on to ask without thinking, “Want some company?”

“What, you want to drive with me to Atlanta?”

And because that’s basically exactly what Richie had implied, and the dumb happy part of him that glowed when he made Eddie laugh seemed to still be in charge, he said, “Yeah I mean. If you want a buddy.”

Eddie looked over at him. “You know I’ve driven a lot of places just myself, but I don’t know if I’ve done a real like, honest road trip before?”

“Well put it on the calendar, Jack Kerouac. You, me, and our dead friend Stan.”

“Shit.” Eddie laughed. “Sounds like a great way to start the year.”

It might be a terrible way to start the year, Richie had to confess to himself. Entirely possible and most likely that when he was sitting in Omaha’s airport a few hours from now, doubt and regret and are-you-serious would grab at him with their tiny little rodent hands and gnaw straight through him. But in the sun room of Ben’s Nebraska mansion, that all felt so far away, and the good feeling he got from sitting with Eddie felt balanced, like a perfectly poured pint that foamed just to the top of the glass. Like everything was good and normal, and they lived in a world where friends didn’t forget each other and the monster under the bed was just a story and nobody had to wait until they were almost forty to figure out that they liked men and worse, that they were in love with their best friend.

Everything was just good and normal.
“Hello?” Mike sounded bemused on the other end of the phone, and Eddie didn’t know why considering he hadn't even said a single word yet.

“Hey!” he said. “You’re finally coming to New York!”

Mike laughed. “Man, do all of you just constantly check your email?”

“What?”

“Nothing, I just sent that email five minutes ago.”

“I’m a fast reader,” said Eddie. “Okay, no, I didn’t read it all yet – I skimmed it first and saw the part about you coming here.”

“Skimmed it,” said Mike, chuckling again. “Well, that’s the plan. Not sure when I’ll be in the city, maybe some time around the middle of January.”

“That’s probably the worst time of the year to visit,” said Eddie, thinking of New York in all of its cold and slushy winter glory. “But I guess if you’re still leaving Derry at the beginning of the year?”

“Yeah,” said Mike. “January 1st. I’m driving out of here.”

“Wow,” said Eddie. “Good for you.”

He was sitting on the couch in his apartment, his laptop staring back at him from the coffee table. It was a cold, Saturday afternoon, and Eddie had been doing some work, because there was always work to do and it wasn’t like he had anything else going on, when his phone had alerted him to a new email from Mike. Eddie had opened it, skimmed it out of some weird habit that hated the notion of anyone burying the lede, and when he got to the part about Mike planning to be in New York City soon, he’d called Mike before finishing the rest of the email.

And now Mike was really going to leave, the fortuitous date of his escape just over two weeks away. Back on Thanksgiving morning, when it had been just him and Mike in the kitchen of Ben’s house, he’d asked Mike about Derry. He was curious if anything felt different, if Mike still held onto the same strange sort of faith he’d exhibited in it before. The town could go either way, Mike had said then. Sort of like cards, you either play the hand you’re dealt, or you fold and walk away.

Maybe they’d never learn which way Derry decided to go, because Mike, at least, was walking away from the table. Eddie felt strangely relieved just hearing Mike name a specific date, although he knew he wouldn’t really stop worrying until the day Mike called him from anywhere outside of Derry.

“Yup,” said Mike, “It’s really happening. I’m packing everything up, leaving most of the furniture behind for whoever buys the place. If someone buys it.”

“Didn’t half the town get blown to shit?” said Eddie. “Has to make any still-standing property worth something.”

“That’s what the realtor tells me,” said Mike, sounding unconvinced. Eddie didn’t blame him. He couldn’t imagine a Derry realtor being the most honest of sorts. This house has four bedrooms, an
open kitchen, and there’s a delightful entity of infinite evil that lives in the pipes and might pop up to eat your daughter. Depending on the season.

“I really didn’t realize how much stuff I had until I planned to move,” continued Mike. “I didn’t even think of myself as someone who had many things, but living in the same town your whole life – you still end up with a lot of stuff.”

Eddie snorted. “Don’t I know it. When Myra and I moved from Queens I think I spent a month just throwing things away.”

“Yeah, I’m doing about the same thing. Been going down to the pawn shop almost every week to see what I can sell.”

“That reminds me – are you good with money, Mike?”

He could imagine Richie looking at him and saying way to be subtle, dude, but Eddie hadn’t gone from a shitty townhouse in Queens to making a six-figure salary in Manhattan by being delicate about money.

“Good with handling it?”

“No, are you okay financially,” said Eddie. “Because gas isn’t cheap.”

And neither are hotels or tolls or roadside diners when you’re eating at them every night, not to mention health insurance in this country when you’re paying it your own way, and you’ve been living on a small town library’s salary.

“I know what you meant,” said Mike. Anyone else might have been offended or resentful. Mike still had a touch of amusement to his tone. “And I’ll be fine – made a good amount selling the farm, and the house will sell some time next year. And I know how to stretch a dollar.”

“Alright. Because you know if you need anything.”

“Well, I could use a good recommendation for a spot to stay when I’m in New York.”

“Don’t be fucking stupid,” snapped Eddie, “You’re obviously staying with me, I have an extra room and an air mattress. A good air mattress.”

“You sure Eddie? I don’t want to inconvenience you.”

“Are you kidding me? It’s the very least fucking thing I could do, the very least – Mike, the whole point of knowing someone who lives in New York City is so that you can guilt them into letting you stay with them and avoid paying for some over-priced hotel with a shitty breakfast bar!”

And it would be right. It couldn’t be an inconvenience when Eddie was looking forward to the idea of Mike visiting.

There had been an absence when he’d come back from Nebraska, an emptiness that he wasn’t conscious of until his plane had finally landed at JFK and he could put away the low-key panic that occupied most of his brain during a flight. It had been a strange type of wanting, something soft and gray, and if he thought about it or tried to feel it, it seemed liable to grab him and sink him.

He wasn’t sure what the answer to this keen missing was, and while the idea of Mike visiting didn’t seem to calm it, he did think at the very least it might distract from it.
“Alright,” said Mike. “You’ve convinced me.”

They chatted a little bit longer, Mike sharing how he’d handed over his resignation, hoping that the combination of the short notice and holiday season would mean he’d be able to slip quietly away. But the library staff had balked at the idea of their head librarian leaving without any sort of acknowledgement, and were apparently planning on killing two birds with one stone by having the annual Christmas party also serve as a going away party for Mr. Hanlon.

“Huh,” said Eddie when Mike shared the story. “It’s weird to think about anyone in Derry being nice.”

“Sometimes it has more to do with proper than nice,” replied Mike. “But some of the people here are mostly alright for most of the time.”

“Hm.”

“What about you? Looking forward to the holidays?”

“Not particularly,” said Eddie. “I mean, I’m not not looking forward to them, there’s just not much there.”

And there wasn’t, without Myra. No holiday meals to plan for or presents to buy. Even the sounds of the apartment were altered. Myra liked the “holiday spirit,” loved to listen to Christmas music on the kitchen radio and play Christmas movies on the television. Which Eddie hadn’t enjoyed, but he didn’t entirely mind. Unless it was that one movie A Christmas Story, which Myra adored and he actually kind of fucking hated and wasn’t going to miss sitting through.

Silver linings, he guessed Richie would say.

“Well, you’re always welcome at the Derry library annual Christmas party.”

“No offense, Mike, but I would rather sacrifice my last fucking lung than go back to Derry.”

Mike laughed. What else could you do against the truth sometimes?

It was weird to stare down the double barrel of Christmas and New Year’s and realize that, for the first time in his life, he’d be alone for them. He pressed against the thought experimentally, the way he might have with a bruise to see if it hurt, and found the idea didn’t bother him as much as he expected it to. Alone still glared like a creature merely biding its time, but to be alone for the holidays specifically – that didn’t seem to matter so much.

So much so that it was in the middle of December, while tourists flocked around the Rockefeller Christmas tree and every retail establishment was playing the ten same holiday songs on a loop, that Eddie had his first consultation with a lawyer. Earlier he’d taken the rare approach of actually appearing at a happy hour and revealing something of his personal life to another manager at his workplace, one who he knew for a fact had been divorced twice now. You make all the money, right? The guy had said, then nudged Eddie and said Lawyer up now, hit her with a one-two punch so she can’t even think and you don’t get stuck owing her shit. You want me to recommend you someone?

Eddie had thanked him for the advice, paid his tab, and left the bar with his beer only half-drunk. Nothing like the sweet infectious spirit of the holidays.
It wasn’t the guy with the sage wisdom that got him to finally talk to someone. It wasn’t any one thing, really, but if there was a tipping point, a proverbial straw, it was Beverley. The lingering conversation with her under that night sky outside of Ben’s home in Nebraska, the sense that the ground would start to slope some way beneath him and if he didn’t start moving, it’d simply carry him away.

So he’d spoken to a lawyer, holding his aspirator tight in his left hand as the lawyer had listened to his situation and detailed his different options, explaining grounds for divorce in New York and separation agreements and other things that wrapped themselves around Eddie’s chest and squeezed lightly. He’d left that meeting feeling simultaneously more confused and more certain of things, and found himself thinking of when they’d plunged back into the sewer system of Derry. Knowing what had to be faced while every cell in his body had screamed against doing it.

Compared to what he’d faced at the end of last summer, calling up the indomitable Tracy to leave a message for Myra with her should have been easy. But in Derry he hadn’t been alone. It was only him as he left the voicemail, his voice in the empty apartment and the wailing ghost of his mother’s disappointment – the only echo that could drown out whatever Christmas song had gotten stuck in his head.

But other than the collapse of his marriage, the continued not-asthma asthma attacks, and the wicked memories that leered around his scars and the limp in his step, things were okay. It was almost nice to watch the end of the year approach with no obligation to anyone, no worry about Christmas plans or presents, confident that he’d skip his company’s annual New Year’s party as he did every year.

“You really are a sad, beautiful freak of nature,” Richie told him on the phone when Eddie was trying to explain the strange calm he felt about opting out of the holidays.

“It’s just less stressful,” Eddie replied. “This is one of the most stressful fucking times of the year!”

“So what’s your plan?” Richie asked. “Like, on New Year’s – you’re just gonna go home, warm up some lean cuisine and go to bed by nine?”

“No,” scoffed Eddie, although that didn’t sound terrible. Other than the lean cuisine – too much sodium.

Richie had plans, of course – he had scored an invitation to some movie star’s party. Which, he had emphasized, was not too difficult in LA, so don’t start thinking he was a really big deal or anything.

“Do you even know this person?” Eddie asked, putting Richie on speaker so that he could scroll through through the movie star’s limited IMDb page. He recognized nothing.

Richie laughed. “Okay, first of all, this isn’t high school and you’re not my mother.”

“I’m just asking a question.”

“There’s going to be like, a thousand people there and maybe ten of them will actually know the person who’s throwing the party.”

“And this is… fun for you?”


It sounded like hell to Eddie, but even going out for drinks after work with his colleagues recently had been a trial. And he’d left that early.
“Back to you,” continued Richie, “You’re really not gonna do anything for New Year’s?”

“Why are you so invested?” said Eddie.

“Cause my heart bleeds to think of you going to bed all alone at ten pm on the thirty-first! That’s so depressing.”

“Why, if that’s what I want to do!”

Although the words were barely out of his mouth when he felt the tugging of a memory – not one from that vault, but just one grown yellow and faded from time. Of being sixteen and telling his mother he was going over to a high school friend’s New Year’s Eve party – not even a friend, not really, just someone he knew who had invited a bunch of their grade over. And his mother, of course, had forbidden it. Had stood up and blocked the doorway, even though it was still the 28th when he was telling her this, as though she was worried he would stand up and walk out of the house that instant.

*You want to be outside of this house, in this city, on New Year’s Eve, past midnight? Do you know how dangerous that is, Eddie? It’s not safe, the way people behave! And you’re still a child! You don’t understand what can happen! You don’t understand, Eddie!*

They could have a nice New Year’s Eve together, she insisted. Just the two of them.

He remembered going to bed long before midnight that year, because it was better than sitting up with her in their small living room in one of their ragged, fabric armchairs – the chairs were a specific, cloying shade of pink that reminded him of Pepto-Bismol, except along the seat and arms where they’d been rubbed gray. She had sat in her chair, half-watching the TV, half-reading the dime-store novel in her hand, never committing to anything so much as watching her son, antsy in his own seat.

So he had gone to bed early. Better than sitting there with his breath thick and stale and stuck in his throat, the whole house feeling like it was pressing in against him.

“How’s your comedy stuff going?” asked Eddie, aware that he was basically screaming *please change the subject* and hoping that Richie, for once, could let something drop. “You said you were working on new things still, right?”

Richie laughed. “Very subtle, hint taken, okay – yeah, still working on things. I’ve got a couple
smaller gigs lined up for next week, I’ll probably workshop some of the new stuff there.”

“Can I get a preview?”

“I don’t know, Eds,” said Richie, in a tone of voice that Eddie would have described as sheepish except he had never known Richie Tozier to ever be a sheepish individual. “I usually workshop these things with an audience.”

“So what the fuck am I?”

“Alright alright – I’m working on another bit about how horror movies are a little too fanciful.”

“Oh, okay.”

“Most big budget horror today, it’s just not tapping into what’s really scary, you know? I’m saying, you got your CGI monsters, your CGI ghosts, your CGI Jigsaws, right? And I’m not saying that any of these look like a fun time, right. But true horror – have you ever been texting a friend, and you’re talking shit about someone else and you send the text, and then realize your brain fucked up and you accidentally sent the text to the person you were talking about?”

“No.”

“Okay, that’s a rhetorical question,” said Richie, “And that’s why I workshop this on stage and not on the phone with a Wall Street stock broker.”

“Risk manager,” corrected Eddie. “Also, I feel like the whole premise is off.”

“This is great,” said Richie, and Eddie could almost see him – lounging in his apartment, probably a mess but with a killer view, phone propped against his ear while his hands fiddled with something else, shit-eating grin on his face. “Tell me more, Eds, about the premise being off.”

“You’re saying horror’s out of touch, but if there’s anyone who knows how, how crazy shit really can be, it’s us, right?”

“Sure, but my audience doesn’t know about the Lovecraftian monster from my hometown, you dig?”

“I’m just saying!” said Eddie.

“Okay, okay, feedback appreciated,” said Richie. “I’ve got another bit about how life is too short to ever buy anything but spreadable butter.”

“That’s true,” said Eddie. “It usually has less saturated fat.”

“Okay, well, hopefully my next audience is full of hypochondriac risk managers.”

Eddie snorted at that. He could feel the conversation tapering towards its natural ending point, the polite moment where one of them was supposed to say well it’s been great chatting with you and hang up. It was an exit Eddie never really much wanted to take, because the world seemed a little slower and a little easier to follow when he had Richie on the phone.

And maybe Richie got that, which was why they both seemed happy to ignore any natural exit points, their phone calls winding on and on, past the point where neither of them had anything particularly interesting still to say. Like now, when Eddie kept the phone balanced in the crook of his neck as he unloaded the dishwasher, while he listened to Richie typing and occasionally
humming on the other end. And he thought, briefly, about how nice it might be if Richie was doing
that sitting at the kitchen counter or in the living room of Eddie’s apartment, and then thought
about how Richie would probably laugh at him for thinking something like that.

He must have made a noise without realizing it because Richie asked, “What?”

“Nothing,” replied Eddie, shifting the phone from his left ear to his right.

“Okay,” said Richie, and Eddie was sure he could hear the smug little half smile in his friend’s
voice, the one he wore when something was probably funny only to him. Eddie rolled his eyes, and
didn’t wonder about if Richie could hear that, if he could see Eddie as clearly in his mind’s eye as
Eddie could see him.

It was December 30th and Eddie was home, working through a Caesar salad and answering work
emails that no one would bother responding to until the next year when Myra called him – because
even though Eddie had to call her guard dog and leave a message with her to be able to even
approach the idea of a conversation with Myra, it seemed like Eddie was just supposed to be fine
holding office hours 24/7.

“Hello?” answered Eddie.

“Hi, Eddie,” said Myra, and it occurred to him that he didn’t know when he had last heard her
voice. When had they last spoken? A month ago? Longer? Not since the last night of Richie’s visit,
when she’d called – again – with no warning. “Do you have a minute to talk?”

No, not right now was on the tip of his tongue. There was the petty temptation to squash her
expectation. But he recognized the shittiness of that instinct and sighed, rubbing a hand along his
jaw.

“Yeah, now is fine. How are you?”

“I’m fine. Tracy told me you left a message, you wanted to talk?”

“Yeah, I did,” said Eddie, steeling himself. “Look. I talked to a lawyer, and I think we should start
talking about a separation agreement. Doesn’t have to be tomorrow – ” he started to say, because
he didn’t want to overwhelm her or panic her, but Myra cut him off before he could finish.

“I agree.”


“Yes. I don’t see why we should wait around, since – since it’s decided.” She paused. “And I think
I’m going to leave New York.”

“Oh. Really?”

“Yes, I might – I never really liked living here, I don’t think,” she said, and Eddie opened his
mouth to say what are you talking about, as though they were having this conversation in their
apartment after dinner, like some regular, end-of-the-night squabble and he was being caught off
guard.

Except they weren’t. And if he thought it about for more than two seconds, maybe he wasn’t. All
the little moments were filtering their way back to him now. The way she’d wanted to stay in
Queens, how she’d suggested Staten Island over Manhattan (*It’s practically another state!* Eddie had exclaimed at that), how she left the apartment less and less after their move. Her pointed phone calls to him in his office, and the fear she harbored, as though she worried the sidewalks themselves would suddenly open up to reveal gaping mouths and swallow one of them up.

And all the times he had chalked those things up to Myra just being Myra. Myra being over-protective. Myra not used to having money. Myra taking refuge.

“Eddie?”

“Sorry,” he said automatically. “I, uh. That’s good. That’s great. Where are you going to go?”

She was quiet for a moment, and Eddie wondered if he shouldn’t have asked because maybe the last thing she wanted was her ex-husband to be able to track her down.

“I’m not sure,” she said eventually. “But maybe Missouri. Since my aunt is out there.”

“Missouri,” said Eddie, trying to figure out if he knew one good thing about Missouri that he could say. “Well, that’ll be different.”

“Yes. That’s kind of what I want.”

There was a beat, but neither of them said anything about hanging up.

“Eddie?”

“Yeah?”

“Remember the first night, when you said you didn’t want to be married anymore?”

His mouth suddenly felt dry. “Sure.”

“And I was really upset that night, remember?”

Eddie switched his phone from one ear to another. “Yeah. I remember.”

“Well. I’ve been thinking about that night, and how upset I was. Because Eddie you, you really surprised me. I felt horrible at the time. And I was thinking about it again. I was thinking about… all of this. And you know how sometimes kids, little kids, they fall, and they don’t even realize something bad happened to them, they don’t even realize they’re supposed to cry or be upset, until they see someone else crying over them?”

“Yeah,” said Eddie, and it was remarkable how a person could live with another person for over ten years and still have no idea what they were going to say next.

“Well I think,” continued Myra, her voice small but firm. A practical tone. “I think I’ve been kind of like that. I’ve only been upset because I thought I was supposed to be. When your husband tells you that he doesn’t want to be married anymore, and doesn’t give you a choice, or a chance to talk about it, you’re supposed to be upset, right?”

“I guess so,” said Eddie, although part of him wanted to bite back with *you want to talk about not having a chance?*

He thought he could hear his heart beating in his ears. More than that, he could feel it pounding against his ribs. He thought if he looked down at himself he would see the shape of it pushing against him, like a fist knocking from inside his chest. Was that normal? Did it feel faster?
“But it – well, it doesn’t feel good. But I think it could feel worse. I think I could feel a lot worse about things.”

It felt pretty bad now Myra, he wanted to say. Or maybe that was from the voice in the back of his mind, the one that was hysterical with the notion that after this conversation, that would be it.

“And I think I’m just trying to figure out how to say that I think it will be okay.”

Words he hadn’t expected from Myra in a tone of voice he rarely heard. Words that caught him by his shoulder and spun him around and made him look, forced him to realize it was never just a matter of what Myra had sheltered in him, but what he had held back in her.

It had never been about captive and captor, ocean and anchor. They were two tent poles leaning against each other, an arch with fear lodged in the center, a malignant keystone. That had been their marriage, his mother’s masonry.

And that brushed against the anger at the edge of his understanding, that made his heart beat sick and hard, the anger that he wrestled to contain because if he let himself ask

*why Ma*

anything of it he didn’t know how far it would burn. He didn’t know what would be left of him after.

And his wife, his ex-wife, was saying that maybe things weren’t so bad, and Eddie felt dizzy.

“Yeah,” said Eddie, half wondering if he was about to have a heart attack. “You’re right, you’re right.”

“Well,” said Myra after a long pause. “We can talk more about this later.”

“Okay,” said Eddie, the word sounding far away to his ears, like a door shutting in another part of a house. Without even really realizing he was doing it, he felt his left hand patting around for the pocket opening of the sweatshirt he was wearing, digging around for his aspirator. “We can talk about it later.”


“Sunday is fine,” replied Eddie, his heart like a hammer, chest tight as though someone

*the clown, it’s the clown and It’s got you It’s squeezing you*

had a hand wrapped around it.

“All right. Well I’ll talk to you then,” said Myra, and when he didn’t reply, because it was hard enough to breathe let alone force any words out, she added, “Take care of yourself,” and hung up.

He let the phone fall to his side, heard it thump lightly against the couch cushions. The asthma was back, digging its pointed, sucking nails into his lung, clawing against his throat. He closed his eyes and leaned forwards, palms of his hands pushing tight against his forehead, his chest heaving but his breath coming in thin. It was worse, worse than it ever was before

*before Derry*

because the truth was out. It was the asthma with its mask ripped off, make-up smeared away, truth grinning up at him from deep between his ribs. The inhaler seemed to vibrate in his hand, and he
heard his mother screaming in his ears, her sobbing plea, saw the grinning pharmacist

(It can’t do any harm)

felt the fear that pushed in slowly. That reached like a sick, bandaged hand from underneath a house he wasn’t supposed to go near. Whispered offers he wasn’t supposed to take. And somehow he hadn’t yet suffocated but any second now, if he didn’t use the inhaler, if he didn’t take his medicine, that piling black wave was going to come crashing overhead, and take him

(just like It should have done in Derry, like Henry should have done in Derry, you’ve been on borrowed time and now the Collector has come to collect)

under.

Remember, he told himself, over the crying ghost of Mama Kaspbrak and the mean-eyed pharmacist and pleading, dying bellows inside his chest. The memory was the smallest boat in the storm – the hospital room, the first one. When he was a child, and had six friends, six best friends, who came back no matter what his mother had said and told him to feel better and told him you’re gonna be okay and told him we need you Eddie and signed his cast. The six best friends that lent him the strength to tell his Ma what he knew, what he had known then, that carried him through it.

Tough titties but that was then and this is now, hissed the truth inside his skin, along his veins, and he squeezed his hand tighter around the aspirator, around its promised claim.

(We’re here, we’re all here, you can breathe with me)

And it was dark and hard to think but he still thought of Richie. Richie sitting in the little windowed room in Ben’s house. That sweet, quiet calm. The sun glancing in, golden against the wood-beamed walls. A gentle day that hung laundry on a line. Richie, sitting in that afternoon as though time was a hammock. Like life was so easy.

It was a thought that was barely enough, like drowning in a storm and reaching wildly for the smallest floating scrap. But it was enough.

And then the storm subsided. The fear slithered away – not gone, of course not gone, but tucked itself away under a rock and he could breathe again.

He was sitting on the floor. He didn’t remember sliding off the couch to the floor, but he must have done it because here he was, kneeling on the rug, very much conscious and very much not having a heart attack. He took in another shaky breath and pulled his hands away from his head. He held open his left hand and looked at his inhaler, sitting in the middle of his palm, unused. Whatever had happened to him, it hadn’t been an asthma attack. And Eddie didn’t know whether to count that as a victory or not.

He took a few more breaths, in and out, taking stock. The world had come back to him. His cellphone lay face down on the couch cushion where he’d dropped it.

Myra, of all people, was right. It would be okay. He sat on the floor of his apartment for another moment, back leaned against the sofa. He closed his eyes, and focused on his breath going in and out. In and out. Like it could be so easy.

Eddie woke up the next morning on the air mattress in the apartment office and decided fuck it. It was New Year’s Eve, and he was going to do what he usually never would have, what he had
insisted to Richie was not something he had any interest in, what he knew his ma would have hated. He was going to go out that night.

Nothing insane, nothing like the tourists who voluntarily stood shoulder to shoulder for twelve hours in Times Square just to get a bad view of the ball drop. Every year his company liked to flex just how much fucking money they had by renting out a space on the 50th floor of a building along Broadway on New Year’s Eve. The wall of windows offered a view of Times Square, packed with the suffering spectators, all from the comfort of a space with a catered selection of hors d’oeuvres and easily accessible bathrooms.

Technically anyone interested in attending was supposed to RSVP in the beginning of December. But Eddie was a senior risk manager who had his pick of favors to call in and strings to pull, and he hadn’t successfully sold his soul to Big Insurance by quailing at the idea of being insistent, and even harsh, with someone on the phone. It was easy to arrange and soon he had successfully made plans that he knew he would spend the rest of the day regretting.

And he did. There was regret and a little bit of terror all the way up to the moment where he was staring at himself in the long bathroom mirror, dressed up in his best black tie for the party he had sentenced himself to. There were a few things that separated him from most of the other people who held similar positions to his at his office. One was that they gave off the type of aura that implied they were people who looked at themselves in the mirror and liked what they saw. Eddie avoided himself and when he didn’t, he couldn’t help grimacing. The worry lines and age lines and little gray reminders in his hair. The idea of him showing up, dressed up, with the cane he had come to rely on when faced with long walks or long evenings, because Pennywise had knocked every part of him off balance and he wasn’t a kid anymore, half-made of rubber and built to bounce back. He’d carry the worst night of his life in his bones and muscle and tissue forever, and wasn’t that a fun fucking thought to have?

He shook his head. It’d be easy to give into the voice, to take it all off and stay on the couch in his apartment and watch the year live out its last seconds on the television. But the only thing worse than going out was staying in, so he steeled himself and resisted tucking his aspirator in his coat pocket, grabbed his cane and took a cab downtown into the flashy and thrilling mess that was New York City as midnight approached on New Year’s Eve.

He wouldn’t say, at the end of the night, that he had a great time. Maybe not even a good time – he hadn’t been kidding when he told Richie that going out on the town wasn’t his idea of fun, and while he made the rounds and talked to plenty of people that night – most of them a little surprised to see him in attendance – he also wouldn’t say he had any particular fondness for any of his coworkers. He would have preferred a repeat of Thanksgiving, gathered with the one good thing this year had brought him.

But there was a weird defiance in it, not that anyone in that room with him would have understood it. It was nothing to them to come out here every year, all dressed up with their husbands or wives, drinking the champagne that was actual champagne from the open bar. It was a victory, a small one, but he felt the satisfaction in it when midnight roared in with cheering and balloons and his phone buzzed in his hand to a message from Richie that said Happy new years on the east coast, are you even awake still? And Richie’s all-caps reply of OH SHIT when Eddie texted that not only was he awake but he was at a party near Times Square.

And for the first time since coming home to an empty apartment after telling Myra I can’t do this anymore, after he kicked off his shoes and wrestled out of his fancy clothes, he walked into the master bedroom and collapsed into the king-size bed.
When he woke up it was still dark outside. His cellphone was ringing, and it was the cascading chime that had pulled him out of sleep. He reached out for the phone, dragging it off the nightstand and wondering at first if he’d forgotten to switch his alarm off. He tilted the phone towards his face and two things became clear. First, that it was almost six thirty in the morning, which would have been fine if he’d gone to bed before one am, and second, that Richie Tozier was to blame for not letting him sleep in. He picked up the call.

“Hello?” said Eddie, his voice slightly raspy. “Are you okay?”

“Eddie!” exclaimed Richie, sounding way too loud. “Eds, can I tell you something? I have to tell you something.”

“Are you drunk?”

“No! What? A little – it’s New Year’s!”

Eddie pulled the phone away from his ear for a second.

“Where are you?” asked Eddie. “Are you home?”

“Can I tell you something?”

“You want to tell me something now?” muttered Eddie. “At six in the morning.”

“Time’s relative bitch, it’s still three for me.” Yes, Richie was drunk.

“Okay why don’t we talk again in like, seven hours.”

“No, no, wait, Eds, just a second, just hang on okay.”

“Okay.”

“Okay. Okay, Eddie, the thing, the thing is…”

***

It was 3:13 am on January 1, 2017 as Richie Tozier stumbled out of the bar in West Hollywood, too drunk for his own good and feeling free as a bird. The night was comfortably cool, the air sweet after the close and sticky heat from inside the club. The world felt good, Richie felt good, and he was going to tell Eddie the truth.

It wasn’t what he had thought he would be doing twenty-four hours ago, when he was sitting in the back of a comedy club he hadn’t been in for far too long. It wasn’t anything fancy, a low-lit interior with a lot of heavy dark wood and a floor that was sticky in places, but if there was one place in LA that Richie loved with all his heart, it was this one. This was where he had performed the most when he was still a poor and skinny kid, part of the crowd of young people trying to catch a break between three other jobs and shitty apartments split with four other people in a rich city that chewed up dreams. Where he’d also come to not perform, paying the cover and two drink minimum just to sit in the back and watch, feeling judgment and sometimes the prickle of envy for the other young comedians, awe when some of the big names would swoop in. On those nights he
usually couldn’t even get a seat, and would end up standing the whole night, squished between the crowd or against the wall and grateful just to be in the room.

He’d come some way since then. Now he was one of the big names that packed the place, though he didn’t appear here as often as he would like. He’d ended up at it that night, December 30th, the edge of the year, as a simple audience goer. He’d just finished up his own show at a theater with ticketed seating that was a twenty-minute drive away. It had been fine but he’d left feeling restless and a little unsatisfied, and suddenly the memory of the club had called to him like an old friend, the kind you could go for months without talking to and then reconnect like no time at all had passed.

The night was now crawling towards midnight, he had a vodka tonic in one hand, and he was grinning as the young comedian on stage did a bit about the mating habits of earthworms. It was an open mic night and the place was two-thirds full, so there was a decent amount of applause when the worm guy finished his set. Richie took another sip from his drink.

The next performer was a young woman, maybe in her 20s. She had dreads, a Lakers hat, a jean jacket with what looked like a hundred buttons pinned all over it, and a sunny confidence as she swaggered onto the stage and plucked the microphone from its stand.

“Thank you,” she said as a round of cheers and applause echoed from one of the tables near the front. Probably friends. She grinned over at them, took a beat, then launched into, “So, we’ve all noticed how the Shrek moves are gay as fuck right?”

She might have been young and new to the scene, but she was hardly an amateur. She moved across the stage like it was a familiar home to her, and Richie was laughing with the majority of the club as she compared *Shrek 2* to the first time she brought a girlfriend home for Thanksgiving after coming out.

“Representation matters,” she said, “And I found mine – it’s a green ogre lady voiced by Cameron Diaz.”

She had great delivery, a fun presence, and in the moment Richie wasn’t thinking about anything beyond that. In the moment he was just laughing because a comedian was telling jokes, and she was funny and told them well. It was later, in the backseat of the Lyft on the way to his apartment that he’d turn over her set and find himself impressed beyond her humor and control.

She’d stood on a stage and talked to a crowd of strangers about a part of herself in a way that Richie would have never dreamed of doing when he was her age and doing open mics in the city. In a way he’d never seen anyone else doing, not in the scenes he was learning to cut his teeth in at least. She had shared and spun jokes and invited them to laugh with her, but she didn’t wrestle out the truth of herself just to pin the neck of it under her heel.

He rubbed a hand over his face and watched the city flick by through the windows. Write about it in your livejournal, why don’t you, he thought to himself. And immediately felt some other inner voice blinking slowly back up at him, the part of him that had wandered out, squinting, from behind the wall. The part that had kneeled at the Kissing Bridge long ago and chiseled out his own small promise, in between all the other initials and delightful Derryisms like *FAGS TO HELL*. A promise which was a little about another boy but was mostly about Richie, owning up to a feeling that was entirely mundane and wholly dangerous.

Could life be so simple? Like a television sitcom, everything coming in at just under twenty minutes, minus commercials, and all the problems neatly resolved? Couldn’t it be that easy, at least? Couldn’t he make it that easy?
When he got home it was almost two in the morning, and it was officially New Year’s Eve.

Some part of him was still wondering could it be that easy when he was standing in the middle of a Hollywood Hills mansion party just after the countdown had finished and the cheer of HAPPY NEW YEAR had roared through every floor and Camilla – who, to be fair, he had invited along in the first place – pulled him in and kissed him.

It wasn’t a bad kiss, and he was well on his way to drunk, and the instinctual part of Richie’s brain that was used to kissing women was kissing her back – for a second, at least, before instinct was beaten over the head by the newly freed, rainbow-tank-top-wearing part of his brain that was trying to get into self-acceptance and shit. He pulled back.

“Hey,” he said, looking at Camilla, who still had her left hand on his shoulder. “Can I tell you something?”

“Yeah, of – ”

“I think I like dudes.”

“What?”

“Like, I’m gay.”

“Oh.” She looked at him in a way that said I know you and I know your shit Richie Tozier and you better not be fucking with me on this one. “Really?”

“Yeah,” he said, nodding. The music had cranked back up again and everyone was dancing around them, and maybe one or two people had even just jumped into the pool fully clothed, which was always the type of thing Richie had thought only happened in movies before he moved out here. “Really.”

“So why did you invite me out here tonight?”

“Uh, because I’m super bad at this? It’s still all sort of new to me.”

“What is?” she asked, and when his higher function failed to form a response because it had taken every borrowed bit of confidence from all the alcohol he’d consumed that night to even say I like dudes to another person, she answered herself. “Being gay?”

“Yeah.”

“Oh,” she said again, and Richie noticed she still had her hand on his shoulder. For a fleeting second, he wondered if she was going to turn around and yell hey everyone, turn off the music, get this! He wondered if she would start laughing at him. He wondered if he’d look up and see the clown shrinking back out of the corner of his eye.

“Well do you want to get out of here?”

“Huh?”

She shrugged, then smiled at him. “Like, do you want to go somewhere else? Maybe somewhere with less straight guys?”

“What?”
“Come on, let’s go – I hate parties like this.”

“Then why’d you come?”

“Because you asked me, dumbass. And you’re my friend.”

*What a novel concept* thought Richie as he followed her through the crowd, back into the house and out the front door. He probably had to text one of the other people he came with that they had left. Or he could just not, and let them make their own assumptions.

“Hey,” he said as they walked out onto the winding road. “You want me to call a car?”

“Nope. I drove.”

“You drove? On New Year’s?”

“Always on New Year’s. I don’t fuck with price surging.”

“Are you good to drive?”

“Yeah, I only had like one beer. Hang on a second.” She stopped walking and bent down to undo the clasps on her black two-inch heels and kicked them off. She had gotten all dressed up for the night, in a tight-fitting maroon dress that left her shoulders exposed with her dark, curly hair tied up in a knot on her head. As she straightened up it occurred to Richie that it wasn’t cold, but it certainly wasn’t warm, and even he could feel the wind’s chill through his jeans, shirt, jacket, and alcohol.

“Hey, do you want my coat?” he asked, already shrugging out of it.

“It’s not that far a walk.”

“Yeah, but like… you took off your shoes already. So here.”

She smiled over at him and took the coat. “Okay.”

They continued to walk up the road, car after car parked on the side, with the sounds of parties from the various mansions that dotted the hillsides traveling from every direction. Richie remembered the first time he’d shown up for a party in the Hollywood Hills, new to the city and sweaty-palm nervous because he’d had no official invitation. He and a friend had snuck into the party thanks to his friend’s brother’s girlfriend having an in with some actor who had allegedly gotten a major role on some network show. He’d seen people he recognized from the screen and the whole thing had felt hyper-real, like he was a character at the beginning of a movie.

But movies had an arc, movies wrapped things up. Life went on, and it was funny to think he could now walk casually through this place he’d once thought off as some distant dreamworld. That he could leave a party here with a woman he knew well but not too well, a woman who he’d been sleeping with on and off for the last couple of years and to who he’d just admitted about liking men.

They continued to trudge along.

“How much farther to Mount Doom?” asked Richie.

“Hilarious,” said Camilla. “Don’t fall by the wayside, I’m not carrying you.”

“I feel like you’re being super chill about all this.”
“About what?”

“She snorted. “Rich, I work in Hollywood. You think you’re the first closet case I’ve ever slept with?”

“Wow, and I thought I was special.”

“About – me.”

She looked over at him, “Well, if you want to feel special, you definitely lasted the longest.”

“I’ll take that win.”

She fished her keys out of her purse and tapped a button on them. About a hundred feet up ahead, a blue civic chirped back and blinked its red taillights at them.

“And anyway, I’m bi,” she said.

“What?”

“Bisexual.”

“Wow, and I thought I was special.”

“He grinned, but she just gave him a look that even through his alcohol-soaked brain he could read as unimpressed.

“You never mentioned it,” he added instead.

“No offense, Richie, but some guys, you tell them that, and they say ‘oh hot, so do you want to have a threesome?’” She looked sideways over at him. “And you always seemed like you’d be one of those guys.”

“That is my brand.”

“Might be time to rethink that,” she said as they reached the car. She tapped out a text on her phone, threw her high heels in the backseat and pulled out a pair of slip on tennis shoes, which she tugged on before getting into the front seat. “Alright, let’s go get you another drink.”

So that was how he started 2017, arriving at a bar he’d never been to before in West Hollywood, full of people dancing and cheering and drinking the new year in. It was packed with all types of bodies dressed in all types of clothes, from sheer tops to jeans and shirts to skin-tight dresses to nearly nothing. Multicolored lights pulsed throughout and a Diana Ross song was blasting overhead, with half the room shout-singing along to every lyric as they danced against each other, crushing confetti underfoot. The whole thing was a little like looking into the sun and a little like eating all the icing off the top of a cupcake.

They went straight for the bar, and before Richie could even relay an order, Camilla was ahead of him and telling the bartender vodka shots, reminding Richie very suddenly that while he’d be 41 in three months, Camilla was still in her 30s. Camilla had her 20s in the rearview mirror, whereas Richie’s were long forgotten at a gas station miles behind. He could practically hear his liver, weary and gray-faced telling him I already did my time man, and his head chiming in to ask if he really wanted to kick off the New Year as a non-functioning bedridden mess, because he knew what he’d already drunk back in the Hills.
But then the shots were on the bar (shit, she ordered a double for each of them?) and fuck it because it was the new year, new beginnings, all that merry and gay shit, so he clinked his glass against Camilla’s and downed the thing with the expertise he’d honed at public university. She smiled at him with a wide-open grin he was sure he’d seen from her less than a handful of times.

Suddenly someone else was shouting “CAMILLA!” with enough force behind the name to cut through the high volume of the club, and three people – two men, one woman – appeared in front of them, and they and Camilla were all screaming and hugging one another and Richie was feeling fucking old. For a second, he tried to imagine this situation with the rest of the Losers here, and the thought was so funny he just stood there grinning broadly at no one. Beverly would probably already be on the dance floor. He didn’t imagine Eddie would dare go past the doorway.

“Guys,” Camilla was saying loudly to the three banshees that she was apparently on shrieking-terms with. “This is my friend Rich. Be cool okay, he’s new here.”

“New to LA?” asked one of the men. He appeared to be nine-tenths muscle and one-tenth mustache, going by the arms and abs on display from his homemade crop top. God, he wasn’t even doing anything but standing and there was a full six-pack defined there, enough to maybe give Ben Hanscom a run for his money.

“New to this place,” said Richie.

“You look super familiar,” said the other man, who was far less intimidating, or maybe it was just that he wore a short-sleeved button up shirt that gave no indication as to what the state of his abs might be. “Are you an actor?”

“I was in a Burger King commercial like two years ago,” replied Richie.

“Oooh,” said the group, while Camilla side eyed him.

“Oh my god,” said the other girl as the music shifted. It was a Top 40 artist Richie recognized but a song he didn’t. “I love this song, come on, come on!”

She grabbed Mr. Sixpack and started to pull him back out onto the dance floor (should he have gotten any of their names?), just as Camilla grabbed Richie at his elbow and started to tug him along too.

“Uh, what the fuck are you doing?” asked Richie, making an attempt to stand his ground.

“Come on! What’s your plan, lurk at the bar like a loser?”

“That sounds like an awesome plan!”

“But this is an awesome song!”

“I don’t dance in public places with other people who can dance, that’s like a rule I have.”

“Well that’s what the shot was for, asshole! Come on!”

“Plus it’s New Year’s,” said Mr. Shirt, who had hung back with them and was smiling at Richie. “This is when you break all the old rules.”

“Exactly,” said Camilla, tugging at his arm again, and this time Richie let her pull him fully onto the floor, into the dancing and cheering mass where it was loud enough and he was just getting drunk enough that he was starting to sway and move in a way that a very generous dictionary might
call *dancing*. It wasn’t much, but it was more than he’d allowed from himself in – fuck, who could say? Years? He’d long since perfected the art of standing by the bar, by the pool, in another room, holding a drink and providing witty repartee while avoiding the dance floor.

Tonight, that seemed far away. Tonight, he didn’t feel like a sad closeted forty-year-old gay dude who had been sweating hard over his half-assed life where he didn’t even dance. He didn’t feel like the lost little Loser from small town Maine with the big-glasses and easy target on his back and on his face, or the guy who’d forgotten about that Loser. He was drunk and the music was loud, and he fucking loved music, especially when it was loud enough to shake his guts and drown out his brain. He could dance like an idiot in public in the city he’d always dreamed about and come to love, and this felt easy.

Mr. Shirt was dancing closest to him. He kept catching his eye and grinning, and Richie was pretty sure he was drunkenly smiling back at him. Far away he thought about how he was *here*, in this club, and it meant something to be looking at a man who was looking at him, knowing how Richie looked at men.

Shit, he was going to give himself a head ache.

“Hey,” said Mr. Shirt, “Have you done anything other than Burger King commercials?”

“Maybe,” replied Richie, feeling all the alcohol from the night like something hot under his skin.

“Why?”

“You just seem really familiar.”

“One of those faces?”

“Maybe. But I think I’d remember your face.” He moved in closer. “I’m Brian by the way.”

*Brian* was a name that, to Richie, had always conjured up images of stocky white boys with short, well-combed hair who attended prep school before dad paid their way into some Ivy League university. This Brian wasn’t that exactly. He was white, but his hair was dark and artfully tousled instead of carefully combed, and he was less lacrosse-player-jacked and more normal-dude-fit.

Why did Richie feel like he was sixteen again, trying liquor for the first time in the basement of Grace Batley’s house that weekend in October when her parents were gone?

Dimly he was aware that he wasn’t just dancing in some West Hollywood bar, but he was dancing with this guy. That Brian was getting closer, and that in the split second before all space between them was lost, there was the sharpest jab of doubt – *what if you don’t like this, Richie, what if you were always wrong and all of it was for nothing?*

Then the space was gone, one hand against Richie’s hip and his lips against Richie’s, and this guy was kissing him – and Richie was kissing him back. And for the first time it was a kiss with no tactical strategy behind it, no jokes leading up to it, a kiss that counted as more than a bullet point in an argument. Frankly, other than the same tragicomic truth that ran through the punchline of his life, there might not be anything funny about this kiss. With one of his hands on the back of Brian’s neck, his mouth moving against his, and a starving realization making itself known, for the first time it was a kiss just based on *want*.

They broke apart, and the rest of the world was like an ocean of sound and light that they just happened to be bobbing in. He knew two things with that specific type of confidence that was only unlocked after midnight and with the help of too much alcohol. First, that he had not been wrong.
And second, that there was more than a what to the wanting.

*Now*, said a little voice that he had been playing a dutiful game of *whack-a-mole* with for years. *Are you fucking kidding me? Now.*

There had never been a night like this, where everything hopeful felt possible, everything finally seemed fucking good, like you could run without worrying about any cartoon banana peels on the floor.

He didn’t know how much longer he stayed on the floor, sometimes dancing and sometimes cheering and mostly kissing this man, feeling drunk and high and some other type of ecstasy. Eventually, though, he was acting on the insistent little instinct, he was stumbling out of the club and into the cool, inviting night and pulling out his cellphone. He had a bunch of mindless *Happy New Year!* texts, as well as a missed call from Beverly, but he ignored them all for the moment to pull up Eddie’s contact information and hit the call button.

He leaned his back against the brick-wall side of the club and waited, the ringing on the other end the smallest formality. The year was young. The night was bright. Nothing had ever been so easy.

The ringing was interrupted as somewhere in Manhattan, two thousand miles away Eddie Kaspbrak picked up the phone.

“Hello?” he answered. Richie would never have guessed his heart was capable of this shit, but it leapt at his voice. He sounded sleepy and concerned. “Are you okay?”

“Eddie! Eds, can I tell you something? I have to tell you something.”

“Are you drunk?”

“No!” exclaimed Richie reactively. “What? A little – it’s New Year’s!”

“Where are you? Are you home?”

“Can I tell you something?”

“You want to tell me something now? At six in the morning.”

“Time’s relative bitch, it’s still three for me.”

“Okay why don’t we talk again in like, seven hours.”

“No, no, wait Eds, just a second, just hang on okay.”

“Okay.”

“Okay. Okay, Eddie, the thing, the thing is…” Crazy how his dumb ass had made a living on words, wrote and performed and spoke for a living, and now he was faltering at which ones to use. *Just go for it, idiot.*

“What?” asked Eddie on the other end, sounding a little less concerned and a little more irritated.

“I like you, man,” said Richie, feeling sixteen again. Even younger – thirteen and on the shore of a new land. “I’m saying I like you a lot, I mean fuck, dude, I think maybe I love you – I don’t know! I’ve never really been in love before. Fucking crazy, I know.”
“What?”

“What do you mean what?” replied Richie, still a little too drunk and a little too exhilarated to hear the nervous catch in Eddie’s voice. “I’m only saying, I don’t really know but everything… life is such a mess, right? It’s so confusing. And you guys, all of you… you’re like the best, least confusing thing in my life. But especially you, Eds. I think you’re the fucking best.”

“Wait… um, I think you’re cool, too, but I don’t… I’m not sure if I’m entirely understanding what you’re saying?”

“Huh?”

“I mean… I mean what are you saying?”

The truth of his words was slowly starting to edge inward. And suddenly Richie felt like a balloon that had floated as high as it could go, one that was just suspended strangely in the atmosphere before it finally popped. There was an old instinct rearing its head now, the kind that knew if you made yourself the joke before someone else could, that the only choice they had was to laugh with you. An old instinct that wanted to say psych! That wanted to say gotcha, that wanted to say I’m so drunk I won’t even remember this in the morning.

The same instinct, Richie recognized in an annoyingly sober way, that might speak in the fake-delight of the clown.

“I’m saying I love you,” said Richie, no longer feeling the fun buffer against the real world that was the best part of being drunk. Now it was just the bad part, feeling sick and stuck on a ride you couldn’t get off. “I’m saying I’m in love with you.”

“Oh,” said Eddie, and if Richie could have climbed his way into the pause that followed and fall down it forever, he would have.

“It’s okay,” said Richie, for some fucking reason.

“Rich, I mean, you know that I care about you.”

“No no, it’s cool,” said Richie, because actually, fuck, if he had to listen to Eddie awkwardly figure out his way around I don’t love you dumbass he might just walk into the road.

“You’re my friend,” offered Eddie, “I just – I don’t –”

“It’s cool,” said Richie again. “I got it, don’t worry about it, man.”

There was another horrible pause, where neither of them was sure what to say or what to do, and weary Richie realized it was on him to put this conversation out of its misery.

“Anyway, yeah, I have to get home. Sorry about uh, about waking you up.”

“No, that’s – it’s fine.”

“And don’t, ah, don’t worry. You know, about this.” Richie forced out a very weak laugh. So weak it sounded vaguely like an anti-laugh.

“Yeah. Uh. I’m sorry –”

“I’ll talk to you tomorrow, right?”
“Okay.”

“Cool,” said Richie. “Happy New Year’s, Eddie.”

And he hung up, feeling very much like an old man who was up too late and had drunk too much on what was now technically Sunday.

This, he figured, was why you didn’t let the tiny little voice of hope get its way, even when things felt good, even when it was New Year’s Eve. Now it was just him in a hateful silence, the type that an audience that wasn’t having any of your shit threw up at you like a wall. It was, overall, a bad fucking time, and distantly he thought he could hear a familiar voice saying his name, trying to find him. It was hard to hear her over the voice ringing in his ears, high and garbled and awful and echoing, the only thing laughing in the stony audience barely content to watch him choke. The clown, shrieking and howling in the back row, slapping its knee, screaming it was worth it, everyone was right, wasn’t it worth every penny to see Richie Tozier Stand Up Tonight!

“Richie!” said Camilla at his shoulder. “There you are, I was looking – are you okay?”

The misery in his stomach gave him only a few seconds worth of warning. Then he was pushing himself from the wall and quickly staggering forwards to puke behind the alleyway’s lone dumpster.
Richie looked at Stan’s face as the car disappeared around the corner. Stan’s eyes were focused on
his feet, his mouth pressed into a thin line. The only admission to any emotion was the slight,
heated pink on his cheeks.

They rarely ended up walking this way together. In fact, he and Stan hardly saw much of each
other at all these days. High school had shuttled them off in different directions; they shared none
of the same classes for the same periods, they didn’t even have the same lunch block. Like currents
in a stream, they had been slowly pushed and guided away from one another by hundreds of
different little rocks and rivulets.

So when something like this happened, where they both happened to be walking out of the west
entrance of Derry High an hour after the school day had ended, there was enough between them
still to merit the two of them walking home together, but maybe not enough for the conversation to
come the way it once had.

And then, before they’d barely had a few moments to even recognize one another, the car had
come around the corner. Windows down, mean laughter rolling out, and some asshole had stuck
his head out and shouted a specific, ugly word, the type of which was mostly used as a sharp barb
against people like Stan, people who rested on the Sabbath and attended Derry’s lone synagogue
and weren’t unfamiliar with the type of people who would shout words like that.

The car disappeared and the word hung back, like some gross, embarrassing thing on the sidewalk.
It embarrassed Richie to hear it, but that was about the worst it could do for him. It seemed to do
something else to Stan.

There was some time, back in the past, when Richie wouldn’t have even had to think about what to
say. His response would have rolled off as natural as breathing. He would have known what to
shout at the car and then what to say to Stan. But that would have been back when he and Stan
always walked home together – them and Bill and Eddie, both of whom no longer lived in Derry
and who the current had taken away, too.

“Hey man,” said Richie eventually. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah,” replied Stan, pulling his head up to look from his feet to Richie. “It’s not a big deal.”

The traffic lights flicked from green to amber to red, and the crosswalk changed to say WALK, and
they both moved their feet to cross. For years this intersection had just been run by four-way stop
signs, but enough kids had been hit and last year a high schooler had actually died, so the town had
put in a traffic light. Something about the whole thing had struck Richie as morbidly ironic at the
time, but he couldn’t quite put his finger on what it was.

Richie really wished that that fucking car hadn’t driven by and that the asshole in the backseat
hadrn’t stuck his head out to gleefully yell that word. If he was honest, it was already weird enough
to be running into Stan, and it was weird that it was weird, and some local Neanderthal shouting
some derogatory shit wasn’t the icebreaker Richie was looking for with this kid that he used to be
friendly with.
“What were you staying late for?” asked Stan, apparently taking it upon himself to dive headfirst into the conversation.

“Oh, just detention,” said Richie, and he saw a slight quirk of a smile on Stan’s lips.

“For what?”

“I drew a bunch of dicks on Mrs. Carter’s chalkboard.”

“Jesus, Richie, that’s not even creative.”

“Grow up Stanley, classical art is defined by dicks. What about you?”

“Photography,” said Stan, “I stay late to use the dark room sometimes.”

“Oh shit, we’re both artists!”

“I don’t take pictures of dicks.”

“Hey I’ll let you take one of mine but you’ll need a wide angle.”

“Shut up, Richie,” said Stan, but he was smiling in a way that was familiar.

They continued along the sidewalk. It was April, and little bits of spring were starting to make their attack, though winter still held the upper ground. Derry, Maine didn’t give a fuck about what the calendar said.

“So what do you take pictures of?” asked Richie. Now that they had a conversation going, now that the engine was warmed up again, he was starting to feel okay, feeling like the word dropped out the car could really be left behind and forgotten.

“Mostly just places around Derry. I started because I wanted to take pictures of birds. But it turns out that’s kind of hard.”

“Why?”

“Because they’re really small and they move really fast. You need like, a super amazing expensive camera to really get bird photos. So I still try, but, now I mostly take pictures of things in Derry.”

Richie snorted. “What’s there to take a photo of in Derry?”

“Um, there’s lots of stuff. I don’t know. That’s what’s interesting about photography I think. Like, you can just look at anything ordinary or that you’re used to and don’t think about, and if you frame it right, it’s more than that.”

“Wow Stan, you turned into even more of a nerd.”

“Well, you haven’t changed at all.”

Richie looked up at Stan, who was smiling widely back at him, and the two of them started laughing. For a moment time folded back on itself, and this felt as easy and familiar as it had that summer, that – when had that been? Not last year, but maybe the one before? When it had been all of them – seven? – down in the Barrens. It was funny to think about it now, like going through a shelf or set of drawers to find something misplaced.

“Hey, Richie.”
“Yeah?”

Stan was looking serious again. Richie had never known anyone who could look as serious as Stanley Uris. The kid had practically mastered the look by the age of ten. Time had only perfected it.

“Do you ever think about It?”

Something in the way Stanley asked the question made Richie feel that he was missing the full meaning. Kind of like every time in gym when he was expected to actually run after and catch a football. Gym was a real delight. Did wonders for the old self-esteem.

“About what?”

Stan frowned at him. “Don’t screw with me on this.”

“Screw what!? I’m not screwing with you, I don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about.”

The frown lessened slightly, and became something less concerned and more… Richie couldn’t say for sure. A thing between fear and sadness, a thing he didn’t really know what to do with on an afternoon walk home from school.

“You’re really not lying?” asked Stan.

Richie opened his mouth to say no, of course not, when something seemed to slip in his mind. It was like idly scratching along a tear of wallpaper and suddenly revealing the plaster underneath. Something lived within those walls, memories of a dark, stinking sewer and a monster that grew large wolfish hands and an innocent statue in the middle of town that begged a kiss of Richie as it (It)

swung its axe around. And the seven of them, standing in a circle, and making a promise.

What promise?

It clouded back over again. It was easier that way, to leave it like a dream that became more and more hazy the further you got from the morning. Richie ran a hand through his hair.

“Well, I thought I wasn’t,” said Richie. “I’m mostly not!”

Stan watched his feet as they walked. Stan had always been better at considering his words before he said them, lining them all up in his head like little soldiers to make sure they satisfied him before sending them out the door.

Like Bill, thought Richie automatically, Bill was like that, too, just his words had a tendency to trip over the stairs on the way out.

“I wish I would forget it, too,” said Stan. “Sometimes I do, but then sometimes it all comes back again. I think… I hope it’s just this place.”

They had both slowed as they approached the intersection where Richie remembered Stan would peel off to the left, following Cunningham Street down into his neighborhood. They stopped on the corner.

“My dad’s been talking about moving,” said Stan after a while.
“Oh, you too?” said Richie, unsure where the you too part came from. His own parents had been kicking the idea around of moving for a while, but he hadn’t meant himself.

“Yeah. I think maybe this summer even.”

“Well,” said Richie, remembering the car, still feeling the sting of a word not even made to cut him. “Maybe the next town won’t be so full of assholes?”

“Everywhere is full of assholes,” said Stan lightly. And then, “Leaving makes me kind of nervous.”

_Doesn’t everything make you kind of nervous?_ Thought Richie. He might have said it once, that summer when it seemed like they could all say anything to each other. But Richie was getting older, even if it was just a little bit, and starting to figure out the little thoughts and pieces you kept boxed away.

“Well,” he said instead.

“Because I don’t think I’ll ever come back here,” said Stan. “If we leave, I don’t think I can ever come back.”

Riche shrugged. “Doesn’t sound like any big loss.”

Stan looked at him, and it was another _between_ look, an expression that traveled between annoyance and sadness and resignation. Richie thought Stan should really knock it off with these world weary looks already.

“Yeah. Maybe. Maybe not.”

They couldn’t just keep standing on the corner. Stan offered up a small smile, slow and deliberate, and for a moment it inspired some kind of older-brother feeling in Richie, even though he didn’t have any siblings and shared a birthday in the same year as Stan. But for a split-second he felt older than he was, and saw the way the truth was unkind and how the world could crush a guy underfoot, between the faceless bullies hidden by speeding cars and the grinning fangs that kept themselves tucked away in the shady parts of town. He thought if he could see all these things maybe he could figure out how to shore up against them, but someone like Stan, who was too serious and too careful and tried to be unbothered but blushed so you could see it all the same, someone like Stan maybe needed someone looking out for him.

It was all there in a flash, and then it was gone, a thought that drifted off of him as easily as water against a raincoat. They were just two kids, standing on a corner, kids who had been closer and now weren’t, which was normal and natural, was just the way things went, which was a part of growing up.

“Well, it was cool to talk to you,” said Stan.

“Yeah, you too. See you around?”

“Sure.” Stan smiled. “Maybe don’t draw so many dicks on chalkboards, Richie.”

“Hey! I’m a troubled youth and it’s the only creative outlet I’ve got!”

Stan shook his head and readjusted his backpack. “I’ll see you later, Richie.”

“See ya.”
Richie watched Stan walk off down his street. *Losers stick together*, he thought idly, not sure where the thought came from or what it meant, but that was brains for you – nonstop confetti cannons in which the confetti was all sorts of psychological bullshit.

He readjusted his own backpack and crossed the road, continuing down Main Street and his own walk home, the currents carrying each of them their own separate way.

January was already a shitty month in Eddie’s opinion, the perpetual morning-after to December’s explosive wild night. It was a long, gray smear of weeks that he associated with dangerously icy sidewalks and sneezing New Yorkers who didn’t know how to cover their damn mouths.

Now it had a totally new reason to suck, because things with Richie were wrong.

They had been wrong ever since 6:32 am on the morning of January 1st, which was when Richie Tozier had hung up after wishing Eddie the most fucking morose *Happy New Year*. Eddie had stared at the too-bright screen of his phone, then stared at the dark ceiling of his bedroom, wide awake and feeling like there was a bowling ball sitting inside his chest.

He couldn’t go back to sleep. How the fuck could he be expected to do that after his friend, his best friend, had called him up and admitted some kind of love for him? He was Eddie Kaspbrak. He had a fucked up mind and a fucked up body and a soon to be ex-wife and a job that made anyone not in his industry keel over with boredom within five seconds of Eddie’s explaining it. All of that to say, he was not the kind of person to which anyone proclaimed sudden romantic confessions.

Especially not someone like Richie. Someone who was his friend, who he loved but didn’t feel that way about. Because, also – *also* – he was straight, as straight as they come (and where was Richie to make a joke about that) and what the hell had Richie expected to happen there? Did he think Eddie – ?

He couldn’t even think it, the idea so beyond considering. He could feel his thoughts advancing on him, driving him backwards towards a waiting edge and a drop he didn’t want to see. So he kicked off the covers and got out of bed, standing up so fast he made himself dizzy and had to reach for the bureau to steady himself.

He started the new year feeling like a Jenga tower in the last round of the game, every piece of himself suddenly redistributed in a way that made no fucking sense and feeling like he was one wrong move away from tumbling into pieces. He had put his shirt on inside-out and backwards, which he didn’t even notice until he was looking at himself in the bathroom mirror. He turned his phone off, back on, set it to silent, then back to regular, and found himself checking it obsessively all during the morning, rather than his usual *avid* amount.

At one point it actually rang, sending his stomach leaping into his chest and his heart into his throat, but it was only Bill, calling from the hotel room in London where he was spending New Year’s because Audra was shooting a movie in England. Eddie worked his way through the conversation like an ill-rehearsed actor, mostly waiting for Audra to pull Bill off the phone to go have tea and crumpets or whatever the hell a famous writer and famous movie star might do on the first day of the year in Europe.

He grabbed his cane and went for a walk around the block. He came home and did his physical therapy exercises. He started a load of laundry and began to deep clean the apartment, starting with the kitchen – wiping down the counters, scrubbing the inside of the cabinets, applying a cleaning solution to the stove top, tackling the refrigerator, mopping the floor. It should have distracted him,
but with every movement the phone call from that morning only became more vivid, replaying itself over and over in his mind like a song stuck on a loop. The more he remembered it the more it shifted, transforming in his memory like some kind of surrealist painting, certain moments lost while others ballooned to terrible, unavoidable significance.

What had he done? What had he said on the phone? Just asked what over and over again like a fucking child? Like it wasn’t already bad enough for Richie to say what he was saying the one time, and here was Eddie, forcing him to repeat himself, explain himself.

*Maybe he made a mistake,* Eddie thought as he sprinkled a dusting of Comet in the kitchen sink. After all, hadn’t Richie just come to grips with the whole liking guys last year? It had taken the dude forty years to figure that out. Stood to reason that this was a rookie mistake. He was Richie Tozier, he was a famous comedian who lived in Hollywood and would probably win an Emmy one day and had a zillion followers on Instagram. There was no reason for him to settle for *(a loser)*

Eddie, especially when Eddie didn’t feel that way about him. The cavern at the back of his mind yawned back at him, and Eddie pulled on his yellow rubber gloves to scrub out the sink.

He reorganized the inside of the refrigerator and polished the cabinet doors. He emptied out the trash and disinfected the inside of the trash can, and thought fifty different times about calling one of the others to try to untangle the situation, and shut the door on that thought every time.

At 7:20 pm, his phone buzzed and he saw a text from Richie. His chest seemed to squeeze in on itself. He opened the message.

RT: So what was the deal with that company party you went to?

Eddie stared at his phone as though Richie had sent him a message in Norwegian. He didn’t know what he had expected, but it wasn’t this. The New Year’s party? The one he’d gone to a lifetime ago? Richie wanted to ask him about that?

He wondered if he should respond now or later, and then immediately hated himself for even asking himself that because what, now he was the star in his own personal teen drama?

Maybe this was life’s revenge on him for living the most dull-as-paint-drying life during high school and college – all those years of getting his homework in on time, avoiding campus parties and house parties and bar parties, growing up in New York City and letting all of its potential slip through his fingers. No time for flirting before or after or during class, or following a girl back to her dorm room, even if there was a girl who would have wanted him to. No time between school work and work-work and his mother waiting at home, watching the clock, ready to report him as a missing person the second it got too late (she had even done it, one time in junior year when he’d been late at the library and forgotten to call). He’d side stepped teenage angst and relationship drama in his earlier years; so was this the wheel coming around, throwing him face down in the emotional dirt and slamming its boot against his head?

Sure fucking seemed like it.

He had waited until eight to reply.

Things had not improved since then.

They still talked, but it wasn’t the same. Something essential was missing. Richie didn’t idly barrage him with the usual daily onslaught of text messages, the types that ranged from obscene to
stream of consciousness to “hilarious” memes that half the time Eddie needed explained. Richie
didn’t randomly call him, as he had before when he was driving through Los Angeles or walking
down the street to pick up take out from the taco spot on the corner, the one that he always raved
about and had promised Eddie they would go to after he one day tranquilized Eddie and got him on
a plane to LA.

When they did talk, it was with the feeling of a job that couldn’t be put off much longer. Their
conversations were an egg balanced on the end of a spoon, and the silences that cropped up were
no longer a safe and comfortable space between them. Neither of them brought up the New Year’s
phone call, and Eddie always found himself on the verge of asking is everything really alright, only
to find himself teetering at the edge of a something that he didn’t know the full measure of.

It was fucking maddening. It was like suddenly finding himself lost in the middle of a country
where he didn’t speak the language. He kept trying to distract himself from the emptiness he didn’t
know how to communicate, the gulf he didn’t know how to cross. He doubled down on his daily
routines, he went into work earlier and left later, he read every single article in the Health section
of the Times instead of just skimming the headlines.

And when he wasn’t distracting himself, he was giving in.

Because the thing about Richie Tozier was that he had a back catalog. And it wasn’t the same, like
drinking watered down well liquor after acquiring a taste for the real stuff, but fuck, it was better
than nothing.

He watched Richie’s filmed special again and listened to his three comedy albums. He watched
some of the critically acclaimed animated show on which Richie had voiced a character for three
seasons. He listened to the successful podcast Richie had started during the advent of podcasting,
back when he was still a small-fry comedian on the come up, and had kept going for four years. He
watched a (terrible) romantic comedy from 2011 that Richie had a small supporting role in and
delighted in Richie’s awful hair in it. He listened to a recent episode of a podcast he’d never heard
of before, on which Richie was a guest talking about a movie he’d never seen by a director he also
didn’t know. He found himself checking Richie’s twitter and instagram accounts – which felt super
teen drama – as if he’d really find more insight into Richie’s wellbeing through his public
personas. Instead he found snatches of conversations, small comments and photographs of Richie
in his Hollywood world with his Hollywood people, things that made his stomach twist in some
small miserable way like a pill bug on the sidewalk.

He didn’t mention any of this to Richie – although he could just imagine Richie laughing and
saying aw, my very own John Hinckley with some fondness. He could also imagine Richie asking
what the fuck and why, and Eddie didn’t have a good answer for that. He kept those questions
locked inside and just kept wading through the Richie of the past, even though that Richie wasn’t
quite right, but neither was the one he had right now, somewhere in Los Angeles. And maybe right
wasn’t the word he meant anyway. It wasn’t Richie, it was the thing between them, whatever had
shattered that morning when Richie had said I’m in love with you, because love was a
sledgehammer and that was what sledgehammers did. They shattered things.

He was driving himself up the wall, chasing after questions like a dog with its own tail, so when
Mike finally arrived on a cold Tuesday night in the third week of January, as promised, it was a
welcome fucking relief. Here was a wonderful new distraction, one that he had to make the guest
room ready for and plan to do things around and make sure he had the kitchen stocked for and all
kinds of other shit. One that he could go down to greet and be a little stunned by, the sight of Mike
Hanlon, former head librarian of the Derry Public Library and standing in the lobby of his apartment building.

“Holy shit,” said Eddie when he saw him, and then Mike was pulling him into a crushing hug. Eddie laughed a little breathlessly and returned the hug, clapping him on the back.

“You made it,” said Eddie, when they pulled apart.

“Did you ever doubt I would?” asked Mike. He was grinning, and Eddie didn’t think he’d seen Mike so open before.

“Never,” said Eddie, who had secretly worried about some freak accident befalling Mike, that Derry wouldn’t want to let go of the last of them. He headed back towards the elevator and Mike followed. “How was the drive?”

Not bad, or at least not too bad by Mike’s standards. He’d driven down from Boston, where he’d spent the last three days. Coming into the city had been a little slow at first and then all too fast, and he admitted to Eddie he’d been a little relieved when he was able to finally park his car and knew he wouldn’t have to worry about it again until he was leaving the city.

“How you drive a car around here, I don’t know,” Mike had said.

“It’s easy, it’s like driving any place,” Eddie had replied. “Just don’t be an idiot and don’t take anything personally.”

Mike had chuckled and shaken his head at that.

He was staying with Eddie for the next five days, six if you counted next Monday morning when they’d probably get breakfast together before he continued on his way to Philadelphia. Eddie hadn’t planned to take any vacation time, which worked out because Mike was both a self-sufficient and unorthodox tourist. He was less interested in the Empire State Building and Times Square, more so in visiting Langston Hughes’ house or taking the D train all the way to the end of the line to visit some historical place in the Bronx that Eddie had never heard of and had no particular interest in ever experiencing.

In the evenings they’d get dinner together, and Mike would politely shrug off suggestions of Michelin-star rated restaurants, even when Eddie insisted “don’t worry, I’ve got it,” more content to wander the surrounding neighborhoods and find some out of the way bar or a nondescript restaurant that, on his own, Eddie wouldn’t have dreamed of stepping into without first consulting Yelp and calling ahead for a reservation.

“That takes the fun out of it,” Mike had said when Eddie pointed this out. “You live in one of the best cities for discovering things, Eds.”

He did, too bad he didn’t care for discovery.

But it wasn’t so terrible with Mike. The dinner spots he led them into ranged from a tiny hole-in-the wall ramen joint to an underground jazz club where a woman crooned on a small stage against a red velvet backdrop. Mike preferred to sit at the bar whenever that was an option – another thing Eddie ordinarily would never have done, but it was interesting to watch Mike, to see how he could sit down in a place he’d never been before with people he’d never met, and have folks talking to him like they’d known each other for years by the end of the night. On those nights, Eddie thought he saw flashes of what Mike might have been if his parents had left Derry, too – Pulitzer-Prize winning reporter maybe. Critically acclaimed journalist with a fellowship at some overpriced New
England university.

When the weekend rolled around Eddie let Mike convince him to accompany him to Queens, although Eddie insisted on driving them.

“You want to take the subway from Manhattan to Queens?” Eddie had said when Mike had suggested that first.

“Is that crazy?”

“Yes.”

Mike wanted to see the neighborhood that the Kaspbraks had moved to, and Eddie wasn’t sure if that was sweet or if it was retro-active stalker behavior. Either way, he led them on the odyssey that was driving from Manhattan to the squat, brick apartment building in Jackson Heights that he and his mother had ended up in after leaving Maine.

“Why do you care about this?” Eddie had questioned when Mike had asked if they could park and walk around. He couldn’t imagine anything more depressing than wasting a Saturday in January walking around his second childhood home.

“I don’t know exactly,” Mike had replied with a slight shrug. “I guess I’m just interested in seeing more of your world.”

Eddie didn’t understand what Mike really meant by that, or what more he’d want to see of this street that seemed to have plenty of the same potholes from when he and his ma had moved onto it in late 1989. But he didn’t ask that as they walked around the block, and he didn’t rush him when Mike started up a conversation over the chain link fence with an old woman who was sitting on her apartment stoop, bundled up in a puffy blue coat against the cold.

Mike’s visit was the first time Eddie could remember having someone stay in his home and not want the person gone by the second night (although there wasn’t much competition there, since the last person to stay for a prolonged period of time in his home was a cousin who’d crashed on his and Myra’s sofa back when they were still in Queens). It was Mike, how could you want him to leave? He was so polite about some things it made Eddie want to throttle him a little, the way he waved off Eddie’s insistent don’t worry about that or I’ll take care of it comments, loading and unloading the dishwasher anyway, taking the recycling out with him he walked out the door on Thursday. He was the world’s most obstinately considerate houseguest.

They talked about the others during his visit, of course – the way friends talked about friends. Bill’s latest creative anxieties, how were Ben and Beverly doing, and what did they even think was going on there? And every time Richie came up Eddie braced himself for the conversation to trip, to fall, for Mike’s expression to become serious or regretful, to look at him and say whatever it was that would send Eddie tumbling backwards. And every time he didn’t, every time they discussed something about Richie in the same casual way they would any of them, Eddie couldn’t help but feel a small tug of disappointment.

“So where you going to live?” asked Mike on his last night. They were walking back to Eddie’s apartment after an evening spent in a narrow neighborhood bar that was about two blocks away and that Eddie had never been to before, despite living in walking distance of it for five years. It had been a beautiful, cold day and now it was a clear and colder night, Eddie bundled up in a thick wool coat and hat and scarf, Mike in a windbreaker that made Eddie’s bones cry just to look at
him. They’d gotten on the topic of Mike selling his place back in Derry, and how Eddie was just starting to figure out selling his current apartment.

“Just some place else in the city,” Eddie replied. “Still in Manhattan, but something a little smaller and cheaper I think.”

“A little smaller?” asked Mike. “Just how small can they get around here?”

“Fuck off. What about you? When your cross country pilgrimage is over, where are you going to settle down?”

“I’m not sure,” said Mike, his voice easy. Eddie couldn’t imagine having an attitude anywhere close to easy if he didn’t know what he was doing, where he was going, and how he’d end up living. But Mike didn’t seem bothered by the future at all. “I guess that’s part of what I’m hoping to figure out with this trip.”

“You’ve given yourself a lot to figure out.”

“Oh, I know,” said Mike. “It’s sort of nice.”

They reached Eddie’s apartment and then, because it was Mike’s last night, Eddie switched on his electric kettle and dug out some boxes of tea. They ended up sitting in his living room, mugs in hand – green tea for Mike, chamomile for Eddie – the silence a warm and comfortable thing compared to the noise from the cold streets below.

A different sort of memory drifted idly by, the feeling of sitting at the cheap kitchen table in that little apartment he’d shared with his ma in Queens, Eddie up late with books from his statistics college course, work spread across the kitchen table that only didn’t wobble because they had jammed a copy of *People* under one leg. The shitty white-light bulb from overhead that cast too sharp a light over everything, glaring up against the linoleum floor. How his mother would sometimes come in in her patchy blue bath robe and make a mild cup of tea for him, leaving it by his books before smoothing his hair back, kissing his forehead, and reminding him to not stay up too late and don’t forget his medication before bed.

He didn’t have so many of those quieter memories. Thinking about them now made it feel like something had wrapped itself around his stomach and was slowly squeezing. He took a sip of his tea and looked around the living room, cataloguing what he saw to distract himself from the feeling. Hardcover books unread on the shelf. Flat screen television, black and silent, staring against the wall. Light blue mug in his hand, part of a set from Crate and Barrel. Mike Hanlon, a long-time friend, sitting in an armchair in his apartment and looking content.

“We’ve all left now,” said Eddie. Mike turned to look over at him, his face a question. Eddie continued, “I mean Derry, that we’ve all left Derry.”

“Oh,” said Mike. He nodded. “Yeah. We’re all gone now.”

“I’m kind of amazed you didn’t leave back in the summer.”

“I had things to take care of,” said Mike after a moment. “And I was used to Derry.”

He blew lightly against the tea in his mug and took a sip. The silence lapped gently against them, and Eddie chewed over what Mike had just said, *I was used to Derry*, and wondered again about what it was to be used to a home that was foul and rotted, that you knew was patiently laying a trap for you at the same time that you were trying to save it.
“How did you live with it Mike?” asked Eddie. “I mean that whole time… knowing everything.”

Mike considered the mug in his hands, his response careful. “Well, I don’t know about how. It didn’t really feel like a choice. It just had to be me. It was me or no one, and that thing was coming back.”

“Yeah, but… even if you don’t choose something, there’s a way you live with it, right?”

“Well, sure – so I guess that’s how I lived with it. Thinking about it that way. Some things you can’t let yourself consider or see, right? Otherwise I think you’ll lose it,” he said. He looked over at Eddie. “Are you asking how I lived with it then, or how to live with it now?”

Eddie opened his mouth, instinct snapping no, of course not, I said what I said didn’t I? But something deeper, maybe wiser, shut his mouth and reconsidered Mike’s question, weighed it against the part of him that had survived Pennywise, the part that knew his mother had lied to him, the part that knew he didn’t love Myra.

“I’m still figuring that out, too,” said Mike in response to Eddie’s silence, his own voice calm. “I lived my whole life in that town. And it was Derry, so it wasn’t always easy. My dad, he was making a stand when he decided to stay there. There were times, especially when I was a little older, when I couldn’t understand why he would. Why he would come back to build his life in Derry, of all places.”

Mike paused for a moment, considered the mug in his hands before continuing. “But I have to be grateful, too. Because I think, what if he’d left? What if he and my mom had decided not to stay? Would there have been another kid eventually, instead of me, to complete the circle?”

“No,” said Eddie without thinking.

“Maybe not. Or maybe so. I wonder if there was always supposed to be a group of kids, or maybe there is no ‘supposed to be.’ Maybe if just one thing had been different, Pennywise would be still there, It would be waiting right now.” He shook his head and laughed a little. “I’m sorry – I’m an old man who lived alone for a long time, I can go on.”

“Mike, look around,” said Eddie. “Does this look like the soon-to-be-sold apartment of a middle-aged socialite? Come on – you can go on.”

Mike smiled. “Alright, but I did warn you.”

“I’ve been warned.”

Mike was quiet for a moment, and Eddie thought he could see him organizing the shelves of his mind, pushing a book cart that rolled softly against the low pile carpet.

“For the longest time, the only thing I had any real faith in was us,” he said. “That’s what I would hang onto. I used to go to church with my family every Sunday, all the way through college, even though I had stopped believing in all of that when I was a kid. I think it was after that summer I stopped believing, but, it’s hard to remember something like that, something that doesn’t happen all at once… what I’m trying to say is, that’s part of it, too. How I lived with it. Knowing that what had happened in Derry was real, that terrible things had happened and could happen again. But that… that if they did happen again – I believed that we’d come back together, that we’d finally finish It.”
He chuckled, despite there being nothing that amusing about the situation. “Kind of a bad thing to have faith in, because even though I believed it, it was the sort of the thing I didn’t want to happen. I didn’t want to see the deaths start again. And I didn’t want to have to call all of you, because I didn’t know what it would take to fight It.”

He took another sip of tea from the mug in his hand.

“But I hung onto that. Because it was easier to think of it as fate, or part of something like that, than to think of it as, as what it was, you know – as something that could fall apart.”

Eddie didn’t exactly follow all of what Mike was saying – he spoke like a man who was still getting used to being able to talk about ideas that he had only been able to admit in a journal for too many long years – but this part he understood. That they could have failed. That not everyone in Derry was oblivious to the hunger that lurked in the sewers. That monsters were real, and often they won.

“How to live with it,” repeated Mike. “I don’t know. You make right with yourself, I think. That’s all you can do – something I’m still working on.”

Eddie exhaled hard. “Aren’t we all?”

“That’s true,” said Mike, laughing a little. “That’s true – and that helps. Not being entirely alone in this one.”

Eddie felt suddenly tired, thinking of Mike alone in Derry for year after year, waking up every day and checking the paper to see if any half-eaten kids had been fished up out of the canal. He rubbed his hand against his temple, as though he could reach in further and rub out the memories that peered down at him like ugly knick-knacks from too high a shelf.

“God,” said Eddie, “I’m so sick of that fucking clown.”

Mike barked a loud, genuine laugh. Eddie looked up at him, surprised.

“Me too,” said Mike, grinning.

“It’s like, it doesn’t even seem to fucking matter sometimes that It’s dead,” said Eddie, not really sure what he was saying but knowing that his life wasn’t anything like he’d expected it to be a year ago. That he and his friends had come back together and defeated the monster, and things had felt more complicated ever since then.

“It matters,” said Mike, the grin altered, almost a grimace. “It matters for Derry. For the kids.”

“What about us?”

“Of course it matters for us,” said Mike. “We’re the ones who broke the cycle… and maybe we’re still breaking it, in some way. Dealing with aftershocks. I don’t know. I know it can’t be easy for you all – to remember everything.”

“Fuck,” said Eddie. “Wouldn’t it be great for something to be easy?”

Mike laughed again, and Eddie looked over at him. The first night back in Derry, during that July that felt like a lifetime ago, Eddie had seen a resistance in him. Mike had stood and moved and listened with the careful urgency of a man who wouldn’t bow to a body at the beginning of growing old, to wriggling doubts. A man who believed he was carrying out orders that couldn’t be questioned. Sitting here in Eddie’s apartment, just the two of them, far from that summer night’s
reunion, Eddie saw a new softness about him, like the growing bruise on a fruit.

“Aftershocks?” said Eddie.

There was a long moment before Mike replied.

“I know we killed It,” he said, his words coming out slowly, carefully. “I know It’s dead. But sometimes I can feel It. Or I think I… I think I hear It. Even though I know It’s not there.”

Eddie thought he knew a little something about echoes that wouldn’t shut up. He shifted in his chair. “Does It, does It say stuff to you?”

Mike gave a grimacing smile and was silent for a while, staring at nothing in particular before finally admitting, “Oh, just that I wasted all my time and most of my life. That I drove myself a little crazy to stay sane. That Derry wasn’t ever worth it, and that Stan – ”

He cut himself off. Eddie thought that if the town of Derry had any idea about anything and had any semblance of a soul, there’d be a statue of Mike Hanlon at City Center instead of that fucking plastic Paul Bunyan monstrosity. But the last bit of good was gone from there now – as far as Eddie was concerned, it had left the day Mike had driven over the county line.

“You know that’s bullshit though, right Mike?”

“Doesn’t matter what you know sometimes,” said Mike again, his voice gentle. Eddie scowled. The rest of them, they were people you could confide in. Bill could lead, Mike could listen, Beverly could pick you up, Ben could comfort, Richie could inspire. What could Eddie do but want to be those things? Particularly now, looking at Mike, and thinking about how still waters run deep and how maybe no one was a better example of that than their friend who had stayed behind all those years.

“You had the hardest job,” he said. “That fucked up town owes everything to you – and maybe it’ll always be fucked up, but at least you won’t have kids getting fucking eaten every thirty years, right? You won’t have kids like Georgie. That’s thanks to you.”

“Thanks to all of us,” said Mike.

“No! I mean yeah, sure, but, I’m saying you’re like the fucking lynchpin,” said Eddie, emphasizing his point with his hand in the air, “There’s no us without you first. You’re like, the best of us, Mike.”

Mike laughed. “I don’t know about that – you’re the one who almost died down there.”

“Yeah, well. That didn’t take a lot of fucking effort on my part, right? And I’m still here.”

“Yeah,” said Mike, nodding. “You are.”

“What?”

“Nothing.”

Mike gave him a grin, one of those rare, wide-open smiles. It made Eddie selfishly grateful, because at the end of the day, what he cared about more than the fucked up town and saving its fucked up kids who would just grow up into fucked up people, was having his friends back, even if maybe they were all a little bit fucked up, too. The beauty of friendship, as Richie would say.
“Thanks, Eddie.”

“For what?”

Mike only answered with a shrug. When Eddie frowned at him he took another sip of his tea, looking satisfied for some reason that Eddie couldn’t understand.

The quiet rolled back in, still comfortable but somehow different, slightly shifted. As though a bridge had been lowered, and something had been allowed to cross it.

“So I guess you’re going to stay in New York then,” said Mike, as though they’d never stopped having this conversation.

“Yeah. Where else would I go?”

“I don’t know.” Mike took another sip. “What’s keeping you here?”

“Maybe my entire fucking life and career? Why, you think I should be somewhere else?”

“No. Just wanted to know if you thought about it, since you’re moving anyway.”

“Yeah. I mean. This is my home, this is what I’m used to,” said Eddie, realizing the echo as the words left his mouth. *I was used to Derry.* “I mean – I just mean, I’d be the same any place.”

It was true, it was like what Mike had been saying. You could leave a place and a place could still haunt you. Yes, he was restless, but so what, who wasn’t? The only time things felt different these days was when he was with the Losers, the way Bangor had become something brighter in the presence of his friends, how New York changed when he explored it with Mike, or walked through it with Richie.

His heart beat harder as something came near him, and Eddie remembered what it had been like to be a kid and swim in that reservoir, the feeling of something he couldn’t see brushing against him under the water.

“That is the hard part,” Mike was saying. *Where ever you go, there you are.*

“Yeah,” said Eddie, and his voice sounded far away to himself.

They didn’t talk much for the rest of the night. They just sat together in Eddie’s living room, drinking their tea long after it had grown cold, sharing the silence between them while Eddie turned over Mike’s words in his head. *Make right with yourself,* he had said. As though the past was something you had to invite in, pull up a chair for. A thing you had to learn to break bread with, or else be broken by. Aftershocks.

When Mike left it got worse, Eddie’s thoughts marching back in as if to say *yeah, hoped you enjoyed the little vacation but we’ve got a lot of catching up to do, remember that phone call?* His mind was like an amusement park ride that he wanted to get off of, run by a sadistic carnie who refused to stop it.

And now the usual distractions yielded absolutely nothing – not work, not apartment hunting, not podcasts, not researching. It was like the dam they’d built down in the Barrens that fateful summer day, the one that had been surprisingly successful but had to be reinforced with more mud and rocks and sticks and sand every few minutes, otherwise the Kenduskeag would eventually win.
He’d thought Mike’s visit had been another effort to shore up the dam, but maybe he’d only been a distraction from the distractions. Because once he left, it was like Eddie had turned around to see the entire thing washed away.

There was no refuge from the memory of that early morning phone call, which kept forcing itself back to the forefront of his mind with all the subtlety of an icepick to his brain. This situation was different, a reality that didn’t haunt or torment him so much as dog constantly at him. Despite the black out curtains and rigid bedtime and melatonin vitamins, his sleeping was bad. Which made being awake even worse, and it took his brain three tries to understand the message Richie sent him as the end of January approached.

_Thursday 9:02 PM_

RT: Yeah, I know we talked about me driving down with you, but some work stuff came up last minute, so I’m just going to have to fly down and meet you guys down there. Sorry about it being last minute

Eddie was standing in the kitchen and stared at the text, read it again. This was an essay as far as Richie’s texts went. It was a reply to a message that Eddie had sent that morning, because Mike was going to be in Georgia in a week, and he and Richie hadn’t talked about driving down to Atlanta since, well, since before the fucking phone call – but they had talked around Atlanta during their desperately normal conversations, about how they were looking forwards to seeing everyone there again. And yes, things had been god awful and weird, but Eddie realized now, looking at the message, that he had been counting on this trip still. On Richie’s arrival and the two of them driving south.

He read the text again, and his heart – which seemed to do all kinds of shit lately, like pounding and tripping and squeezing and stopping – did something different. It simply sunk. He looked at the message and read what wasn’t said. Richie didn’t want to come, because he loved Eddie, and Eddie –

Eddie lowered his head, braced his hands against the countertop, breathed out hard. In, out. In, out. He lifted his head and stared around his empty apartment, quiet and dim against the night. _I think I love you_ – that’s what Richie had said, right? _I think I’m in love with you_. And Eddie had clammed up. Rolled over and ran without stopping to think or look behind, like Richie’s confession was a shambling and decaying thing that had pulled its way out from under a dark and abandoned house. And he’d been running circles in his mind ever since, the edge always waiting.

Because love, as he’d known it, was a pit. Love was a leeching hunger. A room that was locked from the outside.

_(no it’s the six of them returning to sign your cast)_

_(it’s the five of them waiting for you to wake up)_

And that wasn’t what it was with Richie. It was just better with Richie. The good stuff was better and the bad stuff was lighter and there was always a way to make something funny. The truth was that with Richie, he could breathe easier. The fear, constant and choking, cleared away.

And maybe in its absence, something else had been allowed to grow.

Admitting it felt wrong. It felt risky in a different way, as though he’d been given something as fragile and vulnerable as a tiny bird egg to cup in his palm. And grown men with ex-wives, grown men who had made their living shouting and swearing and thinking fast and smart and mean in
Manhattan didn’t do things like hold tiny bird eggs in their palms.

*(build houses in your heart)*

But there it was.

He didn’t know if it was supposed to mean anything. It was like glancing at the corner of a map and finally noticing the key. A truth that landed as lightly as a bird on a branch, returning to its nest.

Maybe there was more to love.

Come on, Eddie. *You’re braver than you think.*

He picked up his phone and called Richie. It rang three times before Richie picked up.

“Hey?” said Richie.

“Hi,” said Eddie. He felt a little like he was walking on a tightrope, the air thin around him and everything else in his life small and far beneath him. “I saw your text.”

“Yeah.” Richie breathed a small sigh on the other end. “Yeah, it’s work stuff you know, came up last minute – ”

“We could do the drive in a day,” blurted Eddie, angling carefully towards the truth. “It might not be leisurely like a real road trip or anything, but you can do that, New York to Atlanta, it’s probably like fourteen hours or something. I can even drive it all.” There was silence on the other end for a moment too long, and Eddie added. “I just think you should still come to New York.”

A long exhalation of breath on the other end of the line. “Uh, Eddie… I – ”

“Richie,” said Eddie, because he didn’t want to hear whatever Richie was going to say, and he was sick of this Richie, that didn’t know how to talk to him, sick of their stiff and brittle conversations, the way they propped up words like painted scenery on a stage. “I don’t know how to answer you still, alright? I don’t know. But I – I don’t think I gave you the right answer then, either.”

There was a beat, and then Richie asked, “What are we talking about?”

“We’re talking about us,” said Eddie. “About – what you said. When you called – ”

“No, no, I know what I said,” said Richie quickly, and there went Eddie’s stupid heart, sinking all over again. “We don’t have to talk about that.”

“We do,” said Eddie. “Wasn’t this what it always came down to? Plunging downwards, not knowing what was waiting in the dark but going anyway, because it was the thing you had to face. Because right now this sucks.”

Richie laughed. It was a dark laugh, no humor in it. “Yeah. Okay. This does suck, we can agree on that.”

“And I can’t figure out why,” said Eddie, realizing it as he said it. “But I think if you just came here, I think it’d be easier to figure it out. So… you should still come up to New York.”

A heavy sigh crackled through the phone. “I don’t know, Eds. I think sometimes things just suck because they suck. And that’s it.”
“Richie…”

“What?”

“I’m bad at this.”

“I honestly don’t know what you’re trying to do here, so I couldn’t judge you on that,” said Richie. “I mean, if you’re trying to be confusing as hell you’re actually doing a great job.”

“I’m trying to not accidentally lie to you,” said Eddie.

“…Uh, okay, well… how are you doing with that so far?”

“Fine, I think. Listen.”

“I’m listening.”

“No – shut up. I’m… I’m trying to figure out how to say this, and I don’t want to tell you something that’s wrong. But – maybe there is a way I feel about you. That’s different from the rest of them. It’s different from the way I’ve ever felt about anybody before.”

“Oh, okay,” said Richie, sounding a little off. “I’m still listening and I’m still confused.”

“We should talk about this in person. I… I don’t want to get this wrong.”

His head hurt. His chest was tight. His breath was stuck, the words he couldn’t seem to say caught in his throat like leaves in a gutter but dammit, he was so close. He closed his eyes tight, grimaced to himself.

“Maybe I’m in love with you, too,” he finally said, and it felt horrible and fantastic at the same time to admit it. “I don’t know. I don’t think I’ve ever actually been in love before, so I don’t know what this is.”

There was silence on the other end of the phone. That was a first.

“I’ll come to Los Angeles,” continued Eddie, deciding it as he said it and hoping that the silence on the other end didn’t mean that Richie had just had a heart attack and died. He probably hadn’t, right? Eddie would have at least heard the phone thud or something like that if Richie had suddenly collapsed dead on the ground?

“Okay okay!” exclaimed Richie, not dead. “I’ll come to New York, shit, give me a minute.”

“Too fucking late,” said Eddie, sitting down at the dining table where his computer was resting. “I’m opening my laptop.”

“Eddie, what the fuck? Hang on, you – fuck.” Richie laughed again, this one a little more nervous. “Are you just saying all this so that I’ll fly to New York?”

“No, especially since I’m on expedia looking at tickets to LA right now.”

“What? Stop – wait, hang on, holy shit – can you give a guy a minute?”

“No, I’m coming,” said Eddie. His last-minute, one-way flight to Los Angeles was going to cost a teeth sucking amount of money, but what was the tidy pile sitting in his bank account for if not putting himself on a plane to fly across the country to prove how serious he was about this shit to Richie?
“Shit,” said Richie, and then, “That’s a long flight.”

“I know.”

“You hate flying.”

“I know.”

“Oh my god,” said Richie. “You really do love me.”

“I said I might, I might love you. I don’t know what this is. I don’t want to tell you the wrong thing!”

“Okay,” said Richie. “Allegedly. You allegedly might maybe love me.”

“Maybe,” said Eddie. “There’s a flight that leaves from JFK tomorrow morning and gets me to LA around three, are you busy then?”

“Holy shit, I can’t believe this is fucking happening.”

“Are you busy?”

“Nancy Meyers eat your fucking heart out!”

“I guess I can just hang out in Los Angeles if you are.”

“Are you kidding, Eds? Of course I’m free, I’m free whenever, I’ll camp out at LAX to wait for you.”

“I thought you had last minute work.”

“What? Oh – fuck no! That was just an excuse, I thought maybe you hated me forever now and were just being polite about it.”

“Oh my fucking god,” said Eddie, rolling his eyes at his empty apartment.

“I know!” said Richie.

“I’m – uh, I’m sorry I didn’t realize any of this when you called,” said Eddie. “I’m serious about – like, I’m not very good at this kind of thing.”

Richie laughed, “Man, neither am I.”

“Okay, well, fuck me then.”

“Don’t fucking tease me Kaspbrak.”

“Dude,” he said over Richie’s cackling laugh, feeling his own face growing hot.

“Sorry, Eds,” said Richie in a voice that wasn’t sorry at all. “You set them up like that.”

“Fucking asshole,” muttered Eddie into the phone as he dug his wallet out of his workbag, but his heart was full. Something that had been askew felt like it had started to shift back into place. He pulled out his credit card and entered in the required fields to purchase his plane ticket. He was fully committing himself to one of his top five least favorite experiences, and all for a scruffy and terrifyingly unhealthy man who had spent most of their childhood making fun of Eddie’s mom.
“I’m forwarding you my itinerary.”

“I’ll print it out and frame it for posterity.”

“If that’s your idea of décor, that’s fucking tragic.”

“Uh, I’ve been in your apartment, dude. You’re no Chip Gaines.”

“I don’t know who the fuck that is but I’m never trusting anyone named Chip on anything.”

Richie laughed, and Eddie smiled into the phone. He felt a little like a towel that had been fully wrung out. And even through there were probably a hundred other things to say, he had a last minute flight to arrange and pack for. He needed to hang up, but he couldn’t bring himself to say good-bye just yet. Maybe Richie couldn’t either, because for a while neither of them said anything, sending nothing but little pieces of silence to one another. Like they used to. Then Richie broke it.

“Gotta be honest dude, this is like, twenty times better than beating that fucking clown.”

“That clown put me in the hospital for a month,” replied Eddie. “So yeah, I’d agree.”

Richie laughed. “You probably have to pack, right?”

“Yeah.”

“I should probably let you do that.”

“You don’t have to let me, you’re not holding me hostage.”

A small laugh.

“I missed you, Eds.”

“Alright, well, you don’t have to be so gay about it.” A louder laugh on the other end. Eddie smiled to himself and added, “But I missed you, too.”

It was back, the thing that let them talk like they were kids with all of summer and its long days and late evenings stretched ahead of them. Like words were cheap, and they had nothing and everything to catch up on. The feeling that was like treading down a familiar path, like seeing the world from the back of a friend’s bike, with your hands holding firmly onto his shoulders.

They talked for too long, about trivial shit, things that meant nothing, things that were just an excuse to listen to one another talk. When Eddie hung up it was nearly midnight and he still had to throw a bag together for a flight that was leaving way too soon and way too early. In some ways he’d never been so exhilarated about a flight. In other ways he’d never been so terrified – the flight itself, and what waited on the other end. Richie Tozier waiting to pick him up.

He stopped packing and simply stood for a moment, staring at nothing and feeling dizzy in a way that had nothing to do with a lack of oxygen. It was the idea of Richie Tozier, all six foot whatever of him, with his smart mouth and stupid face and the distance gone between them. There was a softness within Eddie, something bashful yet bright, swaying on the balls of its feet and sending a creeping warmth up the back of his neck.

*More stupid teen drama,* thought Eddie to himself, turning back to his sock drawer to pull out a few neatly bundled pairs of dark socks. But that bright feeling only smirked sideways at him, as though to ask him *why even try to play it cool?* There was no room for being aloof or above it all here.
This was the point of sloppy vulnerability, of marching up to someone, knowing you had a target painted on your face and a *kick me* sign on your back, with your arms open wide. The bright feeling only shone brighter, Eddie’s face felt hotter, and he couldn’t help grinning to himself like some kind of fool as he continued packing.

Love made a loser out of everyone.

Chapter End Notes

I'm sorry chapter 6 ended sad, but I promise it's gratuitous self-soothing content from here on out! Also, I know Joanna Gaines is the designer, not Chip, but if you think Richie knows enough to make that distinction then we have different interpretations of how dedicated an HGTV watcher he is
Chapter 8

After they hung up, Richie stood shell-shocked in the middle of his apartment. He felt as though he’d just been witness to something bizarre, like a comet streaking through the sky and crashing on the ground right next to him. He should have been standing besides a crater.

Eddie felt something for him. And Eddie was coming here, to him, for him, and – oh fuck his place was a mess.

The only reason Richie’s apartment had been inhabitable to begin with was the semi-regular cleaning service that he contracted to keep things from spiraling into a disaster zone. But after he’d drunkenly poured his guts out on New Year’s to less-than-ideal results, he’d cancelled the cleaning crew because it only took them walking in on him one time, sad and high while Fiona Apple played in the background, for him to decide who cared if the apartment was clean or not? He hadn’t been betting on Eddie calling him up and saying actually never mind I love you too and I’m coming to see you in fifteen hours.

Maybe! I said maybe!

An idea that made Richie dizzy even considering it. He kept tapping open his email on his phone and looking at the itinerary Eddie had forwarded to him. A one way flight from New York to Los Angeles. Arriving tomorrow. Whatever the opposite was of that feeling he got when he was about to throw up, that was what he was feeling now.

But also maybe a little like he was going to throw up.

Since sleep was impossible and there was a slight chance he wasn’t hallucinating this entire thing and Eddie really was going to get on a plane and be here and see his apartment, he got to cleaning. Cleaning, and cursing the slovenly habits of past Richie.

For the past month his only priority had been to languish in despair, with languishing broken up by the occasional fast food order. Unfortunately he still had a job that required him to occasionally show up at places and do things, and there were only so many more times he could drop the fuck it all and cancel everything order on his assistant before Julia revolted. So when he had a gig or a meeting or some other vile event that required putting on clothes, brushing his teeth, and smiling and talking with people as though he didn’t feel like there was a sinkhole in his chest, he had ponied up and knocked it out as quickly as possible. He turned down invitations for drinks or dinners because all he looked forwards to was coming home, sloughing off his human disguise and returning to his true form as a stupid, miserable slug.

Some people were harder to shake off than others. Camilla had been genuinely worried about him – first about his physical health after he’d keeled over and hurled in that alleyway, then about his mental wellbeing. She’d been sending him a lot of supportive messages of the rainbow-flag-waving variety, which at any other time might have been appreciated but not when he was consumed with being a slug.

And even some of the Losers seemed to be suspicious that something was off, which was a real sign that he was slipping if friends across three different time zones were worried. Richie only had his suspicions about their suspicions, but Beverly had been calling him an increased amount and Bill was texting more than usual, including hints that he’d be happy to catch up with Richie on the phone – and Richie knew Bill preferred avoiding the phone if he could.
Long boring story short, the past month had been rough, and the evidence was all over the apartment. The victim was depressed as hell, he imagined a detective investigating his death-by-dirty-laundry-pile would say. *Exhibit A, this place is a goddamn mess.*

Take-out bags and containers littered every surface in his apartment, from the counter top to the coffee table to the little table out on his balcony. The laundry hamper in his bedroom was overflowing, its contents spread to the rest of the floor like an unchecked fungus growing along the side of a tree. The sink was piled high, the dishwasher still unloaded, the trash filled to the brim. The bathroom probably needed an attempt at cleaning and he should put new sheets on his bed – oh fuck, was Eddie going to sleep in his bed?

The potential reality of this washed Richie in an immediate shock of cold and then heat, and then his brain chimed in with *dude, he’s not even going to get further than the doorway, let alone to the bedroom if you don’t handle this mess.*

Priorities, right. But he still made sure to change his bed sheets, although he’d been doing even less sleeping in his bed than usual. It was amazing the couch hadn’t yet acquired a permanent Richie Tozier-shaped silhouette across it.

At four in the morning he stopped cleaning for a moment, wondering if he should try to sleep. But it was like someone had mixed pop rocks and coca cola in his brain, and maybe no one had written a love song using that exact metaphor yet but they fucking should because that was how it felt. He kept going, trying to get his apartment to looking halfway as if a human with some self-respect lived in it. By early morning it was nearly there, and while he didn’t think his all nighter spent cleaning would stand up to inspection by a black light (which hopefully Eddie didn’t travel with but frankly, Richie wouldn’t have been surprised), it also didn’t look like a slug human had taken up residence in it since the beginning of the year. A victory.

With the added bonus that he had exhausted himself enough that he was able to collapse on his couch and fall quickly asleep, his TV chattering in the background as it wished a good morning to all the Angelenos tuning in.

He didn’t dream about anything and woke up five hours later with a start when his cellphone timer started chirping. By all rights he should probably have felt miserable, but he felt more awake than ever. Love was a hell of a drug.

He checked his phone, saw some text messages he’d missed that Eddie had sent (as well as a couple of salty ones from his assistant), and realized he probably should have set his alarm for thirty minutes earlier if he had wanted enough time for a leisurely shower and quick breakfast before driving to the airport. Instead, he had just enough time to jump in the shower, scrub aggressively at his hair, throw himself into some of the clothes he’d pulled out of the dryer at 3 am, skip shaving, and grab two packets of pop tarts from the cabinet despite the fact that his digestive tract liked to put up a grumbling protest whenever he ate any. *You might be in denial about being forty,* he imagined his stomach huffing at him, *but I’m not.*

He took out two bags of trash with him, throwing them down the garbage chute at the end of his hallway before taking the elevator down into the garage, using the time to tear into his first pop tarts packet. Cinnamon sugar, because his palette was *refined.* He almost choked on a piece when he pulled out his phone and saw that Eddie had texted him *just landed.*

*Fuck yeah I’m so proud of you, survived the plane and everything,* Richie texted back as he walked towards his car. *I’m en route.*

*Great,* responded Eddie, and then *Don’t text and drive.*
Richie grinned as he reached his car, until he was reminded that he had not thought to clean his car and it probably could have used some de-cluttering. Too late now to do anything more than scoop up the medley of shit that had accumulated in the front passenger seat and throw it in the back. He peeled out of the garage and headed onto I-405, flipping through the radio stations and settling 95.5 FM, Los Angeles’s Only Option When You Want to Rock! because the sky was clear, the traffic light, and he was driving to the airport to pick up a guy who maybe loved him. And that made him want to roll down the windows and yell along to the Scorpions as loud as he could.

He was still about ten minutes away – barring any traffic disaster – when his phone started ringing and he saw SEXY NORMAN BATES listed as the caller. Be cool be cool be cool thought Richie as he picked up the call.

“Hey!” he said.

“Hey, this airport is fucking hell on earth,” said Eddie, and it was music to Richie’s ears. “I mean seriously, it makes JFK look like a vacation resort. Where are you?”

“I’ll give you a pass for talking shit about our beautiful airport this time, since I’m still so impressed you made it. I’m almost there,” he said, which was almost true. “Just hang out somewhere, I’ll park and meet you inside.”

“You sure? I can go find wherever the pick up area is.”

“If I was still twenty and broke, absolutely, but I didn’t become dazzlingly rich and famous just so I couldn’t afford thirty minutes of parking at LAX.”

Eddie snorted. “Okay, I’m in Terminal 5. I’ll see you soon?”

“Unless the mega earthquake decides to hit now.”

“What – fuck you, man.”

“See you soon!” laughed Richie, hanging up.

There was a certain satisfaction – a twin to knowing the best part of first-class was getting to beat everyone else off the plane – in not bothering with the pick up area of the airport, not drifting to the right and joining the slow sludge of cars looking for a strip of space or their arrived person. He pulled into one of the hourly parking lots instead, gave himself a few seconds to collect himself, found that to be impossible, and stepped out of the car and followed the signs towards Terminal 5.

Eddie had texted him that he was waiting at a Peet’s Coffee near the baggage carousel, and that was where he found him. He was sitting at a table, cane balanced against the edge of it, with enough luggage for a small family surrounding him – two big bags, a smaller carry-on, the portable oxygen concentrator that he’d first seen at Ben’s house. He had a coffee and was watching the back and forth of people across the terminal, taking it all in with a familiar narrow concern on his face. For a second Richie wasn’t at the airport. He was standing in the wings, feeling that sweet and frightening buzz that lived somewhere in his stomach in the seconds before he walked past the curtain, into the waiting spotlight and welcoming applause. He hoped that was what he was walking into here.

“Hey, Eds,” he said as he walked over. He watched Eddie’s face snap around, moving from blank concern to alert to relief as he spotted Richie.

“Hey,” he said. Then he was pushing back his chair and standing up and grinning at him, in a kind of nervous way that seemed to echo the wary hopefulness Richie felt in his own chest. They both
stood there, just smiling the same new, stupid smile at one another, like kids at a middle school dance.

Then Richie took another step forwards and folded his arms around Eddie in a hug, the pop rocks traveling from his brain to his heart, and the only thought he seemed to have any room left for was please.

He felt Eddie’s arms move to hold him back, and it wasn’t the first time that he’d hugged Eddie but it was the first time he’d held him like this. Like he didn’t have to worry about tipping his hand, because now it was finally all out there. The truth was there between them and Eddie’s answer was to wrap his arms around Richie and hug him back for an inordinate amount of time.

But you couldn’t just stand around hugging a guy forever, not even in an airport terminal. They pulled apart eventually.

“Why is your hair wet?” asked Eddie

“I took a shower,” said Richie, pleasantly surprised to find his voice still worked. “I do that sometimes.”

“I’m relieved to hear it.”

“Yeah.” Richie grinned at him.

“What?” asked Eddie, and when Richie just kept smiling, repeated more aggressively, “What?”

“Nothing, sorry. It’s just good to see you. It’s like, really good to see you.” He felt a little embarrassed, an emotion he was more familiar with than people tended to give him credit for. “It’s crazy that you’re here.”

Eddie looked at him, and Richie had to wonder a little at what Eddie, who saw potential disaster before anything else, saw when he looked at him. A colossal mistake? A guy that wasn’t worth flying six hours across the country with one lung for?

Or maybe, since he was smiling again, he saw a little of what Richie did in him, someone who understood and made things a little less unbearable.

“It is crazy,” said Eddie. He looked around. “But also, I didn’t come here to just hang out in the airport.”

“You don’t want to stick around, see if Brad Pitt is flying today?”

“I’ve seen you, that’s enough celebrity for me.”

“Wow, you think I’m hotter than Brad Pitt.”

“That is not what I said.”

“Well I think you’re hotter than Angelina, so I guess we’re perfect for each other,” said Richie, and when Eddie’s face went a slight pink, added, “Shit, don’t tell me you’re team Anniston?”

“Living here has really rotted your brain,” said Eddie. “Celebrity culture is a disease.”

“Well maybe there’s something in here to cure it,” replied Richie, slinging Eddie’s carry-on across his shoulders. “Also, I don’t know if I need to hear any societal commentary from the guy who tanked the economy in 2008.”
“You know not everyone who wears a suit and works near Wall Street does the same thing?”

“Classic Wall Street misdirection,” said Richie. “Won’t work on me, Eds, I never have any fucking idea what you’re talking about with work.”

He took Eddie’s other two overstuffed suitcases – which thankfully had rolling wheels, because Richie was not Ben Hanscom – and headed back towards the parking lot, feeling a little like a pack mule but not entirely minding because he had Eddie walking beside him. They chatted more as they walked, most of it Eddie complaining, in great detail, about every aspect of the airline industry after Richie had asked how his flight was. Richie would have happily listened to Eddie’s complaints for another hour if it was all he wanted to discuss.

It was all so familiar and all so different. Richie had been to the airport before to pick up girlfriends, or even just girls who were friends that he sometimes slept with. He wasn’t a sweaty-palmed fifteen year old trying to figure out how to ask Rebecca Foley if she’d go see a movie with him on Friday after school, and he wasn’t a sweaty-palmed seventeen year old trying to figure out how to hook up with Rebecca Foley after prom night. And yeah, it had all been in service towards playing a part, but it was one he thought he’d done okay at. He wasn’t a total fucking dweeb at least.

So why was it that none of that seemed to matter for shit as he was walking across the parking lot with Eddie beside him, feeling like he was maybe, actually, the world’s biggest dweeb? He didn’t feel like a forty year old who had found success in an industry that granted very little of it. He felt like the thirteen year old he’d only recently become reacquainted with, the kid who had learned to hide a long time ago and had never imagined this could be his life. It was a lot of shit to feel in the hourly parking lot across from Terminal 5 at LAX.

They reached Richie’s car and he loaded Eddie’s comically heavy luggage into the trunk. He closed the lid of the trunk and turned towards Eddie who was just standing there, frowning vaguely at the back of Richie’s car and not making any move towards the passenger seat. Maybe he’d seen what a mess Richie’s car hid and was silently figuring out a polite way to tell Richie he would be taking a separate cab to his apartment, thanks.

“Sorry mademoiselle, did you need me to get the door for you or something?” asked Richie.

Eddie turned to look at him, and Richie had to marvel again at how dark Eddie’s eyes were, what it felt like to have all of that concentration fixed on him.

“Yes?”

“Can you shut up for a second,” said Eddie, stepping towards Richie. Distantly, Richie caught himself making sure there was no one in the same aisle as them, but he was moving towards Eddie, too, bending down and just before they were kissing Richie had a moment to think shit do I have cinnamon sugar pop-tart breath? In the next moment he didn’t care at all.

It was simultaneously one of the best and one of the worst kisses in Richie’s life. Eddie kissed him the same way someone might jump into a freezing pool, just to throw themselves in and get it over with at first. The shock to the system, then the acclimation. Your body adjusts, you don’t feel the cold anymore, suddenly you’re swimming.

That was how it felt, Eddie’s kiss all sudden, aggressive insistence and then something slower, with one of his hands on Richie’s waist, Richie’s own hand threading through Eddie’s hair as this parking lot became the most romantic spot in the world. Kissing Eddie Kaspbrak with the trace of coffee on his breath. For the first time in his life he was kissing a man that he loved, and the whole
thing filled him up with some wild, pink feeling, made him so damn happy that he started to laugh.

“What the fuck?” said Eddie, pulling back.

“I’m sorry,” said Richie, still laughing. “It’s me, it’s me, I’m just...”

Eddie was looking at him, brow slightly furrowed, and Richie felt instinct whacking him on the back of his head. He slid his right hand from the back of Eddie’s head to cradle his cheek, his thumb resting lightly over the ridge of a scar, as though he had held Eddie like this a hundred times before.

“I’m just really happy,” said Richie, and he saw the suspicion clear from Eddie’s expression. “That’s all.”

“Oh,” said Eddie, his mouth slowly pulling into a half smile. “That’s really all? No punch line?”

“Geeze, Eds, is everything just a joke to you? Can’t you ever be serious for once?”

“Alright,” said Eddie, rolling his eyes. “I mean I’m trying to be genuine here.”

“Okay, I’m getting in the car now.”

“And now you’re just walking away, instead of communicating!”

“I am communicating, this is me communicating let’s go.”

“Is that all I am to you? Your own personal chauffeur?”

“Are these pop tarts in the passenger seat?”

“Trying to change the subject? Also yes, do you want one?”

“I thought you were joking about these!”

“If there’s two things I’m serious about,” said Richie, smiling over at Eddie. “It’s you and pop tarts.”

“That’s a tragedy.”

“You’re telling me,” said Richie, fishing out his keys. “I’m the one who fell for an insurance guy.”

An hour later they were sprawled out in Richie’s apartment, with take-out from the taco place down the street and a Temptations record spinning lazily in the corner. Eddie hadn’t run shrieking from the apartment after stepping inside, so Richie felt that his late night cleaning efforts had been a success.

“So,” said Richie, having finished inhaling his last taco. “What’s our fucking deal?”

Richie was stretched out on one end of his couch, Eddie sitting in the armchair he had pulled up to the coffee table. He finished chewing, then took a napkin to wipe his mouth and fingers before answering.
“You want me to tell you my romantic history?” asked Eddie in the same way someone else might ask you want to hear a funny joke?

“Educate me, Casanova.”

“Well right now I’m getting divorced – separated, if you want to get technical I guess –but you know all that. Anyway, before that Myra and I had been together for ten years. And before that we started dating because someone else set us up, and then we got married because Myra seemed to ‘get’ me and she was the only girl my ma halfway approved of. Oh, and how many girls were there before that?” asked Eddie sarcastically. “Three, if you want to be generous and count Larissa who made out with me one time in twelfth grade.”

“Lucky Larissa.”

Eddie pinked slightly, but went on. “What I’m saying is, I was never any good at starting things like this. And it’s not like I’ve gotten any better at it while being married.” He paused, then added, “And I’ve definitely never… never done anything like this with another guy.”

“Well we’re in the same boat there,” said Richie, looking over at Eddie. He had a hundred different questions jostling in his mind. Maybe Eddie could see that, or maybe he was just immediately suspicious of Richie letting a silence go on for too long.

“What?”

Richie grinned. “Just that you’re not straight either.”

“Wow, Einstein, what tipped you off?”

“What tipped you off?”

Eddie half-laughed, shook his head at Richie. “You, dumbass.”

“Wow,” said Richie. “Did I make you gay?”

“Fuck off.”

“Are you?”

“What?”

Richie shrugged. *I’ll take conversations I never thought I’d be having in my life for $2,000 Alex.*

“Well, you’re not straight,” said Richie. “So are you gay?”

“Oh my god,” groaned Eddie. He held out his hands in an empty gesture. “I don’t know? Who cares.”

“I care,” said Richie, leaning over to get a chip and some guac, “Mostly because when we were all back in Derry, Pennywise was really after my ass for being all repressed and shit – that clown was straight up homophobic. And I’m going to find it very unfair that It didn’t do the same thing to you.”

“Seriously?” said Eddie. “First of all, that clown fucking impaled me. But if it makes you feel better, when were kids It did used to say shit like, *hey I’ll blow you for a fiver.*”

Richie laughed so unexpectedly that he sent little crumbs of chip flying over the table.
scowled.

“What the *fuck*?” laughed Richie.

“It’s really not funny.”

“Right right right,” said Richie, then, “Maybe a little bit though…?”

“Fuck off,” said Eddie idly. “So – am I gay? I don’t know. That’s low on my list of priorities right now. Feels like a sub-item compared to figuring out this.” He gestured between himself and Richie.

“Wow, I’d love if my sexuality was just a sub-item.”

Richie swiped another chip with guac as he mulled this over. It had never mattered to him before about defining what existed between him and whatever girl he was with at the time. For some of them, like Camilla, this didn’t matter either. For others – like Sandy – it most certainly fucking did. Too little too late, he was starting to have a little more sympathy for Sandy because looking at Eddie, sitting in Richie’s chair in Richie’s apartment in Richie’s city, he was struck through with need. Like the shitty, chalky-tasting candy hearts said, *be mine.*

“Okay,” said Richie, “How’s this sound… we’re dating?”

“Have we even been on a date?”

Richie threw his hands wide. “What the hell is this?”

“This is us eating tacos in your apartment.”

“And that’s not a date?”

Eddie made a face.

“You want me to wine and dine you?” asked Richie.

“No, I just think dating sounds weird. It sounds like… I don’t know, so high school.”

“What are you *talking* about dude, dating is for everyone. Grandparents date.” Richie shook his chip at Eddie. “This hang up’s on you.”

“Okay, fine! We’re dating.”

Angels in heaven couldn’t have played a sweeter sound for Richie. He grinned. “Cool.”

“But,” said Eddie. “I don’t know how easy this is going to be.”

“We already fought a big shape shifting sewer clown together, how could anything be harder?”

“There’s different kinds of hard – *don’t!*” snapped Eddie at Richie’s rude grin.

“But Eds, I can’t – ”

“I know, but just, you know, deal with it. Anyway, I’m saying practically, you live here, I live in New York, I’m… working on getting divorced, so…”

“Am I a homewrecker?”

“No,” said Eddie, rolling his eyes. “You are obviously not.”
Maybe, but it was the first time since Eddie had landed in California that Richie was remembering the hospital scenes from long ago, and the woman who had waited by Eddie’s bedside with an anxious patience. The woman he had struck a temporary alliance with, the two of them constructing a quick scaffold of an allegiance. Then Eddie had woken up, things had changed, everyone had left, and next thing he knew Eddie was leaving Myra.

It was something bigger and something separate from Richie, sure, he knew that. But he couldn’t help the wince in his conscience remembering her now. Not that he felt any desire to call her up and catch up over drinks, but, like Eddie said – they’d been married ten years.

“How is Myra?” he asked, wondering if it made him an asshole to even ask it.

“I think she’s… kind of good, actually,” said Eddie, looking thoughtful. “She’s okay.”

“Well, that’s cool,” said Richie.

The record ended and Richie got up, wiping his fingers against his jeans as he walked over to flip the record over to the other side. When he flopped back down on the couch, Eddie was looking at him like a kid that knew he had to fess up to something.

“What?” asked Richie.

“Does any of that bother you?” said Eddie, and, when Richie gave him a confused look, continued to add, “The distance. We’re on opposite ends of the country, I’m getting divorced, I just mean… this is Los Angeles, there’s probably tons of other people, other guys that, if you wanted – ”

“Okay,” said Richie, cutting across Eddie. “No. I mean, would it be cool if we lived less than a six-hour flight away from each other? Yeah that’d be alright. But that doesn’t mean – ” How to put this part into words, this wish that had started as a small, secret confession along a bridge back in Derry. This waiting that had become a starving, and it wasn’t just about any fucking guy, even if they shared a zip code.

“Eddie, it wouldn’t matter if you lived in fucking Russia, okay? I wouldn’t give you up for anything.”

Eddie’s eyebrows lifted. There was a softness, a tenderness between them now, the sort of thing that would be easy to flip over and tear open. Pull it back! Some instinct screamed in his brain. Too strong.

“Except for maybe 90s era Val Kilmer,” said Richie. “I might give you up for him.”

“Val Kilmer?” said Eddie, making a face.

“What? Don’t act like he wasn’t a hunk.”

“Yeah, okay, but is he better than like, young Harrison Ford?”

“Holy shit, is that why you liked Indiana Jones so much when we were kids?”

“No – no. I’m just saying in your hypothetical, if you can pick anyone from any time, and you’re going with Val Kilmer – ”

“Wow,” said Richie, grinning. “This is great. Harrison Ford, huh?”

“No. shut up, I’m – ”
“I mean I can’t fault you, 70s Ford is also pretty damn good.”

Eddie was shaking his head, but he was smiling, too. And Richie was thinking about how it was crazy that he’d made so many people laugh during his lifetime, professionally and otherwise, and none of that shit compared to the feeling of when Eddie was smiling because of him.

Later, much later, sitting on the couch with Eddie asleep against his shoulder, Richie really couldn’t believe how lucky he was. Why had nobody ever mentioned that when a guy you loved fell asleep while resting against you, it made your insides melt a little and felt so good that you’d sit still as a statue for the rest of your life rather than risk waking him up?

Eddie had started yawning by eight pm – not a surprise, given the three hour time difference, the six hour flight he’d been on earlier, the fact that he had gone to bed so late the night before, and the general exhaustion to be expected following some kind of maybe-gay reckoning. Richie had told him that he could go to sleep, that he’d changed the sheets on his bed – “Or there’s the guest bed, too,” he’d added quickly, hearing his mind shout not so fucking fast! again.

“Do you want me to sleep on the guest bed?” Eddie had asked, a slightly unimpressed tone to his voice.

“Not really,” Richie had replied, and wow had he turned up the thermostat too high?

“So I’ll sleep in your bed,” Eddie had said, like it was a very normal deal instead of a very fucking big one. He yawned wide, holding up a hand to cover his mouth, and said, “But not yet.”

“You’re about to pass out right now!”

“It’s only eight o’clock – I have to adjust to the time zone! When do you usually go to bed?”

At that, Richie had barked a very sarcastic laugh. He went to sleep when his consciousness finally got bored enough of fucking around with him, and there was no point in Eddie waiting around for that.

“Depends,” he’d said, “I usually just watch movies until I get tired enough.”

Which was how they had ended up on the couch, Richie on his usual side but with the new addition of an Eddie Kaspbrak leaned up against him, his head resting against Richie’s shoulder, breathing evenly in his sleep.

They hadn’t begun in that position. When the movie had started (the 2004 masterpiece that was Troy, since Eddie hadn’t seen it and Richie was in the mood to give him more shit about Brad Pitt) Eddie had been sitting on the other end of the couch. He’d gotten up at one point and when he returned, he’d stood there for a second, then looked at the spot on the couch next to Richie and asked him if it was taken. Richie had grinned and moved his arm, and Eddie had settled in next to him.

Eddie had made it about halfway through the movie before his commentary – which alternated between confused and condescending – had started to fade. Not too long after that, it had ended entirely, and by the time the credits were rolling Richie was positive that Eddie was asleep.

This was a new and delicate world for Richie. He had made a living, built a life, on the idea of a kind of dirty, roughshod masculinity, on being ready to meet reality with a tilted shrug and sarcastic remark, microphone in hand. Sadness was the kind of thing to be channeled into a night
out with the guys and too many drinks. Love was an eye-rolling idea, a bone you threw to whatever
crack you were sleeping with. Feelings were bullshit, a buddy getting hitched was pussy whipped.
Anything too heavy to hold could be spun into comedy for strangers. These were the clubhouse
rules a guy had to follow to be allowed in, and you wanted to be, had to be in, because if you
weren’t you were out and if you were out you were meat.

(you wouldn’t want anyone to pick truth would you Richie)

Richie frowned at the TV, felt conscious that he’d tightened his arm around Eddie ever so slightly,
as though to pull him in closer.

He had been so wrong, so wrong and he had missed so much for so long. He’d watched it all
happen while standing on the bleachers, his back to the action. He’d only known faggot and queer
thrown with a vicious edge, meant to cut. He remembered growing up hearing about a plague that
was a punishment, he remembered don’t ask don’t tell. Moments that fell into history books that he
always insisted had nothing to do with him, that he had no opinion on, but he noticed them anyway.
Still on the bleachers, watching as people fought and protested and forced their way forwards,
changing tides, winning landmarks, and Richie still watching from the sides. He had long ago lost
track of the kid who had believed it was better to be in the club, any club, rather than be stuck
outside for them to find you and drag you and eat you alive.

But he had missed, in all the fear, what it was he was running from. He hadn’t realized it was just
this, a soft night alone with another man, turning over time with a person who made life a little less
scary. And for it to be Eddie, for whom everything was a Big Fucking Deal, for whom nothing was
ever so simple… but Eddie had called him back and come to him, as though there was nothing
terrifying about it. He tilted his head a little towards Eddie’s, felt Eddie’s hair brush against his
cheek. Could be it was just what Richie had said to him in that dark and murky place. Eddie
Kaspbrak was braver than he knew, and Richie loved him for it.

“Hey,” said Eddie.

Richie looked up from his phone and over towards his kitchen, where Eddie had converted a small
piece of his counter into his temporary office. That morning Eddie had said he needed to get a few
hours of work done, to which Richie had pointed out that it was Saturday, and Eddie had looked at
him as though Saturdays were for children. He had his work laptop set up, alongside a manila
folder that Richie imagined was full of incredibly boring shit.

“Yeah?”

“Mike sent another one of his news bulletins.”

“Oh yeah? Where’s Mikey now?”

“Asheville, apparently,” said Eddie, looking at his computer screen. “But he’s also writing to let us
all that he’s definitely going to be in Atlanta at the end of the week.”

“Oh. Right,” said Richie, sitting up. He looked over at Eddie. “I was supposed to fly to New York
and we were going to drive down together.”

“Yeah. But then you had work,” said Eddie, throwing up “work” in sarcastic air quotes.

“Right, because how dare I not interpret Richie I don’t feel that way about you to mean Richie I
want to kiss you in a parking lot.”
“Well, you should have,” said Eddie, grinning, and Richie felt his heart thumping harder in his chest.

“You know,” continued Eddie, looking at his computer again, “We could still drive.”

“What – from here? You want to drive LA to Atlanta?”

Eddie nodded. “I was already planning on taking a week and a half off anyway, right? And you don’t actually have anything last minute. You can make the drive from LA to Atlanta in a week.”

“Can you? Who wants to?”

“You don’t want to?”

“Nothing against driving, it just, you know, takes forever and I’d hate for all those nice planes to go to waste.”

Eddie snorted but didn’t say anything. Richie shook his head.

“You actually just really like driving, huh? Like, deathly fear of planes aside and all that?”

Eddie gave him a half-smile in response. “Yeah. Something about it. It’s kind of meditative.”

“Maybe you were a truck driver in another life.”

“There is no life where my ma lets me grow up to be a truck driver.”

Richie had to concede that was probably true, although if they accepted the idea of a multiverse then somewhere out there, there had to be an Eddie Kaspbrak wearing a patchy cap and talking into a CB radio as he cruised along the highway in his eighteen wheeler. Eddie thought that idea was bullshit and said so. Richie pointed out that Eddie was the one asking them to drive across the country for fun.

It wasn’t like Richie was adamantly averse to long drives – he couldn’t have been, between all his early days when he’d driven hours to crummy bars where he’d booked a set, the stand-up tours he’d begun in his mid-30s, and living in Los Angeles for fuck’s sake. He was just less of a journey, more the destination guy.

But if Eddie had said he was in the mood to drive from here to the tip of South America, Richie would bitch and moan but have the car packed by that evening.

“Okay,” said Richie, “So he’s going to be there next weekend?”

“Yeah. And he says that he reached out to Patricia – Stan’s wife. She’s invited him and the rest of us over on Saturday.”

“Next Saturday?” asked Richie, filing away the fact that Stan’s widow wanted to meet them as a thing to think about and deal with later.

“Yeah.”

“So we need to be on the road, like, now.”

“Do you think it takes a hundred hours to drive from here to the east coast?”

“Does it?”
“It’s probably closer to forty,” said Eddie, turning back towards his computer. Richie could see him pulling up google maps, so he got up and walked over to stand beside Eddie’s chair. “See? It’s thirty-two hours. That’s easy.”

“Wow, and we get to drive through all of Oklahoma,” said Richie, looking at the generated route. “My dream.”

“We could go through Texas instead.”

“Oklahoma or Texas, my own Sophie’s choice.”

He was standing close enough that Eddie was able to elbow him in his side. Richie grinned.

“What newly out gay dude wouldn’t want to celebrate with a trip through the bible belt?”

Eddie frowned up at him, and Richie saw it held a trace of real concern. “Are you seriously worried?”

“I’m just messing with you,” said Richie. “We survived Pennywise and Derry, we could handle evangelists.”

“Okay…” said Eddie, holding Richie’s gaze for another moment before turning back to his computer. He had a map of the United States open on his Internet browser, with the map displaying a little blue trail that connected Los Angeles to Atlanta. “We can rent a car here, then drop it off in Atlanta, or I can drive it up to New York – either way, makes it that you don’t have to drive it all the way back here. Are you good with leaving on Monday?”

“Man, you work fast.”

“There’s no other way to work when you don’t have time,” replied Eddie, switching back over to his email and starting to type up a reply to Mike.

“Monday’s great,” said Richie. “Can we talk logistics over dinner?”

“Sure.”

“Do you want to go out for dinner?” asked Richie, leaning across Eddie’s computer screen so that he could not be ignored, wagging his eyebrows suggestively. Eddie paused in his typing and looked at Richie as though he were a pop-up that his ad blocker had failed to block.

“Sure. Why are you doing that with your face?”

“This?” asked Richie, wagging his eyebrows some more.

“Yeah. I get it. You have impressive eyebrow control,” said Eddie, moving his computer to the right so that Richie’s head no longer blocked his screen.

“I’m being suggestive.”

“What are you suggesting, that your face is broken?”

“That we go out to dinner!”

“I already agreed to that!”

“I mean like a date, dude, since apparently dinner in my apartment doesn’t count,” said Richie,
feeling his stomach flutter a little as he said it. Even though there had already been a good amount of making out, and he’d woken up this morning in his bed with Eddie asleep beside him, it was still thrilling to ask Eddie out on an official date. The usual order of operations was all out of whack here.

“Oh – okay, great, yeah. Dinner date sounds good.”

“Any place you really want to go?”

Eddie shrugged. “It’s your city, you pick.”

“Okay, is there any kind of food you like other than prescription and rabbit food?”

Eddie gave him a look. “I don’t like raw things.”

Richie took a moment to not make the joke that he desperately wanted to.

“So cross sushi and steak tartare off the list,” said Richie, feeling a slight twinge of regret because sushi was amazing and half the restaurants he was running through in his mind were only on his mental list because of their sashimi. “What about Mexican?”

“Didn’t we just have tacos yesterday?”

“You’re saying that as if it’s some sort of counterpoint.”

Eddie opened his mouth, maybe to immediately shoot down Richie’s reasonable – and in fact, fantastic – suggestion, then made a conceding gesture with his head and said “Yeah. Mexican’s good.”

Richie grinned. “I’d get run out of town if I let you visit without taking you out for Mexican.”

“Okay, so let me finish working if you want me to be free,” said Eddie, right as his phone chimed and Richie’s buzzed. It was Bill, messaging the group chat to let Mike know that he had seen his email and he was still planning to fly in to Atlanta on Friday morning.

Richie settled back on the couch and found it impossible to focus in on anything while Eddie continued to sit at his kitchen counter. How was he supposed to kill time watching something on his iPad, or checking his own work email, when Eddie Kasprak was sitting here, casual as could be, in his apartment? The wild weirdness of it all brushed by him again, that they were kids who played in a dirty stream in Derry, Maine and now they were all grown up with plans to eat dinner at a spot Richie knew and loved on Sunset Boulevard. It was the sort of truth you couldn’t stare at for too long without hurting your head, like trying to focus your eyes to see the tip of your nose.

He distracted himself in an old, reliable way, by sliding his headphones over his head and cranking up the volume on music so that it was too loud to even think. He watched Eddie for a while, before tipping his head against the back of the sofa and closing his eyes, drifting off to that place where his world was only sound and music. He was surprised when he felt a tap on his shoulder and opened his eyes to see Eddie standing over him, the sky outside his window dark. Winter nights came quick, even in Los Angeles.

“Sorry,” said Eddie. “Were you sleeping?”

“No,” said Richie, taking off his headphones, although maybe he had been. “Are you done? You wanna get food?”
“Yeah. Let me just change and I’ll be ready to go,” replied Eddie, who was wearing jeans and a Queens College sweatshirt, which Richie thought was honestly fine but who was he to dictate Eddie’s fashion choices.

“I’m not taking us anywhere fancy,” said Richie.

“Well I’m not going out to dinner in a sweatshirt.”

“Alright alright,” said Richie, waving a hand. “Go get changed, I’ll send for the carriage.”

Eddie shook his head and turned towards Richie’s room where his moderate pile of luggage lived, closing the door halfway behind him as he did so. Richie looked after him, curious.

Last night, after Eddie had woken up on the couch and Richie had suggested they move to his bed, Eddie had taken his pajamas and changed in the bathroom connected to Richie’s bedroom. He’d used the bathroom to change this morning and was apparently doing the same thing now. He left the door partially open, but that felt more like a concession than any sort of invitation, an acknowledgement that he was in Richie’s home and he wasn’t going to shut Richie out of his own bedroom – even if, maybe he wanted to?

Which was fine, Richie had to tell himself, falling back on the couch. This was so new, everything was new. For all the women that he’d flirted, dated, hooked up with over the years, there had been a rough script to follow, and it was one that Richie knew well. But this - there wasn’t a precedent, or at least not one that he knew of, for reuniting with your childhood crush to take on the evil homophobic space clown from your childhood and then dating said crush.

Okay, maybe there was Ben and Bev. But the last thing he was going to do, this early into whatever this new thing with Eddie was, was talk to Ben or Beverly about it.

The bedroom door opened fully and Eddie stepped back into the living room, now wearing a pair of dark trousers and a maroon button-down shirt. There was an adamant, put-together quality about him that not-so-subtly hinted at yes I can comfortably pay off the mortgage for an apartment in Manhattan, and inspired a desire in Richie to run his hands all through Eddie’s carefully combed hair.

“What?” said Eddie, who maybe saw Richie’s malicious intent.


“Okay,” said Eddie, looking at the wall and obviously biting back a smile.

“What?”

Eddie smiled his slightly crooked smile. “Just the idea of you, complimenting me.”

“I know, you’ve thrown my brand all out of whack,” said Richie, standing up now from the sofa and stretching. “Ready?”

“Yeah. How are we getting there?”

“I’m driving. It’ll take about half a century to get there, so I’d rather have judgment-free control over the music.”

“Maybe I’ll judge you.”
“Your judgment I can handle,” said Richie, grabbing his jacket and opening the door. “Let’s go hot stuff.”

Eddie snorted but followed him out the door. He didn’t judge Richie’s music selections too harshly because ultimately, Eddie wasn’t well versed enough with most music to judge anyone. This led to a discussion about what kind of music Eddie did listen to anyway, and Richie would not be satisfied with his answering shrug and ‘I don’t know, whatever’s on the radio.’ Eventually he got Eddie to confess that he’d been really into Linkin Park in grad school, and it was good that they were stuck in some minor traffic at the time because Richie got a real kick out of that and couldn’t pay close enough attention to the road while he was laughing.

Even in traffic, and even with Eddie proving to be a bit of a backseat-driver despite being in the passenger seat, it was a small, sweet type of pleasant to drive through his city with Eddie beside him. This was the town he’d dreamed about, the life he’d worked for; he felt that affection for the city of Los Angeles that only came from a long time settled somewhere, the sort of fondness that let a person gripe or bitch about a place only because they also loved it so much. He found himself telling Eddie stories from all around it, stories that were really about Richie and his life here, and Eddie listened.

By the time they reached the restaurant it was hovering around fifty degrees, since Los Angeles was a fucking desert and the moment the sun went down in the winter, the temperature quickly slid off. Richie handed his keys over to the valet and breathed in that dry, cold winter smell. Eddie was standing beside him, taking in their surroundings on the Boulevard. It was Saturday night and moving with people, and Richie felt the old fear kick up a little bit inside him, like dust on a baseball field.

But he didn’t have room for that fear, not when he was with Eddie, who made him feel solid, made him feel safe – the sort of thing that he just knew if he said aloud would make Eddie laugh self-consciously and look at Richie like he was crazy. And Richie didn’t know how he would explain what he meant exactly, that it wasn’t the type of safe like a high-tech security system tried to sell a person or that fairytales pretended at with knights on horses. It was whatever let Richie stand in his own life and not be nervous at the idea of going on a dinner date with Eddie Kaspbrak.

“Are we eating dinner or just standing around out here and freezing?” asked Eddie.

Richie laughed. “You’re intolerable. Freezing? We’re from Maine, bitch, it’s like fifty degrees out here.”

“Why are the rest of you so obsessed with remembering we’re from Maine now?”

“Making up for lost time? Come on, let’s eat.”

The restaurant was one of Richie’s favorites. Its brick walls, dark wooden paneling, and deep booths with the red dimpled seating all pointed towards a certain level of classiness, while the spaciousness, volume level, and the fact that you could order a margarita the size of your head detracted from it. It was a place that felt nice enough, but not so nice that Richie would feel uncomfortable showing up in an outfit that included jeans and tennis shoes, like he was wearing now (although to be fair, they were very expensive jeans). The sounds inside were a mix of Top 40 Latin Pop, fajitas sizzling on hot iron plates, and loud conversations at large tables.

They were led to a booth in the back, and Richie went ahead and ordered a frozen margarita served with a beer bottle upturned in it, which was worth it for Eddie’s look of horror when the drink arrived.
“Do you have any idea how many calories are in that thing?” Eddie asked when it appeared.

“Nope,” replied Richie, taking too quick a sip through the thick, purple straw that was served with it and giving himself a tiny brain freeze. “Ignorance is bliss.”

He also went ahead and ordered enough appetizers to make Eddie balk, because Eddie’s casual indignation fed him in a way that chips and guacamole never could.

Halfway through their meal a couple slowly approached the table – from their eager nervousness and painful attempt to look casual as they walked up, Richie could easily peg them for what they were: fans. Normally if fans showed up while he was out to dinner he’d have only the briefest of brief conversations, if that – but that night he was feeling strangely giddy and weirdly generous. He ended up standing up to take a photo with them, which Eddie so graciously agreed to take.

“Sorry,” said Richie after the couple had walked away, grinning. “I’m kind of a big deal, you know.”

“Oh yeah, no I see that. I’m very impressed,” replied Eddie, his words tempered by an affectionate sarcasm. He turned back to his vegetable fajitas, spearing a mix of peppers and onions on a fork.

“How’s all the comedy stuff going?” asked Eddie, maybe because the couple had mentioned that they were looking forwards to Richie’s tour, or maybe because that was just the polite kind of shit people asked during dinner. How’s work?

“Ha. I haven’t been doing too much of anything for the past month.”

Eddie frowned. “You did that podcast.”

“The podcast, what – oh! Yeah.” Richie laughed. “I did, that was nothing – how did you find out about that?”

“Well…” said Eddie, hesitating, and Richie’s curiosity was fully piqued. “You know how things were kind of weird between us?”

“I may have some recollection of things being awkward.”

“Right. So. I ended up checking your twitter and instagram a lot.”

Richie busted out a full on laugh. Eddie became very focused on his fajitas, as though they were about divulge insider-trading tips to him.

“Holy shit,” said Richie. “You cyber-stalked me?”

“I know. Whatever,” he said. “Anyway that’s how I found out about the podcast.”

“And you listened to it?”

“Yeah, I did,” said Eddie, shaking his head. “Learned a whole lot about a movie that I didn’t even know existed.”

“I think everyone should know about Phantom of the Paradise existing,” replied Richie. “Those guys are doing the lord’s work.”

“I guess,” said Eddie. “So writing is…?”

Richie was more interested in learning more about Eddie creeping on his social media presence,
but he filed that away to come back to later. *Writing is...?* felt like it summed up his process in general, although even his most self-depreciating self had to admit it wasn’t entirely true.

He had continued to return to the notes and pieces he’d been jotting down since the end of last summer, the memories and scraps from a childhood returned to him. And there had been moments during the past month, while lying on his sofa and wishing he could become one with it, when the guy in his mind who never shut up and wrote the jokes, had nudged him and said *I know you’re depressed, but maybe this could be something, so write it down before you forget asshole.*

So he had some a few more things scribbled down, amorphous thought becoming the bones of jokes, more material that he planned on auditioning during a bunch of gigs he had lined up in February and March.

“One writing is happening,” said Richie, “A little. It has to – actually. You know how I’ve got a tour coming up this year?” Eddie nodded. “Well, we’re talking about shooting it, maybe putting it out with Netflix at the end of the year.”

Eddie’s eyebrows went up. “Fuck dude. That’s awesome – right? Is it? Or is that like, small potatoes to you?”

“Small potatoes?” repeated Richie, grinning. “No, it’s something.”

He actually only had the one filmed special under his belt, but it was the one that had plucked him out of the comedy masses, that had taken him from making a living to not having to worry about money. From being a face people knew but couldn’t name to being recognized and approached for a picture during dinner.

It was also the special that had solidified the type of persona he had on the stage, the one he’d sweat years into building, the comedian that people would buy tickets to see. And that was still a little stressful to consider, because all these shows he was doing now were largely him trying to figure out how to pry that other comedian’s fingers off of him.

Stressful, but not the world’s biggest tragedy. That comedian wouldn’t be where Richie was now, out to dinner and trying to figure out how to explain all this to Eddie Kaspbrak. That comedian wouldn’t have any idea of what it was like to experience all of Eddie’s furious determination on the other end of a kiss, or what it was like to spend half this dinner distracted at the memory of it.

“I’m still kind of piecing everything together,” continued Richie, swiping at some of the salt on his margarita glass with his finger. “Still need to workshop it all, but... I think it’s going to, going to be a lot about us.”

Richie realized the error in his phrasing when Eddie started to choke on his current mouthful of fajita.

“Shit,” said Richie, pushing Eddie’s water glass towards him and half-rising from his seat. “Do you need –”

Eddie held up a finger, while thumping himself in the chest with his other hand and coughing. He picked up the water glass and chugged half of it, while Richie gave a reassuring face to a waiter who had stopped and stared over their way, looking as though she was trying to figure out if she needed to start deploying the Heimlich.

“You okay?” asked Richie after a moment.

“Yeah,” breathed Eddie, voice raspy. He cleared his throat. “Just went down the wrong pipe. Uh,
“Okay, I could have said that better,” said Richie, holding out his hands apologetically. “When I said *us*, I meant all of us – you, me, Ben, Bev, Bill, Mike – Stan.”

“Okay… how…? I mean… I don’t want to tell you how to do your job, but isn’t comedy supposed to be funny?”

“I know what you’re getting at,” said Richie, “I don’t mean I’m going to go up there and monologue about the summer we killed a clown. But when you have a hook…”

He fiddled with the edge of his napkin as he turned Eddie’s question over in his head. The best comedy, the stuff that impressed him the most these days were the sets that had an iron vein of truth running through it. The ones that bounced up against a reality too raw or hard to look at any other way. And somewhere, in the thicket of their friendship, Richie could feel a truth like that waiting.

“I don’t know,” said Richie, “I’m still working on it. But I think there’s something there.”

“Okay,” said Eddie. “Can’t wait to see Richie Tozier’s 2017 Pennywise tour.”

“Buddy, you know I’ll give you a backstage pass.”

Eddie furrowed his brow. “Is that supposed to be some kind of innuendo?”

It was Richie’s turn to choke so hard on his food that he had to reach for a glass of water. Taken altogether it might have been one of the best nights Richie had ever had in Los Angeles. There was excitement and a relief in looking across the table at Eddie and knowing he was there that night *with* Richie, and the feeling didn’t wear off. At the end of the meal Richie succumbed to the dessert menu because, despite his affinity for cheap and trashy junkfood, he had a soft spot for flan. One that Eddie evidently didn’t share since he took one bite at Richie’s insistence and then very purposefully lay down his spoon.

“Are you serious?” Richie said.

“I don’t like the consistency.”

“*Consistency*? Dude – wow. You don’t like flan?” Richie shook his head and pulled the plate fully towards himself. “If you were literally anyone else, that would be a deal breaker.”

It was Saturday night, and ordinarily if Richie wasn’t working he might be heading out to a bar now, maybe a party or get together at someone’s place. He still could be, if he wanted. The night was early and he had a small handful of unread text messages on his phone, most of them from LA friends checking in or inviting him out somewhere.

But ordinarily, Eddie would be on the other side of the country instead of standing outside this restaurant on Sunset Boulevard, waiting for the valet to get Richie’s car. The restaurants and nightclubs up and down the street were lit up and bustling, and Richie might have suggested taking a brief walk, but he remembered Eddie hadn’t brought his cane with him – which he’d almost commented on when they left the apartment, but he had a rusty sort of sixth sense for knowing when something was going to strike an actual nerve of Eddie’s. So he hadn’t asked.

And anyway, at the suggestion of a walk Eddie would probably just bitch about catching hypothermia or something, even though it was probably colder in Richie’s refrigerator than it was...
An idea drifted by Richie as they waited for the car, and he turned to Eddie to ask:

“How do you feel about taking the scenic route home?”

“Weren’t you just complaining about driving earlier today?”

“Okay, I’m not talking about road tripping across the country.”

Eddie looked at him and shrugged. “Well, it’s not like I have anywhere to be.”

The valet returned with the car, and they got in and Richie just drove. The sun had already set on the Sunset strip, but everything was still illuminated, light pouring out from street lamps and store fronts, traffic lights and glowing signs. Richie loved the wide, wayward sprawl of the city, how some parts felt like big-screen Hollywood and others like a spot to get murdered and most sections like one beautiful, magical strip mall – night clubs next to yoga studios next to juice bars next to pawn shops. Palm trees and jacaranda trees silhouetted against glowing billboards for every type of forthcoming show, movie, or album.

It was peaceful, gliding through the city, away from the tourist hotspots but with no real destination in mind, the radio softly singing along in the background. Eddie occasionally asked a question or commented on the awful state of someone else’s driving, and Richie sometimes shared an anecdote relevant to wherever they were driving through, but mostly they let the radio fill in the spaces. They drove for over an hour, the way Richie had never really just driven with anyone else, carried along by the tide of the city.

He knew, distantly, that if he had gone out to dinner with a girl that sex would have been part of the end game. He would have been waiting for the moment when things shifted, when dinner was done or the party was waning or the night simply late enough, and he could invite her to come back to his place. Not because he was wild about the sex itself, which he sort of regarded as a thing that he always eventually had to get around to doing, like paying a credit card bill. Over the years, he’d let sex become something like an arcade game to him. There was a system to it – different levels and difficulties, sure, but the principle was usually the same, and if he could figure that out, he could win.

But when he looked over at Eddie, sex suddenly didn’t feel like a game. The thought that it might happen, could happen, made his heart beat heavier, his mouth a little dry. It was the idea of sex as something that wasn’t just a disguise or a favor or a routine, but a thing beyond that. The answer to a yearning, and suddenly it was a little scarier. Suddenly the vulnerability of it really hit him, and the desperate seventeen year old that still lived in him, alongside the scared teenager and poor college student and successful comedian, was the one at the wheel.

He pushed back on those thoughts, told himself it wasn’t worth thinking himself into a pretzel over shit that didn’t matter yet. It was new but it was easy, and what mattered was Eddie sitting in the passenger seat beside him, dull yellow street lamps washing his face in a brief, amber glow as Richie drove past them. What mattered was returning home, being able to walk into his apartment and pull Eddie close to him, wrap his arms around him and feel the beat of confusion before Eddie hugged him back. He’d never really dreamed he could have something like this, that it was even something to want, something as simple as holding and being held.

He remembered a wild and sudden summer storm from so long ago, rain and lightning and hail, and Beverly leading them to the spot in the junkyard where Patrick Hockstetter had met a sucking, bloody end. He remembered Bill’s plea to them all, and the way they answered – him, Bev, Ben,
Mike, and Stan – folding over him, together, the rain hitting them hard and heavy. Eddie hadn’t been there, it was his first night in the hospital after his arm had been broken, and Richie thought they all saw it, felt his absence like an empty room in a house.

Richie felt like he could have stood there hugging Eddie for hours, but eventually Eddie was asking if he could go brush his teeth, the question slightly muffled against Richie’s shoulder. Richie shifted his right hand so that it went to cradle the back of Eddie’s head and kissed him sweetly before saying, “Yeah your breath reeks, better go take care of that.”

Eddie swatted him on the shoulder and headed off towards the bathroom, leaving Richie grinning like an idiot.

That night, Richie marveled all over again at the sweet, stupid wonder of going to bed with someone he loved. He’d thought for so long that sharing a bed with another person was just something he wasn’t keen on – getting anything like a good night’s sleep for him was always like hoping to score big at roulette, and throwing another human body into the mix never seemed to improve the odds in his favor. If you were tossing and turning maybe you’d wake them up and they’d be cranky, or vice versa, and double the body heat under the sheets always made for a hot, sticky time – and not in a fun way.

But this might be his new, most favorite thing in the world, lying close enough to Eddie so that even without his glasses, he could make out his silhouette in the dark. Eddie had been so exhausted when he got into bed, he almost seemed to fall asleep mid-kiss, and Richie wanted to scream with how fucking adorable that was.

“You’re a nightmare,” Eddie had murmured when Richie had said so.

“Well you’re a big, sleepy loser,” Richie had responded.

“Shut up,” Eddie had muttered, his eyes closed and a drowsy smile on his face. Richie leaned forwards to kiss him again, and when he pulled back he was certain Eddie really was asleep. What a freak.

Unconsciousness took its time getting around to Richie, as it usually did, but for once he didn’t mind. He drifted off eventually, head bent close to Eddie’s, listening to the other man’s breathing, and when he sank into sleep there were no nightmares.

They left Los Angeles early on Monday, showing up at the Hertz before seven am because Eddie was a certified lunatic. Eddie took care of renting the car, insisted on it because he got some deal through his job or his credit card or something – Richie hadn’t paid much attention to that part because it was too damn early. He got them an SUV with four-wheel drive, which Richie didn’t understand at first because even Eddie didn’t have that much luggage and they weren’t planning on off roading any part of this trip, at least not as far as Richie knew.

Then Richie got to have his first taste of being a passenger with Eddie Kaspbrak behind the wheel, and it became a little clearer. Maybe he had thought, based on Eddie’s general fear and wariness for just about every damn thing under the sun, that he would be a cautious driver. One of those turtle types that hugged the right lane and waited with their blinker on for a full minute before tentatively merging lanes.

Turned out that perhaps New York City had ended up raising Eddie just as much as Sonia Kaspbrak had, for better and for worse. Eddie liked to drive, flirting well past the other side of the
speed limit and weaving through lanes like he was applying to be Vin Diesel’s stunt driver. Richie experienced all this with one eyebrow raised and one hand tight on his arm rest, commenting “I thought you said driving was meditative” after Eddie muttered curses after an older woman whose hovering in the left lane was making it difficult for Eddie to pass the car in front of them.

“Yeah, it is,” said Eddie, glancing over at Richie before passing the car by moving around the right lane, drifting two lanes back over into the left and zooming ahead. Richie laughed.

“Beep beep Eddie.”

“Oh fuck off, if you want to drive like molasses stay the fuck out of the left lane.”

Richie was fairly certain the older woman had been driving the speed limit but figured that was information Eddie probably didn’t care about.

Eddie put Los Angeles behind them with good time, and Richie put himself in charge of music. He had to make Eddie pullover so that he could connect his phone to the car’s Bluetooth because Eddie’s selected rental was one of those narc types that didn’t let him connect his phone while the car was ‘in motion.’ He usually abided by road trip rules that maintained that the driver got to pick the music, but Eddie didn’t care what Richie chose and while it was more likely due to his distressing apathy towards music in general, Richie could have kissed him for the free reign it granted him.

“Grand Canyon here we come!” shouted Richie as Eddie drifted into the lane following I-10E, and Eddie shook his head; the Grand Canyon had been a concession on his part once Richie had been properly bitten by road trip fever. They’d spent most of Sunday planning and prepping the drive, with Eddie saying they could knock out the trip in three days and arrive in Atlanta late Wednesday night. Then Richie had taken a dedicated look at the route on google maps and seen just how many landmarks they’d be driving through, and started to get excited.

Eddie had pointed out they didn’t have enough time to stop and see every single cool thing on their drive, or else the trip could easily take a month – Richie figured out that Eddie like driving more than arriving. Richie had argued that if they were going to end up traveling through the entirety of Oklahoma, they could at least balance out the trip with something interesting. Eddie had relented finally with fine, alright, we can stop and see one cool thing. And Richie had picked the canyon.

He’d been to other interesting parks and towns nearby – Vegas of course, Zion twice. But never the Grand Canyon. And the more he had thought about it the more taken he was with the idea. Going to a place like that for the first time, it seemed like the sort of thing you couldn’t forget after seeing it. Not the way people talked about it.

So they’d drive some five hundred miles on Monday and check into an Airbnb that Richie had found, listed by a Mark Petrie for a very good rate (surprise surprise, rates for staying at spots near the Grand Canyon in early February were pretty reasonable), spend Tuesday doing the leisurely tourist thing, and have Wednesday and Thursday for Eddie to drive like the little hellhound he was over to Atlanta.

It was a perfect day for driving. The pale road stretched out long and flat in front of them, low, green mountains drifting slowly by on either side as they cruised east. The sun was nearly halfway up the sky, and it was easy to believe, in the passenger seat of a car headed to new places, that only good things waited over the horizon.

“Can you imagine,” said Richie, “If someone had told us when we were 13, that we’d still be friends thirty years later and driving to the Grand Canyon?”
“That sounds entirely believable,” replied Eddie. “A thousand times more believable than the idea of going back to Derry to kill Pennywise.”

“Oh yeah – yeah, okay, that’s true.” Richie grinned over at Eddie. “So, what sounds crazier – all of us grown up and going back to kill Pennywise, or you admitting you maybe love me and getting on a plane to prove it?”

“Second one.”

Richie laughed. “It’s that crazy huh?”

“You know, it is and isn’t,” said Eddie after a moment, and trust Eddie, of course, to approach a lighthearted comment with a scalpel and magnifying glass. “If I think about this all from the outside, like, if I could see my life with a bird’s eye view, I’d be like, what the fuck.”

“Oh thanks, that makes me feel really great about myself.”

“Shut up,” said Eddie, glancing over sideways at Richie. “I was going to say, that’s just the outside. You know? In here, moment to moment? It feels right. Feels like… like nothing really did before.”

Richie could have said me too, because he felt the same surreal tranquility about the way things had shaken out. But another question had been nagging at him, and he hadn’t made any headway in life by tiptoeing delicately around sensitive subject matter.

“What about Myra?” he asked.

“Myra?” repeated Eddie. “What about her?”

“Weren’t you married to her, for like, a decade?”

“Yeah but, like I told you. It just sort of happened. It’s like… it was like everything with her was on cruise control.”

Richie chewed this answer over, shifting in his seat and asking, “It’s a long time though.”

“What are you asking?” said Eddie. “We got along. But it never felt like, like this. And it didn’t feel that long, before.” He was silent for a moment. “It feels like a longer time now that it’s over. I guess – I think it was when we all came back, when we all met up in Derry again. That was when it really felt like, shit, I’ve been married for a long time.”

Richie could understand that. It was sitting in that restaurant on that summer night back in Derry that the past had suddenly seemed to loom up behind him like some great tall structure, and standing in the shadow of it he saw how much time had passed. That was when he’d first started to feel like he hadn’t ever really grown up so much as just kept on going, memories and experiences piling up on one another like so much junk in the attic.

He could have asked something else, he could have said it was a long time to be married to a woman you didn’t love. But men married women they didn’t love all the time, and anyone could have turned that back on him, could have said forty years was a long time to go stamping down on the truth of yourself. So he let it go.

The conversation drifted on with the road and the day. Richie pointed out whenever they passed a car with a license plate from a place like Idaho or Massachusetts, wondering out loud what had brought them this far from home. He shuffled through different songs and artists, prodding Eddie for his opinion on them sometimes when he queued a particular favorite into the mix. He threw in
songs that he knew they both knew, and there were points during their trip when they were both yelling along to Springsteen, horribly off-key but neither of them caring as they echoed you ain’t a beauty but hey, you’re alright!

Eddie continued to drive, saying he was fine whenever Richie offered to take over, and Richie saw a certain type of peace on Eddie’s face with the wheel in his hand and the interstate rolled out in front of him, so he didn’t push it. Plus he always enjoyed being a passenger more than the one driving. Another little way in which they seemed to compliment one another, in which they worked, and he felt oddly charmed by that thought.

At one point, when the conversation between them had kicked back up, Eddie asked him to try one of his new bits out again, and Richie thought for a moment before shifting into his stage voice and saying, “So, when my boyfriend chops onions it sounds like he’s having sex.”

“What?” exclaimed Eddie, laughing.

“Yeah,” said Richie, “I’ll come home and I just hear a lot of oh god and oh fuck, and I’m like shit, that’s it – he’s cheating on me! And of course, you know, I’m heart broken, but I’ve also been ready since day one to have my Gwyneth Paltrow moment – Sliding Doors, come on – and I’ll run into the kitchen and find him making guacamole. Happens every time.”

“That’s fucking terrible.”

Richie laughed.

“We don’t live together.”

“Wishful thinking.”

“And you don’t know what I sound like having sex!”

“Artistic license,” said Richie, hoping he came off far more casual than he felt broaching the subject. “But that is how you sound chopping onions.”

“They just hurt my eyes. I have sensitive eyes!”

“Hey, still better than mine.”

Eddie glanced over at him. “You have nice eyes.”

“Oh thanks, they don’t work for shit,” said Richie, watching the landscape dash by. “My eyes are the equivalent of a beautiful, stupid hunk.”

Eddie snorted, and Richie thought about how his heart had tripped when Eddie had said you have nice eyes.

They made it to their Airbnb at around nine pm – it could have been earlier, but they’d stopped for a while for both lunch and dinner, plus a few additional breaks at rest areas for Eddie to get out and walk around while Richie checked out the vending machine situation. It could also have been later, if Eddie had given into Richie’s pleas and stopped while they’d driven through Las Vegas. Richie didn’t even hold much affection for Vegas, but it just seemed criminal to drive through a city like that and not stop once. A sentiment that Eddie apparently did not share.

They would be spending the next two nights in a humble, one-story house with vinyl siding near the south rim of the park. Airbnb had presented Richie with some eclectic options, including way
too many luxury airstream drivers and a couple of places that essentially amounted to a fancy tent, but he knew Eddie, and knew that if he booked them a tent Eddie would probably take one look at the place, then grab up all the blankets and spend the night sleeping in the car.

Their place reminded Richie a little of Ben’s home in Nebraska, since this little house also existed at the end of no-nothing road that peeled off of a major one. They arrived well after sunset and it was hard to know what else was surrounding them since there was nothing but fucking darkness, broken up only by a stretch of headlights from the cars moving along the major road. Richie felt that road-trip tiredness as he pushed into the little house, the type of weariness that was entirely unearned since he’d done nothing that day but sit in a car and eat Fritos.

He flipped on the lights and was happy to be met with the cozy, Western-inspired interior that he’d been promised from the pictures. There were two bedrooms, a master and a smaller one with a pair of twin beds (“In case you wanted to I Love Lucy it, Eds,” Richie said when he saw Eddie poking his head in the other bedroom), a living room with a wood-burning stove, a kitchen with a counter and bar stools in lieu of a kitchen table, and a small bathroom between the living room and master. The inside walls were wood paneling and accented with things like horseshoes and paintings of wild mustangs running across the prairie.

Richie didn’t plan on taking any interior design tips from this place.

They brought in the luggage, and Eddie dug out his sweatpants and disappeared into the room with the twin beds to work on some of his physical therapy exercises. There was more space in the living room, but when Richie pointed out that fact Eddie just shook and said the other bedroom was fine and he would only be a minute. Richie decided to give into his weariness and took a quick shower, changing into a clean undershirt and his flannel pajama pants and curling up in bed with the small bedroom TV, which the Airbnb’s last occupants had forgotten to sign their Netflix out of. Suckers.

Eddie nudged his way into the room about thirty minutes later, offered his opinion – which Richie did not ask for – on his current Netflix watch, then ducked into the shower himself. He re-emerged a little while later, his hair damp and changed into a set of pajama pants and a gray sleep shirt, the sweet sight of which inspired a pang in Richie’s chest. He watched as Eddie dug around the smallest of his three bags for a couple of different medicine bottles, tapping out one or two pills from each before popping them all in his mouth and swallowing them down with a cup of water. Richie had watched him do this every night and like every night previous, decided not to ask.

Eddie got into bed with a book he was about halfway through – a short story collection of Bill’s, Richie saw – and he got about three more pages read before Richie was kissing him and Eddie was letting the book slip onto the bed, then onto the floor. Eddie’s hands were moving through Richie’s hair, pulling his face close as Richie leaned over him, and there was the feeling that had been surprising Richie all weekend, that his body could want someone this badly. As though some essential part of himself had been always been missing, and now it was nearly returned to him. It could have been a little frightening, if it wasn’t also so fucking good.

Maybe Eddie sensed that, or maybe he just felt the frightening part of it. Richie had one hand under the hem of Eddie’s shirt, resting on the skin of his waist, when Eddie pulled back just a little.

“Hey,” he said. His breathing was strained, and not in a sexy, oh-Richie-you-make-me-breathless way, more of a my-fake-ass-asthma-is-about-to-kill-me way. The way Richie hated because there was nothing he could do to stop it.

“Are you okay?” asked Richie, quickly rolling off Eddie and onto his side, facing him. “Do you need, uh – ” He’d been about to ask if Eddie needed his aspirator, only to realize that he actually
hadn’t seen Eddie use it once this trip.

“I’m fine,” said Eddie, in a decidedly-not fine voice. His eyes were closed and he wore an expression as though someone had just asked him whether he’d considered the healing power of crystals. His breathing was shaky yet forceful.

Richie folded his hand around Eddie’s hand and held it firmly.

“Can you…” said Eddie in that thin voice.


They lay like that for a while, Richie saying soft and meaningless things, and eventually Eddie’s breathing evened out. He opened his eyes and glanced over to see Richie looking back at him, and turned to stare back up at the ceiling, rubbing his face with his free hand.

“Sorry.”

“For what?”

“Um – I don’t know. Killing the mood?”

Richie squeezed his hand lightly. “You’re fine, dude.”


“Seriously. You want to talk about a mood killer? I had sex with this girl once and afterwards she told me I reminded her of her brother.”

Eddie laughed, then looked at Richie, considering.

“Hey,” he said again.

“Yeah?”

“Some things… I might need time,” he said.

Richie could guess what he meant by some things. He was quiet for a moment, then angled his head towards Eddie.

“Is this all because you forgot to take your Viagra?”

“Oh, fuck off.”

“I’m kidding,” said Richie, grinning, and he leaned in to kiss the corner of Eddie’s mouth. “But seriously, is your dick broken?”

Eddie reached around for a pillow and smacked it into Richie’s face.

It was chilly in the little house, and Richie drifted off later with his arms wrapped around Eddie, Eddie’s forehead pressed against his chest. He tried to catalogue every piece of the feeling; the heat beneath the covers, the gentle pressure of Eddie tucked against him, head beneath his chin. He fell asleep trying to stamp the moment on his mind forever, listening to the slow rhythm of Eddie’s breathing beside him.
That night it started out differently. He was walking through West Hollywood with Eddie, the sky bright yet sunless. The scene was Technicolor, and he couldn’t see anyone else around him but he knew it was crowded. He could feel the push and presence of people, and knew he was thinking to hell with it when he took Eddie’s face in his hands and kissed him while standing on the sidewalk.

Then Eddie was suddenly shoving him away as he staggered backwards, one hand above his chest, splayed at the base of his throat, and a horrible sucking sound was coming from his mouth. Eddie, Richie was sure he was saying, Eddie Eddie what is it, and then Eddie was sinking to the ground and Richie was falling with him, grabbing his shoulders and trying to shout his name.

The scene was melting around them, and Los Angeles was gone and cold dark rock surrounded them instead. Richie was lying flat on his back, Eddie kneeling over him, and it was as though someone had hit the rewind button on his body. As Richie stared the scar on Eddie’s face began to redden and reopen like zipper being pulled back, and a darker, murkier crimson started to bloom across his chest. Richie was reaching upwards, a stupid logic within him saying if he could just stop the flow, if he could just stop up the wound – but he couldn’t reach Eddie, and blood was starting to pour out thickly, the ruins of his shirt revealing a gaping and growing hole in him. No no no repeated itself in Richie’s mind, planting itself like fence posts against what he was watching. Eddie opened his mouth, and more blood, too much blood, spilled out and over his chin, and he locked eyes with Richie and in a garbled, sickened voice asked Why?

Richie burst of the dream with a gasp, his heart a sick and frantic thing in his throat, and instinctively reached out with his hand, not realizing what he was reaching for until he felt nothing. Eddie wasn’t in the bed beside him.

He rolled back over, grabbing at the bedside table for his glasses, and his hand hit a piece of paper, a note left beside them. He sat up, trying to shove his glasses on so fast he almost poked out his eye with the frame. The sky outside was the deep blue of night just starting to give way to dawn, and he fumbled to turn on the bedside lamp so that he could read the note.

Went outside, didn’t want to wake you.

Ordinarily Richie would find that type of note funny – thanks, but he could probably have figured that out, himself. It wasn’t like he needed Eddie reporting his every move within a thirty-foot radius. Unless Eddie had decided to give it all up, take the car and haul ass towards Reno, he probably didn’t need a note.

But with the nightmare still in his bones, his body shaky, he couldn’t not admit to being sort of grateful for the note.

He took another moment, then pulled on a sweatshirt, decided to forego shoes, and made his way outside. In the bare, early morning blue he could see just how in the middle of nowhere their little temporary house was. It was planted on a patch of dirt and surrounded by dry, scrubby brush, the distant, dark peaks of mountains visible. It was also cold, and he probably should have put on shoes, or at the very least some socks. They were in desert country after all, and there could be scorpions or tarantulas or other random, small evil creatures that might want to poison him hanging around in the dirt.

But there was a small fire pit with a metal bench and assemblage of chairs in what might be called the front yard, and Eddie was sitting in the bench, facing away from the house. He must have heard the door open however, because he’d turned to glance over his shoulder, looking a little surprised. Richie decided he wasn’t turning around for any shoes now and walked over to Eddie, watching
the ground for menacing critters as he headed over.

“So much for adjusting to the time zone,” said Richie.

Eddie offered a crooked smile. “You’re up early.”

“Well so are you,” replied Richie. “Can I sit?”

“Yeah, of course.”

Richie sat beside him on the bench, tucking his hands into his sweatshirt’s front pocket. He yawned so wide he heard his jaw crack.

“I didn’t mean to wake you up,” said Eddie.

“You didn’t,” said Richie. “Just a nightmare.”

“Nightmare?” said Eddie, looking at him with a genuine concern that brushed by Richie’s heart. Christ, it was too early for this. “What was it?”

“I have this dream where I’m doing a show, and I’m doing everything as best I can but the audience isn’t laughing, like I am just eating it on stage – and then the light goes up and I realize it’s an entire crowd of risk managers.”

Eddie looked over at him. “Hilarious.”

“Hey, I can’t be that funny this early.” Richie shrugged. “What are you doing out here?”

“Well I woke up. And then I figured I could just stay up, see the sunrise.”

“How very instagram influencer of you.”

Eddie smiled. Richie scooted over, closing the small space between them on the bench. He would have much preferred to still be wrapped around Eddie in bed, because this bench was about as comfortable to sit on as a set of monkey bars, and it was considerably colder.

“Hey Rich,” said Eddie, and Richie perked up a little at the edge in Eddie’s voice. Eddie painted with a whole palette of nervous shades and anxieties, and Richie knew the one he heard now. The reluctant crumble from before they’d plunged into the deepest part of Derry. *I can’t do it guys.*

“What?” asked Richie, attempting calm.

“Are you sure about this?”

“About what?”

Eddie made an exasperated noise. Only Eddie could already be this exasperated before sunrise.

“About me,” he said, looking out towards the horizon. “I mean, you’re Richie Tozier, and – don’t ever quote me on this, but, you’re super famous and hilarious and strangers love you and come up to you just to tell you that.”

“Fame is a prison.”

“But I’m just Eddie. And I know I’m kind of a mess,” he said, one hand seeming to move unconsciously to rest against his chest, and the nightmare shivered through Richie again. “Inside
and outside.”

“And you think I’m not?”

Eddie quirked a smile. “I’ll drive you crazy. I’ll drive you bugshit. You know I will. You could – you could probably be with anybody.”

The truth of what Eddie was asking him smacked into him like a cartoon character treading on a rake. For some reason, he’d thought this topic was over. But it was sitting out here on a cold morning in Arizona, with Eddie frowning off at nothing, that he realized the difference in the question. It wasn’t a matter of distance or divorces, pieces of Eddie’s environment.

This was a question of Eddie himself.

“Are you asking me why I like you?” blurted Richie.

“Okay,” said Eddie. “Now it sounds stupid.”

“It’s not stupid,” replied Richie, who wasn’t sure how to explain something that just was, the same way gravity kept your feet stuck to the ground. He it could be as easy as pulling Eddie close and telling him that he loved him. But Eddie was asking him something else, from the small dark place they all carried inside and tended to. There was no holding back, no playing it safe now.

“Remember the kissing bridge?” asked Richie.

“…By Bassey Park?”

“Yeah, where everyone would carve their initials?”

“Sure. I remember it.”

“I carved our initials in it.”

“What?”

Richie nodded. “When I was a kid, and I didn’t know shit about shit. It was that summer, though, the first one. And then I forgot about it, like everything else, and all of you. Until we came back.”

“That’s… okay.” Eddie was quiet for a moment. “That was a long time ago, Rich.”

“Yeah, but if you’re asking me why you, I mean.” Richie forced himself to turn his head away from the dirt and look at Eddie. “It was always you.”

Eddie didn’t say anything, just looked at Richie, and Richie sighed a little, leaned his head back against the uncomfortable bench.

“I should have told you from the beginning. Like, the second you woke up in the hospital, because I knew then. But I’m kind of a mess, too. I got so used to the wrong thing, you know? And I was scared.”

“What?” said Eddie, with a small laugh.

“Yeah, dude. I was so scared before. And I guess there’s still plenty of shit I’m scared of. But that’s the other thing – I’m less scared with you.”

“Is that a joke?”
The edge of the sky was starting to break into deep pinks and purples as the sun began to slowly peek over the horizon. Richie recognized that it was probably going to be a beautiful sunrise, and he would have missed it otherwise. He’d never wake up and think well, might as well see about the sunrise.

“No. Jesus man, you saved my life. Probably in more ways than one, if you want to get mystical about it. And I don’t care about being with just anybody, any guy, or whatever. Why you?” He laughed. “Fuck, dude, it could never be anyone else. I love that you drive me crazy. I love that I drive you crazy. Shit, we’re probably going to drive each other even crazier but I’m okay with that because it’s you, and I – ”

Eddie cut him off with a kiss, both hands reaching for Richie’s face and pulling Richie towards him like he was the last box of DayQuil on the shelf in the middle of flu season. Richie had a second to be surprised, and then he was leaning into it, kissing Eddie back and hoping that somewhere in there, the little fucker understood. That it wasn’t just about growing up in that fantastically shitty little town together or fighting a child eating sewer clown (twice).

Because no one knows me the way you do. Because no one keeps up with me like you can. Because no one laughs and doesn’t laugh at me like you do. Because gravity keeps you from falling off the fucking earth and you keep me from flying into fucking space.

When they broke apart they were both breathing hard, heads close and Eddie’s hand still curled around the back of Richie’s neck. Richie’s glasses were slightly askew, which was always part of the risk he was going to run as the victim of sudden and vicious make outs. He smiled up at Eddie.

“I love you, Eds.”

Eddie wasn’t looking at him, his gaze cast down, but he was wearing a small smile. Richie nudged him slightly.

“Wow Richie that was beautiful,” said Richie in a half-assed falsetto. “I love you, too.”

Eddie laughed and looked up at Richie. “I do, actually. I do love you.”

“Good,” said Richie, and he kissed Eddie again before leaning back against the bench, draping one arm over Eddie’s shoulders.

“No more stupid questions, spaghetti head.”

Eddie leaned into Richie, both of them watching the sunrise unfold, the clouds glowing orange against a lightening sky.

Eddie said, “I’m not very pretty you know.”

“Holy fuck, is that what this is really about?”

“No, just – ”

“Not only am I definitely past my prime, I don’t think I ever had a prime.”

“Okay, but, how many traumatic chest wounds have you recovered from?”

“Zero, and I’m jealous,” said Richie. “I bet you have an incredibly hot scar.”

“I do not,” said Eddie in a flat voice.
“Well lucky for you, it wasn’t your looks that seduced me.”

“Are you always this romantic?”

“I’m kidding, Eds,” said Richie, idly stroking the little strands of hair at the base of Eddie’s neck. “You’re adorable.”

Later that day they saw the Grand Canyon, and there was a moment, standing there and looking over the expanse of it that Richie thought everyone was right; the pictures couldn’t do it justice. He reached over without thinking for Eddie’s hand, and when Eddie took it in his own Richie thought it was true, it was true that he’d never seen anything like this before, and a hundred sewer clowns could try their cosmic alien worst but he would remember this morning for the rest of his life.
Bad as it was to think it, thank god Sonia Kaspbrak was already happily dead and buried because if she wasn’t, seeing her son in love with Richie Tozier might have been the thing to do her in.

And wow, fuck, Eddie had to admit that he was, he really was. How had he not let himself see it before? With every conversation and bad joke and curated playlist, Eddie realized more and more how true it had been when he’d told Richie maybe I love you. The same way thunder followed after lightning, the reality of it all didn’t really hit Eddie until the moment he was standing outside of Richie’s car in the airport parking lot and some rusty, barely used instinct was telling him kiss him, idiot, kiss him now.

On the plane to LAX he had sorted through a hundred different worries, the largest of which was what if you got it wrong? What if he’d made a bad guess, what if this thing that he’d hypothesized as love was really something else? What if he saw Richie and realized his hideous mistake, if he saw him and found nothing but an anvil in his chest?

Like Richie would probably say, he worried too much.

Because when Eddie did see him, walking through the terminal towards him, the worries seemed to slow. They stopped their relentless battering across the walls of his mind and held themselves, still and suspended. Eddie stood up, feeling shaky inside in a way that had nothing to do with what had happened to him almost half a year ago, and when Richie folded himself around him, he merely thought oh.

And then later, in the parking lot, now.

His thirteen-year-old self might have balked and keeled over, stuck his finger in his throat and made a whole show over how disgusting he found the idea of kissing Richie Tozier. But his thirteen-year-old self had been living in the grip of Sonia Kaspbrak. Sonia, who would never sit down and have a conversation about the facts of life with her son, but had a lot to say on the subject nonetheless. She just sprinkled it in between all the other warnings about remembering his jacket in case it rained and sitting further back from the TV so that he didn’t permanently damage his eyesight. You shouldn’t let other people touch you, Eddie, people are dirty.

Women like that have already ruined themselves and they just want to ruin you, too.

Men like that are confused, Eddie, they’re confused and sick and they want to make you sick, too.

Eddie sat behind the wheel of their rented SUV and watched the cars drift by on his right, the patient, lazy gliding of the clouds overhead, and thought you got a few things wrong, ma.

Richie had fallen asleep in the passenger seat – arms folded across his chest, head tilted to the side. His neck would probably be killing him later, and ordinarily Eddie would have woken him up and bothered him about grabbing the neck pillow in the backseat, but he didn’t think Richie got enough sleep to begin with and didn’t want to interrupt him finally getting some.

They were about four hours out from Atlanta, and Eddie had driven them most of the way there. After their one easy day in Arizona, they drove two long days towards Georgia, tearing across New Mexico, Texas, Oklahoma, Arkansas, pieces of the country he’d never thought to visit before. The
scenery at the beginning felt like something out of a Hollywood Western, with the tall saguaros and orange mesas eventually smoothing out into rolling hills and stretching plains. For a man who’d lived most of his life between Manhattan and Queens, it was almost painfully vast, too unreal to take in. Easier to think of it as a movie set or painted backdrop.

“You really could have been a truck driver,” Richie had mused at one point when they were leaving a gas station in Arkansas, Richie loaded up with a bag of flaming hot Cheetos and a Dr. Pepper (despite Eddie’s pointed “If you drink that I’m just going to have to pull over again in an hour for you to go to the bathroom,” to which Richie had just laughed and said “Alright dad,” and then threatened to pee in the empty bottle later). Richie didn’t really seem to mind Eddie doing most of the driving – Richie liked sitting in the passenger seat, free to fuck around on his phone and control the music.

And Eddie liked driving. He’d fought an epic fight with his mother to take the test for his learner’s permit in high school – at the time, he’d thought it was the biggest fight they’d ever had, the truth of that hospital visit in Derry still obscured behind a hazy fog. And now here he was, driving with Richie to meet up with the Losers, the reason for his actual biggest fight with his mother. She would probably have blown a gasket. And I love Richie, ma, thought Eddie to himself. You remember him – you didn’t like him so much, but I guess you didn’t like any of them really. It wasn’t a happy thought exactly, but it made him smile.

Maybe he wasn’t entirely free of her, but he felt freer than he’d ever been before – and how far could any of them get, really, from the things that had molded them, the things that had left their fingerprints pressed against them? So maybe free wasn’t the right way to think of it, but there was something, he had something, with his best friend napping softly in the car beside him.

It was always you.

Eddie listened to Richie’s breathing, occasionally broken by a small snore, and wondered. Had it always been him?

If he could go back to that thirteen-year-old version of himself, would he really find a kid that was totally put off and disgusted by Richie? Or would he find a kid who wasn’t as confused as his mother insisted he was, who understood more than his mother thought he did? They were all special to him, his best friends, but Richie was the one that always stood out somehow, as though he’d been shaded in with a brighter set of colors. Eddie loved and admired the others, stood in awe of them plenty of times, but it was Richie, with his open insanity and foul-mouthed glory, that had somehow tugged at something deeper.

The same way Richie pulled at something in him now. The way Eddie felt conscious of his body near him, and the knowledge that, actually, kissing Richie Tozier was kind of great. And almost a little bit scary. It was like the opposite of an asthma

(not asthma)

attack, everything narrowing down to a different desperate need, a type of need that Eddie had never before recognized in himself.

Even in the early days with Myra, which people described as the honeymoon phase with a suggestive wink, it hadn’t been like this. Their kisses had always been cursory, the sex somehow both an awkward admission and mundane essential. If anyone had ever asked him (and who would ever ask him), he would have said of course he was attracted to her, she was his wife for fuck’s sake, but the response would have been nothing more than a reflex.
Because it had never been like being in love with his best friend, which was what this was, cruising across the lower half of the United States, feeling nervous still but full and alive.

He drove for another hour, the sun lowering and the world narrowing to strips of white lane dividers, zipping by out of the dark and under the car, before Richie woke up. His breathing shifted, he sighed, and then Eddie saw him moving out of the corner of his eye, stretching his arms back over the seat rest and producing a satisfying crack.

“Shit,” he said, in a soft, grainy voice. “Where are we?”

“Georgia,” said Eddie. “Sleep well?”

“I think I fucked up my neck.”

“Well, that’s what happens when you fall asleep without any proper neck support.”

“Oh, thanks Dr. Oz, that’s really put everything into perspective for me.”

Eddie saw Richie stretch again, then shake his head.

“I thought we’d be there by now,” said Richie.

“It’s not like I can bend the space-time continuum.”

“No, but you do drive pretty fast.”

“I keep up with the flow of traffic.”

“You go like, twenty above the speed limit.”

“That’s the flow of traffic!”

Richie laughed and fished his phone out of the cup holder. It had continued to play music while Richie slept, and was currently cycling through a bunch of songs by some band whose singer had a wispy-droning voice that Eddie couldn’t understand a word of.

“Beverly texted,” said Richie, looking at his phone.

“What’d she say?”

“She’s asking about cars – ‘Just trying to figure out if Ben or I need to rent a car, or if that’s car rental overkill,’ ” said Richie, reading her text aloud for Eddie’s benefit. “I guess she doesn’t, right? Mike’s got his car, we’ve got this one, we’re probably all set with transportation.”

“Probably. What’s Bill doing?”

“I think that’s what she’s really asking.” Richie was talking while also tapping back a reply. “I’m not volunteering for any airport pick ups, but Ben and Bev are staying at the same hotel we are, so we can probably carpool most places.”

“Yeah, that works,” said Eddie. He’d forgotten that Ben and Bev were staying in the same hotel. Bill was staying at some other spot – no Audra this time, she was still busy with the shoot in England – and Mike had an Airbnb near the historic district.

“So in Atlanta,” said Eddie.
“Yeah?” asked Richie, still busy on his phone.

“What are we going to tell the others?”

“What?”

“About us, dipshit.”

“Miracles really do come true?”

“Not what I mean.”

“I know what you mean,” said Richie. “We don’t have to tell them anything – especially if you don’t want to. I mean, look at Ben and Bev – they’ve been vague as fuck about whatever the hell is obviously going on between them.”

Eddie laughed. It wasn’t how he would have characterized it, but it was true that while it was obvious that Ben and Beverly were something, Eddie didn’t think he’d heard Bev speaking candidly about it since that day in his hospital room, a century ago. Piecing together what might exist between them was like watching a murder-mystery and trying to solve the crime before the end. There was obviously something there, but it had the same careful shyness as an artist unwilling to unveil a piece before it was completed.

“But we’re not Ben and Bev,” said Eddie.

“No – I hope you’re not holding out for a shitty haiku from me because I don’t have one.”

“Not surprised. You strike me as more of a limerick guy anyway.”

“I don’t have any limericks on hand either, but I’m sure if you gave me a minute I could figure something out for you.”

“Forget the poetry,” said Eddie. “Are we telling the others – anything?”

“Well,” said Richie. “What do you want to tell them?”

“I don’t know,” said Eddie. “It feels kind of like – like I don’t know what I would say, but I don’t mind them knowing.”

Richie exhaled hard, then laughed a little to himself. “Yeah, I know that feeling.”

“So what do you want to say?”

“I guess if you don’t mind, then I’ll share the good news.”

Eddie looked over at Richie for a moment. Only a moment, because he thought of himself as the sole competent driver in this country and he knew that looking away for even two seconds was enough time to fuck up on the road.

He suspected that it meant something different to Richie to tell the others about the tow of them. He remembered that last night in Bangor, when Richie couldn’t let Eddie leave without telling him that he was gay, tripping and struggling over his words in a very un-Richie like way. It had all been confusing and sort of surprising (which was maybe a little ironic in retrospect), but the part that had really thrown Eddie was when Richie had asked him we’re good?

As though he’d been legitimately worried that Eddie might abandon him or think less of him over
it. And maybe, now, having listened to Richie’s stand up and seen his twitter following and watched enough interview clips of him on YouTube that the algorithm kept recommending more “Rich Tozier” content to him, he thought he saw a little bit more of where that question came from. But it still perplexed him. Richie was concerned with how the world saw him, while Eddie was more worried about how he could possibly stack up against that world in Richie’s eyes.

That was the small germ of doubt, what led him to wake up early and slide quietly out of bed to sit on an uncomfortable bench outside of their little rental in Arizona. What Richie seemed ready to quell, no matter Eddie’s protestations or pointed reference to the fact that he was fucked up in every which way.

They didn’t have to say anything. He could have told himself that it was stupid to say anything, that whatever was happening between him and Richie had only been going on for a week, but he felt the weakness of that defense even as he thought it. _That’s not true and you know it_, sniped his inner fact checker, and he had to begrudgingly concede the point. Maybe it was only now that this was out in the open between them, but what they had had been building for months, stretched back years to the days when they were kids, each other’s shining defense in a dark little town.

Eddie switched on the turn signal as he drifted into the right lane, following the traffic on I-20E towards Atlanta.

“Yeah,” he said. “You can tell them.”

It was almost like déjà vu – Mike suggesting a spot for them all to meet at for dinner in a town they’d all been summoned to. Although this time, it was Eddie who took it upon himself to make the reservations, since no one else seemed to see much of a pressing need. This, he emphasized to Richie, was one of the problems with their friend group. Four people could show up without a reservation and safely wing it. Five was pushing it, and six, in Eddie’s opinion, was outright insanity. Six people just showing up anywhere in a major city, hoping for a table on a Friday night? _Insanity._

Richie didn’t entirely get it, but then he lived in a fun fantasy world where Eddie imagined waiters were willing to shove diners out before dessert in order to make room for Richie Tozier at their restaurant.

“You know I’m not like, Leonardo DiCaprio famous, right?” Richie had said when Eddie pointed this out to him.

“You are a level of famous,” Eddie had said. “More famous than me.”

“My own little pauper.”

“Shut up.”

They arrived in Atlanta late on Thursday and killed time on Friday half-exploring the downtown area, with Richie wondering what Mike was doing and Eddie theorizing that it was most likely something incredibly boring, like a statue tour of Atlanta. When it got closer to seven, they headed over to the restaurant. It was American, and all Eddie knew about it was that Mike had recommended it, which meant he’d probably discovered it through some new friend he’d made after two days in Atlanta. It would be the kind of place with three stars on Yelp and comments about mediocre service (if it even had a Yelp page), but would end up having amazing food.
Mike was waiting outside the restaurant when they arrived, and Richie grabbed him up in a huge hug that Mike returned with just as much enthusiasm. Even though he’d just seen Mike in New York, Eddie thought he looked different here in Atlanta. Maybe it was the traveling, maybe it was being free of Derry for a month, but his eyes were brighter and he stood taller.

“Eddie,” he said, grinning broadly and moving to hug him. “It’s good to see you again.”

They went into the restaurant and were led to their table; three two-tops pushed together to accommodate seating for the six of them. Bill showed up shortly after, and soon Beverly and Ben were arriving together, and then they were all standing and hugging and grinning at each other and Eddie had the brief thought that it was getting easier. Getting on a plane or driving across the country, approving time off or rescheduling events – those things weren’t easy. But the six of them sitting down together to share another dinner together – that was.

They ordered drinks and debated appetizers. They swapped stories of how the trip was and what the hotel room was like and what’s been going on and everyone, Eddie thought, looked a little bit better. Bev’s laugh was wide and open, Ben’s face a bit fuller and his voice stronger. Bill was quicker to smile, a little less of the world on his shoulders.

He was still speaking with his stutter, the intensity of which hadn’t lessened since its return in July. He explained that he’d recently bit the bullet and started going to a speech therapist again – which was another weird trip down memory lane on its own – but there wasn’t much research in the field to begin with, and his case was unprecedented.

“Most kids grow out of their stutter,” explained Bill, “Which is what I thought h-h-had… happened with me.” He smiled. “But not a lot of p-p-people lose it as a kid and then twenty years later have it come b-back.”

“Yeah, but did you tell anyone about the murder clown from space that made you forget your childhood?” asked Richie, looking serious. “Just speculating, maybe that had something to do with it?”

Bill smiled and shook his head at Richie. Beverly gave Richie an unimpressed look.

“Hey, how’s the great American road trip going, Mike?” asked Ben.

“Great,” said Mike, smiling. “It’s kind of nice to not be in Maine in February. This is practically tropical.”

“Yeah I’m sure,” said Bill. “Where to n-next?”

“Chicago eventually, right?” said Bev, smiling at him. “You promised to come visit.”

“Absolutely – but probably not Chicago for another month at least,” said Mike, “I want to drive down to Miami first, see all of Florida.”

“God, why?” said Ben.

“You gonna stop in Disney world?” asked Richie.

“Why would he stop in Disney world?” said Eddie.

“Uh, because it’s the most magical place on earth? And they have little waffles shaped like Mickey Mouse.”
“I’m trying to make my money last,” said Mike, “So I’ll probably skip Disney this time around.”

“Alright, but when you make it to Los Angeles in three years, let me know and I’ll take you to Disneyland. On me.”

“All the Disney park shit is overrated,” said Beverly.

“What?” exclaimed Richie. She shrugged.

“It’s a fucked up capitalist kiddie park where you’re not allowed to drink. And it doesn’t even have real rollercoasters.”

“Heartless,” said Richie. “Maybe Mike’s not a rollercoaster person – are you a rollercoaster guy?”

“I think I like them,” he replied. “I haven’t really been on any since I was a kid, and those were just the rickety ones they used to set up for the Canal Days festival.”

“The death traps?” said Eddie.

“The best,” said Bill, grinning.

“Oh my god,” said Richie, looking at Bill, “Remember that one summer we went together, and I won the gold fish?”

Bill exploded into laughter. Eddie glanced between them. “What?”

“He – he had this fish,” said Bill, still laughing too hard to speak.

“So I won this goldfish,” said Richie, picking up the story with a grin. “Fuck, I haven’t thought of this in – ages. Anyway so, after spending like, twenty minutes trying to win one of those ring toss games, eventually the guy running the stall just took pity on me and gave me the fish,” said Richie.

“Someone gave you a fish to go away,” said Eddie.

“Yeah, and now the only punishment-reward system I understand is one based around aquatic creatures. You should remember that.” He threw a wink at Eddie. “So anyway, I finally had this fish, but then Bill and I wanted to go on one of those roller coasters.”

“Oh no,” groaned Ben.

“So we get in the line, and I’ve gotta put the fish somewhere – ”

“Where were your parents?” asked Eddie.

“Who knows,” said Richie, “Not there. And I wasn’t going to leave my hard-earned fish in the hands of someone else, or just on the ground.”

“Richie,” said Bev.

“Sorry to tell you this, but this all already happened, Bev. Like, thirty years ago, nothing doing now.”

“So what did you do?” she asked.

“I did what any kid instinctively does, which is hide it under my shirt.”
“Oh come on!” exclaimed Eddie. “There’s no way someone doesn’t notice a kid with a bag of water stuffed under his shirt.”

“You are wildly overestimating the attention to detail these ride operators were bringing to the job,” said Richie. “I think I was standing a little hunched over, too, so my shirt kind of fell over it, and I had the bag like half-tucked into my shorts.”

“Oh no,” said Ben again.

“I remember,” said Bill, “When we g-g-got on the ride, and you – you said – ”

“Oh shit – yeah, one small step for goldfish, one giant leap for fishkind,” finished Richie, “Yeah, I thought that was really hilarious at the time.”

“Don’t tell me this fish dies on this ride, Richie,” said Bev.

“Well, I can’t swear to the cause of death,” said Richie, and there was laughter and groaning around the table, “But there was one pretty bad turn and I just remember I was suddenly wet everywhere.” He held his hands open wide. “Sort of like Eddie’s mom when – ”

“Beep beep motherfucker!” roared Eddie.

“I think you started screaming,” said Bill. “You w-w-were yelling.”

“Oh yeah! Yeah I was, shit – but everyone thought it was just part of the ride, I think. Anyway when it finally ended I was freaking out, and the little plastic bag was totally empty and my seat was all wet, and I couldn’t find the fish.”

“You couldn’t find it?” said Eddie.

“Nope. So who knows! Maybe it got free and started a new life – I mean, more likely it died somewhere under that little rollercoaster, but we’ll never know for sure.”

“Jesus,” said Ben, shaking his head. “You’re worse than that demon kid from Finding Nemo.”

“All kids are demons,” said Richie. “We all start out as little psychopaths and society has to try to make us not that.”

“Interesting theory,” said Mike.

“I’m a childless comedian, I know what I’m talking about.”

Eddie snorted, and Ben seemed to be about to add something when their entrees chose that opportune moment to arrive. The conversation was waylaid, and resumed with Bev describing the awful movie she’d watched on the plane ride to Atlanta.

It had been roughly half a year since they’d returned to Derry and each other’s lives. Half a year, and here they were again, sitting around another table, sharing another dinner, swapping new and old stories. It was still unbelievable, that they’d once been kids together, with scraped knees and crooked teeth and bicycles with playing cards pinned to the spokes, kids that had dreamed about life beyond Derry and had come out the other side. Maybe more unbelievable than the horrors they had come up against.

And maybe the only reason Eddie could look at Richie now and admit that how he felt about him was because of them. Real love, the kind that was selfless, was a lesson he had learned with his
friends by the river, along the tall, sweeping grass and long, leaning bamboo shoots that clacked against each other in the breeze. The kind of love that helped someone to fashion sails and find the wind, that had started with them. He owed it to the Losers’ Club, to what would always be the seven of them.

It was as if they’d all somehow arrived at the memory of Stan, because there was a lull in the conversation and then Ben asked the table, “So what’s the plan for tomorrow?”

Mike took a sip of water before answering Ben.

“Stan’s buried at a cemetery about five miles outside of Atlanta,” he said, and Eddie felt the mood at the table shift. *Stan’s buried.* “I figure, we can go tomorrow morning, maybe around ten or so? His wife Patricia invited us to visit her at two.”

What a Saturday. Go visit Stan’s grave and then go see Stan’s widow. Eddie felt a familiar tightening in his chest, became sharply conscious of the feeling of his breath sucking down his throat. As he tried to listen to the table talk logistics he let his left hand drift to the pocket of his jacket, draped on the back of his chair, where he could feel the shape of his inhaler. He hadn’t used it in a long while, but he still reached for it in these moments. Just the touch of it seemed to remind him that he’d survived so far, he could probably hang on a little longer.

“Eddie?”

Eddie looked up sharply. The table was staring at him – no, not staring, just looking, looking to him.

“Sorry, what?”

“You all right?” asked Ben.

“Fine,” said Eddie, hoping his smile registered as more authentic than it was. “I just spaced out for a second. What did I miss?”

He felt a brief, gentle pressure in his right hand, and realized it was Richie, wrapping his hand around Eddie’s under the table.

“Well we were talking about carpooling tomorrow – Mike’s got his car, and Richie said you could drive yours,” said Ben. “If you don’t mind.”

“I said you’re a real road dog,” explained Richie with a wide grin, pitching his voice into a low, guttural drawl when he said *road dog.* As if that meant anything.

“What? Of course you did – yeah, I can drive tomorrow.”

“Awesome,” said Ben. “So Bev and I can head over with you guys tomorrow morning.”

“Sounds good.”

Richie gave his hand a small squeeze and dropped it again. Eddie’s breathing was coming a little easier, and he was able to focus in on the conversation Ben and Mike were having about sightseeing in Atlanta. It seemed to center around very old buildings with historical significance or very new buildings that just looked cool. Eddie caught Richie’s eye, and could read what Richie was thinking in his little smile. *Nerd alert.*

During the rest of dinner Eddie kept waiting for Richie to tell everyone about the two of them, to
suddenly stand up and tap a fork against his glass and say attention, attention please! But he didn’t. And they didn’t stay out as late as they had in the past. Half of them had been traveling that day, and Eddie thought they all felt the pull of tomorrow and what it might take. They were doing their hugs and “see you tomorrow”s before eleven which was, for their group, almost early.

“You look good Eddie,” Bill said to him when they were all standing outside the restaurant, caught up in the trailing ends of conversations. Bill and Eddie were standing to the side of the group, and Eddie laughed.

“Do I?” he said, his voice sarcastic as he lifted his cane in his hand.

“Yeah. You do,” said Bill, smiling. “You seem happy, is all.”

If anyone else had said it to him, Eddie would have chalked it up to run-of-the-mill conversational bullshit. But it was Bill, so Eddie had to believe there was some truth, some significance. Eddie wanted to ask him what he meant – what did happy seem like on Eddie Kaspbrak’s face? But then Mike was standing by Bill, asking if he was ready, since Mike had agreed to give him a ride back to where he was staying, and they were walking off together.

Since they were all staying at the same hotel, he and Richie shared a car back with Bev and Ben, which easily evolved into them sharing one last drink together at the hotel bar. They ordered drinks and found a comfortable, out of the way spot for the four of them to sit. Part of Eddie was painfully tired and all too aware of how his bed was just one, sweet elevator trip away. But another part, some electric piece that was always going to shout wait up I’m coming after his friends, couldn’t have been more awake.

“Cheers,” said Ben when they’d all sat down, Eddie and Richie across from Ben and Beverly, and they all clinked their glasses together. Was there ever a group more dedicated to the concept of cheers?

He saw Ben and Beverly smiling at one another before drinking, and remembered Richie’s description of their relationship as vague as fuck. As if reading his mind, Richie caught his eye and raised his eyebrows before taking a sip of his own drink.

“So you guys drove here all the way from Los Angeles?” said Ben, looking between the two of them.

“Yup. Well, mostly Eddie drove all the way here from Los Angeles. He’s like an automaton,” said Richie, describing the last two days of driving, when they had put in twelve-hours on the road each day.

“Wow,” said Beverly. “I love you, Richie, but I don’t know if I could handle you in a confined space for that long.”

“I’m kind of amazed you’re both still alive,” added Ben.

“Me too,” agreed Eddie, scowling when Richie nudged him in the side.

“I thought you were going to drive down from New York,” said Beverly. She was looking at Eddie very purposefully, then turned her gaze towards Richie. “Didn’t one of you tell me that?”

“Yeah, that was the original plan,” said Richie. He glanced over at Eddie, and Eddie felt the opportunity, saw the question across Richie’s face. Eddie huffed a breath and rolled his eyes, and Richie turned back towards Ben and Beverly.
“Ben, you remember in Bangor, when I had that really beautiful, soul-baring moment where I told you I was gay?”

Ben nodded, his expression painfully genuine. “Sure.”

“Which apparently Miss Marsh here had already been speculating about.”

“No comment,” said Beverly, taking a pointed drink from her glass. Eddie stared. How much shit did Beverly always already know?

“Well here’s the sequel,” said Richie. “Not only am I definitely gay, but it turns out I am specifically, definitely gay for Eddie. And he’s at least a little gay for me, too.”

He settled comfortably back in his seat, the way Eddie was used to seeing people at work do when they had the privilege of sharing some particularly delightful *eat shit* news. Richie was grinning, and Eddie didn’t see a trace of second-guessing in it. Just a broad, in-your-face unapologetic smile, and Eddie’s heart was beating hard but for once he wasn’t concerned about an impending heart attack.

Ben instinctively laughed in a *come on Richie* way, the way they were all used to doing when Richie made a joke that wasn’t very good or they didn’t quite get. Beverly arched one elegant eyebrow and looked over at Eddie, who shrugged and couldn’t help but smile. When she smiled back at him, he felt a relief he hadn’t been anticipating.

“Hey babe,” said Richie to Eddie, nodding his head towards Ben. “You just gonna let him laugh at us like this?”

“Babe?” repeated Eddie, as though he’d just bitten into something bad.

“It’s a term of endearment, because I endear you.”

“That’s not how that word works.”

“Okay Mrs. Merriam-Webster, so you’re cool with this jock laughing at us?”

“I don’t know, it’s kind of a funny situation.”

“Oh, now he gets a sense of humor.”

“I’ve always had a sense of humor, and if you ever said anything funny you’d know that.”

“Gosh you’re a sweetheart.”

Beverly nudged Ben in the side and was giving him a rather pointed look. The laugh on his face evaporated instantly and he looked back over at Richie and Eddie.

“Oh – wait, you’re serious? Uh… oh, wow, I’m sorry.”

“Thank you for your condolences,” said Eddie.

“Oh *shit*!” laughed Richie, shoving Eddie lightly. “Eds gets off a good one!”

Eddie hadn’t heard those words out of Richie’s mouth in over twenty-seven years, and suddenly he was laughing – they were all laughing, this small delegation of the Losers’ club, participating in the time honored tradition of cracking up over Richie being an idiot.
“So, wait,” said Ben when the laughter had subsided. He looked happy but slightly confused, the same way a dog looked when someone only mimed throwing a ball. “Eddie… you?”

“Yeah,” said Eddie, holding his hands palm up in a *what can you do* gesture. “I tried to talk Richie out of it.”

“That is Edward’s charming way of saying you guys will *not* be running unopposed for cutest couple from The Losers’ club this year,” said Richie, taking a sip of his drink. “Sorry guys.”

“Oh,” said Ben, looking towards Beverly, then back across the table, then quickly back to Beverly. “That’s not – we – wait, uh – ”

Beverly placed a hand on Ben’s arm and said “Ben,” in a tone that suggested she loved him dearly but could do without his careful fumbling just then.

Richie leaned in towards Eddie and in a loud stage whisper said, “I know we got a late start, but I think we’ve got cutest couple in the bag.”

“Beep beep Richie,” replied Eddie idly.

Beverly laughed and shook her head. “Oh my god – you guys are like high schoolers.”

“You guys? What did I do?” exclaimed Eddie.

“You threw your lot in with me,” said Richie, throwing his arm over Eddie’s neck in what could be construed as a gentle chokehold.

“Get off me!”

“See, he loves me.”

“I do see,” said Beverly, barely holding back a smile. Eddie shoved Richie’s arm off of him and Richie winked.

“I’m happy for you,” she said.

“Yeah,” said Ben, still looking as though he was trying to figure out which word he’d gotten wrong on the crossword. “How – how did that happen?”

“It’s a beautiful story,” said Richie, “That involves me pouring my guts out, both in the metaphorical and literal sense because I did throw up behind a dumpster.”

“Gross, dude,” muttered Eddie.

“We have waded through the same sewer system twice in our lives now,” said Richie. “How can your tolerance for grossness not be higher?”

“That’s *why* it’s higher,” said Eddie. “I have had more than enough *grossness* for twenty fucking lifetimes. I’m done with that shit – in the metaphorical and literal sense.”

“I’m with Eddie,” said Beverly. “I’m also done with that shit.”

“I thought this was about how you guys got together,” said Ben.

Richie grinned at him. “I’ll show you mine if you show me yours.”
“Richie,” said Eddie.

“Okay,” said Beverly, leaning back in her seat and raising an eyebrow at them. “What do you want to know?”

Ben was looking at Beverly with an incredible tenderness which suggested that even though Richie and Eddie were also his dear friends, he would happily flip over this table and kick their asses if that’s what Beverly asked him to do.

“What’s going on with you guys?” asked Richie, and it was only then that it occurred to Eddie that Richie might be a gossip hound. Unbelievable. “I mean, I know, but I also have no fucking idea.”

Beverly smiled at him. “That’s partially by design.”

“Bev,” said Ben. Somehow he put a question, an assurance, a confession, all in the single, soft syllable of her name. She put her hand on his knee, and Eddie realized it was the most intimate gesture that he had seen pass between them since Ben had taken her cold hands in his own that night after he and Beverly had come back inside from stargazing.

“What do you want – to hear me say that we’re a couple?” asked Beverly. “We’re together – I love him,” she added, and Ben’s expression was so sweet that it almost hurt to look at him. “That’s really all there is to it. I guess we’ve been a little cryptic because we’ve been taking things slow, because – because I need to take things slow.”

“It’s good for both of us,” said Ben. She slipped him a look, the dimple in her cheek giving away the smile.

“He’s been very patient,” she said, then looked back over at Eddie. “It’s possible I might be trying the therapy thing again.”

“Really?” said Eddie, and then, realizing that probably wasn’t the most supportive response, added, “I mean, that’s good, that sounds good.”

“Well, we’ll see, I guess – again.” She tipped back the rest of her drink. “Are you satisfied Richie?”

“I love any conversation that starts with my dating life and ends with someone else going to therapy,” said Richie.

“Beep beep Richie,” said Beverly, laughing.

Richie shook his head, smiled up at the ceiling. “Everyone’s a critic.”

It was after midnight when they finally went back up to their room, and Eddie was wondering if the gin and tonic he’d had at the bar had been one drink too much or just enough. The moment they got into their room, he closed the door behind him and turned around for Richie to take his head in his hands and kiss him. Eddie was tired, and still a shower and teeth-brushing and a half-assed version of the stretches he’d been doing before bed away from sleep. He was tired and maybe a little tipsy but it just felt so good to stand in the entry way of their hotel room, to let all his thoughts and worries drift like so much silt to the bottom of his mind as Richie kissed him. They could have been standing there for one minute or one hour, but eventually Richie pulled his head back a little.

“I gotta shower,” he said, “You want to go first?”
“No,” murmured Eddie, feeling dazed, feeling some other kind of high that even the painkillers had never brought on. “You go.”

“Okay. I’ll be quick.” He bent to press his lips to Eddie’s once again, then headed off towards the bathroom, leaving Eddie with the quiet, toasty hum of the room’s heater.

It had never felt like this with anybody. It still felt like some sort of romcom cliché to think it, but the language of cliché was all he had to grasp for in that moment. It had never felt like this before.

Richie showered and Eddie went into the bathroom after him, grabbing his pajamas so that he could dress afterwards. Which really meant so that he wouldn’t have to dress in the same room as Richie, so that Richie wouldn’t see him.

Great plan, he thought to himself as he stepped into the shower. Entirely sustainable. Because if the lingering effect of that one kiss in the entryway was any indication, it wasn’t. He could look at Richie and it was like the careful, excessively cautious person that usually ran the show in his head had fallen through an elevator shaft and been replaced by some crazy new guy who was dying to see how two emotionally damaged men in their early forties figured out sex with each other for the first time.

The problem he kept coming back to, what made him wary and undress behind half-closed doors and pull back in Arizona, was himself. If his body was a car, he figured at this point it’d be the kind you couldn’t even trade in for parts. It hurt and moved differently now and he didn’t always understand the why of that. And that was just under the hood. The outside was another story. He’d never thought of himself as handsome anyway – definitely no Ben Hanscom – and getting pulverized by a spider-shaped nightmare had not improved matters. Not wanting to look at himself was one thing. But assuming that someone else would want to?

I’m less scared with you.

Somewhere in their dark, little hometown in Maine, if that bridge was still standing, his and Richie’s initials were carved into that wood. What a strange and tender thing to consider, to fold in that Richie who’d secretly knelt along the bridge, along with the loud and rude asshole who had never stopped making jokes about Eddie’s mom. That was what trust really was, maybe, believing in the secret scenes they all carried in each other without knowing what they were.

And now Eddie knew this one. He stepped out of the shower and dried himself off, tugging on his pajama pants and pausing before putting on his shirt. The bathroom mirror was fogged up from the steam from the shower, and Eddie was just a fuzzy beige shape in it. No nervy face with the permanent scar on his cheek, no obvious slope to his stance, no marked back and torso to remind Eddie how deep the damage went. He thought about Richie as a kid, scared and confused but determined to leave one little mark, one little secret that was a declaration and a fuck you to a town that had been grinding all of them under its heel since day one. He wished he had known that kid better then.

Like how Richie probably wanted to know Eddie better now, if Eddie would just trust him.

He left his gray sleep shirt folded neatly on the counter beside the sink and walked out of the bathroom. The heat was on but it was chillier in the room after the sauna-like warmth from the bathroom, and Eddie felt the change in temperature in the prickle that rushed up his arms and across his chest. Richie was sitting on the hotel bed in a faded t-shirt and boxers, his hair damp and face slightly stubbled, flipping through channels on the TV. He looked over when he heard the bathroom door open, and seemed about to say something, but whatever undoubtedly hilarious comment he’d had at the ready slipped away when he realized he was being greeted with the
singular sight of Eddie, sans shirt. Eddie stared towards the ceiling.

“I told you,” he said, heat flooding along his neck and up his cheeks. “It’s not pretty.”

“Is that – ” said Richie, and Eddie was surprised by the way Richie sounded, his voice slightly choked, and Eddie made himself lower his gaze to meet his eyes. Richie was looking at the scarred tangle across his chest, the mottled, dimpled result of doctors doing their best to apply surgery and schooling to a lethal attack from a monster that their science would never know, and Richie would know that. Richie was one of five other people in the world who could look at Eddie’s body and really understand what havoc had been laid across it, and Eddie didn’t know if that was too much to ask of someone, too much to put in front of them every day.

But then Richie shoved himself off the bed and was in front of him in a second. He rested his hands on Eddie’s bare arms, and Eddie felt the pressure of each finger like a circuit being completed. Richie was smiling at him, and it was kind and unreserved and entirely for him.

“Eds. You’re a total babe.”

“Oh my god, shut up.”

“I’m serious! With these kickass scars?”

“Dude.”

“Very hot,” said Richie, bending down to kiss him, and Eddie kissed him back. This part was still a little unnerving – not the notion of kissing Richie, but how badly he wanted to. The way his body was like a thing straining at the end of a leash, and it was here, now, with Richie’s hands on his arms and his lips pressed against Eddie’s, that Eddie realized there was no reason to hold onto anything. He could let go.

Richie’s hand fell from his shoulder and slid across Eddie’s chest, tracing the landscape of skin where sensation lessened, and Eddie needed more of it. He wrapped his own arms around Richie and pulled Richie towards him, hard and sudden enough to cause Richie to make a slight noise of surprise in his mouth.

When Eddie’s hands went under the fabric of Richie’s shirt, Richie pulled back for a second, keeping his own hands on Eddie’s arms but breaking the kiss for a moment.

“Woah woah woah,” he said. “Is this – is this happening now?”

“Yes,” said Eddie, emphasizing the point with a kiss. “Take your shirt off.”

“Okay – it’s just that, you like almost had a panic attack the other day –”

Eddie made an aggravated noise. “Does it look like I’m having a panic attack now?”

“I don’t know, you know, I’m not a professional –”

It wasn’t in Richie’s nature to take the hint to shut up; Eddie kissed him again, sliding his hands across the skin of Richie’s stomach, and soon the shirt was gone. Since Richie hadn’t been waging an internal self-hating war of the same variety Eddie had, Eddie had actually seen Richie shirtless a small handful of times over the past few days. Those had been small moments, Richie tugging off his sleep shirt after brushing his teeth in the morning, standing over a hamper full of clean laundry and digging around for something to wear.
It hadn’t been like this moment, the past and the future hazy concepts, blurry and lost against the pressing need of now. What it was to feel Richie’s skin against his and understand Richie’s body as something to hold, to touch, to steer.

Richie seemed caught between a desire to keep kissing every part of Eddie and an equally pressing need to continue offering his commentary on unfolding events. Since Eddie didn’t need a play by play of the foreplay that he was a direct participant in, he did his best to encourage Richie to keep his mouth otherwise occupied, either by kissing him or immediately cutting him off with a loving “Shut up.”

Although he had to put a hard pause on proceedings when they were back on the bed, almost fully undressed, and Eddie noticed that Richie had left the television on a channel that was running an old episode of *Full House*. He point blank refused to continue until the child Olsen twins were off screen.

“Just turn it off!” Eddie said as Richie flipped through channels.

“Okay, but – fine, hang on,” said Richie, and then Eddie had to wait for him to pull out his phone and cue up some playlist full of more songs by bands he didn’t recognize.

“Really?”

“I don’t like silence,” said Richie, which Eddie rolled his eyes at before slipping his hand around the back of Richie’s neck and pulling him closer to him. He didn’t care about the music drifting out from the cellphone lying on the bedside table. He didn’t care about potential bedbugs or recycled air coming through the vents or norovirus living on the remote control. He didn’t care about the divorce mediator and realtor and work waiting for him in Manhattan, the doctors and follow-ups and prescriptions still ahead. He didn’t care about the lies or twisted love or lurking, shambling basement monsters that waited behind.

He only cared about Richie caring about him. There was light laughter and sniping and hard breaths, but no room for fear between them then. Just sweetness, just holding the man who had been the boy that had knelt by that old bridge in Derry, Maine, fearfully looking over his shoulder to make sure he was still alone. Holding that man who’d grown from that boy and assure him he wasn’t, he wouldn’t be alone again, not while Eddie Kaspbrak was living and breathing and bitching and remembering him with a fast determination. And Richie seemed to answer in kind, *me too, me too, I’ll never forget you again, either.*

“Oh my fucking god.”

Richie cackled. Eddie tried to sit up, and Richie pulled him back down, ignoring Eddie’s protestations about how he had to go shower *again* now and kissed him. All the maniacal little gears and whistles and conveyor belts that lived in Eddie slowed at that kiss, and there was a pleasant stillness within him. A calm, like the type of quiet morning that made room for birdsong and small living things. Peace, that made room for love.

Or maybe he was just that perfect mix of exhausted and happy. He fell asleep that night curved around Richie, his arm thrown over him and Richie’s right hand resting over his own. Nights were often the worst – the truth came sharper in the pressing, silent dark when he was all alone. The knowledge that death was coming, that it could be then, his body could stop, his heart could just
That night, in a moderately priced hotel in Atlanta, the fears weren’t any less real, but their inevitability didn’t seem so cutting with his body curved against Richie’s, feeling the weight and rise and heat of Richie beside him. He breathed in deeply, and sleep crept across them.

Patricia Uris lived in a well-kept, two-story bungalow in an expensive neighborhood in Atlanta. The window frames were brightly painted, the front porch accented by a tasteful selection of patio furniture and unmarked by clutter. A trim row of hedges sat below the porch, and the neatly kept yard was outlined by a small wooden fence.

Eddie parked in an empty spot across the street, and for a moment the four of them – him, Richie, Bev, and Ben – just sat in the car, all of them looking at the house that Stanley had bought and lived in. From Stan’s grave to Stan’s house. A minute later and Mike’s car appeared around the corner and parked a few cars behind them.

“Well,” said Ben from the backseat. “You guys ready?”

“Guess so,” said Richie, and they got out of the car. Eddie took his cane – he didn’t imagine that their time with Patricia would involve much standing, but just in case. Their earlier trip to the graveyard already had him running low.

They rejoined Mike and Bill, and instinctively moved to let Mike lead the way through the quaint little wooden gate, up the brick walkway and across the porch. Mike opened the screen door, knocked on the heavy, wooden front door, and Eddie almost thought this was all a mistake. Mike had told them that Patricia hadn’t moved, and Eddie had to wonder what that was like. He remembered the first night in his apartment without Myra, unable to sleep in their bedroom, and that had been after igniting a divorce that he had wanted. What was it like to live in the home that your husband had killed himself in?

The front door opened. A woman stood on the other side of the screen door, her curly brown hair, marked with strands of silver, clipped back from her forehead. She wore dark slacks and a sweater, the kind of outfit that Eddie didn’t imagine she would be wearing if she had been planning on spending her Saturday afternoon alone. Or maybe she would have – he didn’t know this woman. Her face was hard, wary, and it reminded Eddie of one of his high school English teachers, the one who made gum-chewing students spit the gum out directly into her hand.

“Hi Mrs. Uris,” said Mike, waving a little. “I’m Mike, we spoke on the phone.”

“Oh! Mike!” she said, her expression transforming from searching to a smile, and everything else in her face changed with it. She opened the door and stood back. “You must be all the friends – please, come in.”

Patricia Uris – who insisted on them calling her Patty – moved like a person for whom hospitality wasn’t a natural instinct, but wished it was. She greeted them as though she’d been waiting a long time for their visit, and shook each of their hands, guiding them inside. The house had a bright and clean, almost lemony scent to it.

“She can take your coats, or if you want to hang your jackets here – you can keep your shoes on – it’s so good of you to come.”

Eddie caught Richie’s eye, and Richie raised his eyebrows as if to say well, we’re in it now. Eddie
worried suddenly that they were too much, there were too many of them, big and crowded in this home that had held only two people for a long time. Maybe Richie saw it, because he smiled at him and gave his hand a quick squeeze before they filed into the kitchen.

The kitchen was clean and spacious, opening right into the dining room. A beautiful light wooden table, large enough to accommodate all of them, took up the majority of the dining room, gleaming in the sunlight let in by the French doors that led out to the backyard.

There was a coffee cake resting on a plate on the kitchen counter, next to a modest store-bought veggie tray. The heady scent of fresh coffee filled the room, and Eddie saw the full 12-cup coffee pot by the sink. It felt like a visit out of another time, the way Eddie’s aunts always prepared for him and his mother when they made a day trip out to see them in Haven or Bangor, greeting them with coffee and stale pastries.

There were bits of childish artwork hanging from the fridge, and for a moment Eddie’s heart skipped a fearful beat at the nonsensical thought that Stan might have had kids, even though he knew he hadn’t. Beverly actually walked over to touch one of the drawings, holding the corner gently between her thumb and forefinger.

“This is cute,” she said.

“Oh, my students,” said Patricia. “I teach third graders.”

“Impressive,” said Beverly, turning away from the refrigerator. “I’m really bad with kids, so I’m always extra amazed by teachers.”

“Well, they’re private school third graders, so they’re not that bad. At least not to me. Please, please sit! I stopped by the bakery this morning, if anyone would like some cake. Or if you want anything to drink, I have coffee, water, tea, milk.”

It was surreal, sitting at Stan’s dining room table with a fresh slice of coffee cake and a cup of coffee, presented on a matching plate and saucer, and no Stan. Patricia was an insistent host, making everyone sit down as she brought things to the table. It was only after everyone else had a plate or cup or both in front of them, and the veggie tray had been repositioned to the center of the table, that she sat with them, having served herself a small cup of tea.

“Thank you, again, for having us,” said Mike, “I know the circumstances aren’t… they aren’t what we would want them to be.”

She looked up from her tea to all of them, and Eddie was reminded that this was a woman mourning a husband who hadn’t been dead a full year yet.

“No,” she said, her voice firm, “But I’m glad you came. It’s nice to meet old friends of Stan’s… He never talked about that time, growing up in Maine. I knew he was from there, but that’s all really. He didn’t really mention any of you – other than you, Bill.”

They all reacted a little at that. Eddie started, Richie coughed on a piece of cake, and Bill’s eyebrows went up.

“He did? Me?”

Patricia nodded. “He read all your books. There’s a shelf in his study with all of them – I tried one, but, it wasn’t exactly my thing. No offense, it’s just not my usual genre.”

“It’s okay – I can’t read them either,” said Eddie.
She smiled at him.

“But he m-m-mentioned me?” said Bill. “He said he knew me?”

“Yes… well, he only brought it up once or twice, and I didn’t really think much of it when he did. He would just get excited when he got a new book of yours, as though he was almost remembering it all over again, and he said how proud he was of you.” She took a sip of tea. “I don’t know though. One time I asked him if he had tried to reach out to you, since he knew you, and he looked at me like he didn’t know what I was talking about. So I didn’t mention it again. I mean, he did say before that it was all a long time ago. And I barely know anyone from high school even. It’s amazing that you’ve all kept in touch.”

“Yeah. Well,” said Bill, “It really only happened sort of recently… all of us g-g-getting back in touch. I wish it h-h-had… happened a little sooner.”

“Patricia,” said Bev, cutting off the silence that was threatening to creep up. “How did you and Stan meet?”

Patricia smiled, and it was a little shy but entirely eager. Eddie felt a sudden pang, the wrongness of meeting Stan’s wife without him there to introduce her himself, to be the one to tell them this story.

But she told them about Stan, and they met their friend again through the romance he’d lived with his wife. She spoke of him with a sweet pride, and it made her sweeter as she told it. She described meeting him in college, how even then she could see the man he would become, one who appeared unassuming but was clever and ambitious, kind and practical. One who would strike out on his own and start his own firm on the advice of nobody, going on to become one of the most successful accountants in the state. He had a particular sense of humor, the type no one else seemed to get but always made her laugh. She told them about how she discovered a love for travel with him, and the big trips they would take every summer, the one they had planned to Buenos Aires before – what had happened. While she spoke, tears started to well up in the corner of her eyes, though her voice never changed in pitch and tone. She was slightly surprised when Beverly reached into her purse and pulled out a tissue from a small pack for her.

“Oh,” she said, touching her hand to her face. “I’m sorry. I don’t even realize, half the time.”

“Please,” said Beverly, and her own eyes were glassy. “Don’t apologize.”

Eddie looked over to his right where Richie was sitting, and saw the line of Richie’s mouth screwed up in a way that suggested he was also trying not to cry.

“It’s so good of you to come,” said Patricia again, wiping at her face with the tissue. She took a sip of her tea. “You went to see him this morning?”

Eddie glanced instinctively towards Bill. Bill was the writer, the storyteller, the describer of the indescribable. Eddie didn’t know how he would explain the feeling of what it had been like for the six of them to come together in that sprawling cemetery that morning, searching through the rows of tombstones until they came to a polished granite marker that had STANLEY URIS etched into it. He knew that before they had arrived he had worried at how they were going to spend their whole morning in a graveyard. He continued to worry when they all came to stand around Stan’s grave, the grave staring blankly back at them.

But then Richie had started talking, recalling a moment from Stan’s Bar Mitzvah. Eddie told the story about the weekend camping trip he’d missed out on, and the rock Stan had brought back for him. And then they were all sharing memories and recollections, some of them events that they’d
all been there for, others smaller, more intimate memories, pieces of time that had just been
between them and Stan. He was so careful. He always listened, you wouldn’t even realize anyone
had been paying attention to what you were saying until Stan brought it up again. He had the
weirdest sense of humor. He was a hell of a kid – I hope he was happy. I hope he felt some peace.
And the unspoken – I wish it had never happened. I wish he had come back.

There was one stone on top of Stan’s grave when they arrived. Before they left, they had each added another one.

“We did it, Stan,” Mike had said softly as he laid his rock on top of the tombstone. And then
something else, too soft for Eddie to catch it.

Leaving that graveyard, it had fully begun to sink in that Stan was dead. Sitting in this house
though, Eddie saw the way that he had lived.

“We did,” Bill said to answer Patricia’s question. “I think it was… g-good to see him.”

He hesitated, and then started to tell her about the reminiscing. Then they were sharing the same
stories they’d traded around his gravestone that morning, but it was different here, telling them to
Patricia, who listened rapt to stories that were new to her. She asked questions, and laughed in
surprise, and almost became tearful again when Richie retold the scene from Stan’s Bar Mitzvah.

“There wasn’t a big Jewish community in Derry,” Richie added. “And most kids were assholes to
anyone who was kind of different – that’s sort of how we all became friends in the first place,
actually. And I think, you know, I think it was only because of that that none of us really turned
into assholes.”

“Richie,” said Eddie.

“Right, I guess I still did.”

“Richie.”

“Sorry. I’m trying to say… life wasn’t always easy in Derry. But Stan was tough. Tough but… he
didn’t let that make him any less good.”

Patricia smiled. “He was. People didn’t always see it. But he was tough. I think… I think he had
survived a lot, things he couldn’t talk about.” She took a breath, shuddered a little on the exhale.

She wasn’t just saying this; she was asking them. Eddie felt the truth of her words sink through
him, through all of them, and he wished he had some answer to give to her. But there was no
explanation, or nothing to offer that soothing illusion of closure anyway. Eddie knew why Stan had
decided to turn in his keys and check out early. He knew the full truth of the thing that Stan had
rather died than face again. And it didn’t make any of this any easier.

“The p-place we’re from,” said Bill quietly. “It w-wasn’t an easy p-place to… survive.”

Patricia nodded, as though this was an answer.

Outside the sun was starting its early descent, streaking gold through the windows and across the
table. It would probably be time to leave soon. But there was a feeling, sitting in the dining room,
an atmosphere, a something that brushed against when they were kids and what they had been
together. Stan wasn’t there. But Patricia was, and Stan had loved her, and built a life with her in this
house. As the day drew towards a close, Eddie started to feel less like he was walking into another
graveyard and more like he was visiting a friend’s home.
“I’m glad you came,” said Patricia, smiling. “It’s nice to talk about him… some people are so nervous to mention anything about him to me. I understand it, of course. I think they’re worried they’ll hurt me if they bring him up, but I’m thinking about him all the time. There’s nothing they could say that would make it worse – sorry. I’m not sure what I’m talking about now.”

“No,” said Bill, his voice gentle. “I know what you mean.”

She hugged each of them as they left, pulling them close to her with a strength that belied her petite frame. Eddie didn’t realize how sad he felt to be leaving until she released him from her hug and smiled up at him. The sky was an inky blue-black as they left, and the street lamps had lit up on the block. When Eddie walked down the brick pathway and through the gate he stopped to look back at Stan’s house. It was a quiet house on a well-kept street in an affluent suburb. A married couple, an accountant and a third-grade teacher, had lived in it. Now it was just the teacher. It was all so mundane. It should have been so mundane.

“Hey. You okay?” asked Richie. He’d come to stand beside him and was looking at him with light concern.

“Are you?” asked Eddie, because now there were tear tracks over Richie’s cheeks.

“What, this?” asked Richie, rubbing the heel of his hand against his eyes. “No relation to visiting our dead friend’s widow, I’ll tell you that.”

Eddie offered his hand toward him, and Richie smiled and took it. The best days of summer lived in Richie’s smile.

Mundanity was a victory. After conquering the obscene, after enduring a horror that was never going to free its claws from them, not really, maybe there was a kind of satisfaction in making it back to day-to-day existence. Eddie threaded his fingers within Richie’s and thought that he would be fine with being unremarkable, happy to live a nondescript life, so long as it was with Richie, for as long as this lasted.

“I would kiss you,” said Richie in a low voice. “But that feels kind of tacky in front of Stan’s house, you know?”

“Since when are you tasteful?”

Although Richie made things feel remarkable. That was what love could do, he guessed. You could be a forty year old risk manager getting divorced and juggling all kinds of fun psychological shit, and love could cast you as the hero in your own adventure story. It could embolden a guy, could save one, even.

Richie kissed him lightly on his temple, just above his right eyebrow. Like that morning in the graveyard, it was the kind of feeling that Eddie didn’t have words for.

On their last morning in Georgia, Eddie and Richie drove to a small town that rested an hour north outside of Atlanta. Richie was the one who wanted to visit it, because some popular show he loved did most of their filming there. They had told the rest of their friends, presenting it as something of an open invitation, but no one else had signed up. “That’s the one about zombies, right?” Beverly had said. Ben had commented “That show is so gross,” when Eddie had explained the reason for their trip, and Bill had wrinkled his nose and added, “The writing’s terrible.”

“He said that?” laughed Richie as they drove that morning. “He’s probably just jealous. You know
he’s got a TV show that totally flopped?”

“Bill does?”

Richie nodded. “Yup, this really short series he wrote a few years back.”

“Did you watch it?”

“Only after remembering who Bill was, and only one episode. Barely escaped with my life.” Richie grinned. “Let’s just say Bill is better off sticking to books.”

The town had a cutesy, quaint look to it – squat brick buildings with bright, white window trimmings, little cafes with swing signs and punny names that alluded to the show that had put this small town on the map. Maybe if Eddie had been a born-and-raised New Yorker he would have appreciated the painted, idyllic charm. But he had been born in a small town that had liked to boast its own type of charm, and places like these only reminded him of the things that liked to hide in the grass.

If Richie felt the same, it was overshadowed by his enthusiasm for the show. He was excited, pointing out rote architecture like a water tower in the distance, a plain looking storefront, contextualizing these normal pieces of a town within the world of the television show. It was amusing to watch Richie Tozier, celebrated comedian, transform into a delighted fanboy. It reached at more of the memories from when they were kids, Richie’s fast talking excitement when they left the movie theater after seeing something that he proclaimed was the best fucking thing ever. Until they saw the next best fucking thing ever.

It was a brisk day, the temperature somewhere in the high 50s, slightly overcast. They spent the morning strolling up and down the town’s main street, stopping in one of the punny-named coffee shops to get some coffee and, in Richie’s case, a massive cookie. Eddie had his cane with him, because as much as he disliked the way people would quickly flick their eyes to it and then to him, trying to puzzle out why this man might need it, he disliked supporting the dragging exhaustion in his body alone even more.

He knew that Richie was conscious of it, the shift in Eddie’s body, that he couldn’t plow forwards or onwards as easily as Richie could. Richie talked around it, maybe because he knew Eddie didn’t want to talk about it. He would casually ask “how do you feel about walking to the corner,” and Eddie would glare at him and say “yeah, fine,” even though he was starting to feel the heavy pulse that pressed against him when his post-Pennywise body was starting to reach its limit. Maybe someday Eddie would be able to appreciate the irony in spending years belaboring the asthma he didn’t have, only to grind his teeth against talking about the real injury to his body. Not this fucking day though.

They ended up slowly winding through the town and outside of it, following a small dirt path that led to a set of railroad tracks. Another backdrop to an iconic scene, according to Richie. There was a bench on the other side of the tracks, presumably for all the other fanboys who wanted a moment to soak up whatever action had been filmed here. Richie stepped over the train tracks to sit down at it, and Eddie followed and collapsed on the bench beside him.

The railroad tracks stretched out in front of them, swinging around from a grassy bend to the left and disappearing into a forest off to the right. The town waited a half-mile ahead of them, but there was no one else around where they were, no other fans who had also decided to spend a Monday in February visiting the train tracks that had featured so prominently in the season 2 finale, which had apparently involved a zombie horde and some heroic sacrifices.
Tomorrow they would drive back to New York together, breaking the drive up across two days. Richie would fly from there to Los Angeles, and the thought of it was like a stone in Eddie’s stomach. He looked over at Richie, who was leaning back against the bench with his eyes closed, a gentle smile on his face. This close it was easy to see the lines under his eyes, the slight, tired tinge of purple. He’d woken up in the middle of the night last night, jerking awake so abruptly it had woken Eddie up, too.

“What is it?” Eddie had asked him in a voice blurry with sleep. “Nightmare?”

“Yeah,” Richie had answered, his breath coming in hard, a sound that was familiar but strange when it wasn’t coming from Eddie himself. Richie had rolled over in the bed to face Eddie, his hand moving lightly across Eddie’s cheek, down to his bare chest and over the scarring there. He had bent his head close to him, resting their foreheads against each other. “Just risk managers again.”

Eddie looked at the waiting train tracks, a metal seam that ran along the grass in front of them. A bird he’d never seen before flew by, landed on one of the rails for a second, and cocked its head before flying away. He hated to think about Richie waking up in the middle of the night alone.

“Hey,” said Eddie. “Where do we go from here?”

“I don’t know, lunch? Mikey recommended some place to me.”

“No, no I mean us. Where do we go?”

Richie opened his eyes and grinned at Eddie. “Wherever you want.”

“I mean – ”

“I know what you mean,” said Richie, and he nudged Eddie lightly. Eddie shifted, moving his left arm over the back of the bench, and Richie leaned against him. “And I’m telling you, wherever you want.”

He remembered a conversation with Mike that had been barely three weeks past but felt like a lifetime ago. *What’s keeping you here?* And now here was Richie, saying *wherever you want.* And Eddie still couldn’t see a where exactly, but he could see possibility, the orange, rising edge of a future. Maybe one where they shared a life together, where days ended and started with each other, where Richie belted show tunes in a horribly off-key voice and Eddie pretended to hate it. A future with a tiny, fluffy dog that Eddie protested because *come on, that’s too gay* and Richie insisting *we gotta make up for lost time* and Eddie drawing a line at it sleeping on the bed, which it would every night.

Eddie nagging Richie about scheduling his yearly physical, Richie dragging Eddie to Hollywood premiere parties. A future where Eddie didn’t spend late nights and long weekends at the office because was somewhere else, someone else, he’d rather be with. Nights out with Richie, which Eddie would grumble about but halfway enjoy. Weekend mornings with Eddie up early in the kitchen, doing a Sudoku puzzle and waiting for Richie to roll out of bed, blinking against the sun.

A future where he was ready to talk to someone about his mother, someone who could help him to untangle the pieces of him that were her, who could tell him that it had never been his job to save her.

A future of seeing Richie perform, waiting for him backstage, clapping for him and kissing him and Richie not caring who saw it. A future where Richie told him what his nightmares were really
about. One where they celebrated birthdays, where Eddie didn’t mark the years and gray hairs and growing lines with fear, but maybe triumph. Another year, fuck you to the fucking clown that thought It could take him. He could face it, he thought, he could face all of it with Richie.

His hand traveled from the back of Richie’s shoulder to run itself through Richie’s hair, still marveling a little at this being a thing he could do and wanted to do.

“Hey,” said Eddie again. Richie turned to look at him, and Eddie leaned in and kissed him.

“If that’s your answer,” said Richie, “That works for me.”

Eddie smiled. Maybe the terror never really ended, but it could change, and you could change with it. He thought of the promise that the seven of them had made on that faded summer day, almost lost to the weeds of time. They’d sworn something to the town then, but they had sworn something even more important to themselves.

He breathed in the mild winter air, sweet and cold against his throat, and made a promise to the man sitting beside him. If ever there was a group of people that didn’t owe anyone or anything another promise, it was the Losers’ Club. But if ever there was a guy that it was worth the time and trouble of Eddie Kaspbrak promising one more thing to, it was Richie Tozier. They’d found each other again, against all cosmic odds, and now that he’d found the boy who had cracked jokes about his mother and read comic books on rainy days with him and told him he was brave, Eddie wasn’t letting go again.

This was the answer to that calling. Here they all were, together again, and it was in Atlanta that the circle finally felt whole once more. Maybe there were no happy endings, Eddie thought, but somehow he’d arrived at a beginning. One with his friends waiting and Richie beside him and the long, open road ahead of them. And it had a sweet feeling to it, like a kid’s laugh on a summer day – when pain and fear were ideas far behind, and all that mattered was the moment. An easy afternoon that ran ahead like water over rocks in a creek. The sureness of each other. And possibility, shining overhead, bright and clear like the sun in the sky.

Chapter End Notes

I know I know, it’s just a rambling fan fiction inspired by the movie adaptations of Stephen King’s cocaine fueled masterpiece about the space clown, but it took me forever to write it and I have a lot of genuine thanks for the people that helped me to do so. Thank you times a thousand to Kate who read and re-read everything and said nice things; you know that scene in Holes when Stanley carries Zero up the rest of the mountain? That’s what your nice comments did for my brain and I am indebted forever. Thank you to Katie, who saw It Chapter 2 with me in theaters (even though you were very sick and the movie was very long) and has been patiently rooting for me during my descent into King hell. Thank you to Margaret who doesn’t even do horror but read my very long summary emails and early chapters and let me sit at her kitchen table and talk about this fan fiction for hours. Thank you to Grant who was also at that table and lent me his finance brain for some of Eddie’s scenes. Thank you to Sara who let me sit six feet away while I, again, went on for
hours about this fan fiction and thank you to the wonderful and personal insight that you shared with me.

And oh my god, if you actually read this whole thing? Thank you so much; I didn’t realize when I was standing shell-shocked outside of the movie theater in September last year that it was going to take me ten-ish months and 100,000 words to work this thing out of my system but uh, here we are! And if you enjoyed any part of this then thank you, thank you, because the idea of anyone getting anything out of some words I’ve written is really mind blowing. Thank you for reading!

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