In which Bucky lives the same day over and over again, and circling, circling, comes back to himself.

Think! Think hard. Try to remember. Think—he tried. When had he last had it? When had he been happy—no, wrong question. When had he been—when had Steve been real, or him real to Steve? But that wasn’t it either. When had he last been real? He couldn’t phrase it, couldn’t say it. Nothing real, nothing real.

Forward or backward, it didn’t matter; the dapple of light on the bathroom floor where his mother first bathed him, or backwards from just now, when he last had it, or realized it was lost. Steve, and himself, and he-and-Steve—that unattainable it that receded as far as he could chase.

“Just remember, James: the day’s only twenty-four hours”—thanks Doc, only twenty-four, always twenty four.

Loss, of perhaps himself, never to return, never move forward or back, running in place, walking the whole length of Brooklyn and then Queens and back down Manhattan, a fucking circle if there ever was one.

Shut your eyes, think hard—it doesn’t matter which end he starts from, forward or backward.
He found it gone.

Awoke to a crash and found it gone. Found himself gone, self buried under leaves, once living now covered in February snow drift waiting, waiting for the melt, the spring, the dew-bright day to shine through and shout “here it is! Your loss is no longer. Here I am.”

He covered himself in quilts, swaddled his body like the infant he feels. He huddled tight in his fluff-ball, cocooned and waiting for nothing, become nothing.

Every day started with a crash; ended on a sad, irresolute note, fading into the monotonous silence.

Think hard. Take a deep breath. The noise of the day dissolved into silence. The light of the day faded into darkness. He lost himself, again and again, the world of contingency breaking into imperfect shards, each reflecting a piece of himself he wished he couldn’t see.

0.

"Night, Buck,” Steve said, paused in the doorway. From the corner of his eye, Bucky saw him start and stop.

Bucky didn’t answer. The silence stretched on, Steve closed the door, and Bucky was left with himself.

+ Months in the Tower now, though he preferred not to measure time. And it wasn’t better. Or easier.

Each day was its own trial—Steve looking at him like he was God’s personal gift, circling around him, orbiting him like a particularly unstable star. Bucky fought his impulse to run away, to hide, to punch something. He knew he wasn’t getting better—no matter what Dr. Alvarez said. Every day was a weight on his chest, a series of new choices, of new stresses, of Steve looking at him, expectant and kind and just too fucking Steve. All too much, not for him, not when he could barely look himself in the mirror and see a person instead of a thing.

Hidden away in the Tower like a goddamn fairy tale princess. “Against their recommendation” that he leave, a goddamn paradox—he felt the second he did, it was back in isolation, back under observation, back in the cell where Steve freed him. Trapped, hard not to feel trapped; his skin itched with it, as soon as he heard it, itched to punch out the glass of the wall and jump to the hard concrete swelling up to meet him. He’d spent too many years under a thumb not to know the shackles he now bore. He’d changed them up, sure. But they were shackles, and they chafed, no matter how much padding Steve found for him.

And Steve—he changed them for Steve. He didn’t regret it—not for a second, couldn’t regret it. But living with Steve wasn’t sunshine and roses—instead, stilted conversations and eagerness and avoidance and no armor against any of it. Steve cared about him, sure, but he wanted things. Wanted
Bucky to be Bucky again. Like old times. And boy, he couldn’t deal with Steve’s disappointment, his bright, puppy dog face melting into sadness and patience when Bucky fucked it up again.

And he fucked it up, every time. His particular gift to this world.

+

He went to sleep.

He slept a lot these days—sometimes twelve, fourteen hours a day. Not at once—the best he could manage was six hours, before waking cold and shivering from a memory of snow. But sleep he did, off and on. If nothing else, his body rested as his mind spiraled down, down into a dark hole.

Tonight, Steve left, closing the door. And Bucky, tired, always so tired, stripped to his briefs and let himself fall face-forward onto the bed, not bothering to slip under the sheets. His arms spread wide on the mattress, he breathed in deep, trying to imagine a world in which he resembled a functioning person.

1.

Bucky awoke to the sound of a plate crashing. He startled upright, out of bed and against the wall by the door within a breath, nerves and body alert before his conscious mind. Steve groaned outside the door, and he relaxed. Stretching his arms up over his head, he cracked his spine, left then right, and released. The surge in his body was bracing, and his muscles jumped with energy. Squeezing his eyes shut and hands into fists, he inhaled, counting, and waited, counting, and exhaled, counting.

When he walked out, Steve was sweeping up a depressing, inedible mass on the floor, porcelain shards and egg bits and toasts headed for oblivion in a trash can. Steve looked sheepish and expectant, sun-bright face craving something he couldn’t deliver.

“I made you breakfast?” One side of his mouth quirked up. “Best laid plans, huh.”

“Yeah,” was the best Bucky managed.

Steve stood, the precarious mess piled in the dust bin. “Give me a minute, I can make some more.”

Bucky coughed, throat thick from sleep. “Don’t worry about it.”

“It’s no problem—”

“I’m sure you’ve got important things to do. Don’t bother.” He bit out. Steve froze and held back a flinch.

“Ok, Buck,” Steve said, all tense shoulders and measured words. “You sure?

“Yeah, I’m sure.” Steve tossed the remains of his small, kind gesture in the trash, peering down with a wry expression. A sadness lay beneath his face when Bucky was around—the sadness that made Bucky want to jump out of his skin, guilt and resentment vying for dominance in his gut. He couldn’t handle it most days, and couldn’t now either.
“See you,” he said, withdrawing into his room. He didn’t see Steve watch him, hopeless as soon as his back had turned. Maybe for the best.

Bucky waited until Steve left for the day, his stomach beginning to grumble from the thick sweet smell of melted butter that lingered in the air. The elevator dinged, and he waited half a minute before chugging a glass of milk.

The day begun.

Dr. Alvarez, 11am, every Friday—a condition of his release.

When he first arrived at the Tower—arrived, he thought, more like lured and captured and held captive—they met every day. Barely functional, coming off of his litany of drugs and mind-altering conditioning, she stood as the one person who let him yell and crash and burn without judgment. He could say anything, or almost anything, and still she would return her placid, measuring look, pleasantly stern against the soft grey walls. Frustrating as hell when he wanted a reaction, but most times, coming from Steve’s presence, all he wanted or needed was someone who didn’t want and need something from him in return. That was Doc.

Of course, today was the day she asked about him. No luck, he swore. His whole life was a testament to his bad luck. Or rather, his gift to the world, given freely, a horror show of terrible, terrifying coincidence

“So, James.” She pinned him with her steady gaze, sticking him like an insect to a board. “How are things with Steve?”

“Fine, I guess,” and that’s the most she pulls out of him the whole session. Steve, the topic of ‘Steve,’ shuts down, now not unlike every other time. They sat in silence for most of the hour, with Bucky petting a cashmere pillow hard enough to wear a track. Aggressive stroking, more compulsive that soothing

He napped away the afternoon. Although hungry and more than a little bored, he preferred lying on the brown suede couch with the throw tossed over his body to any sort of movement. What should be relaxing given the languor he should feel made him restless in his inactivity. Dreams, half-dreams, came and went; memories of old wooden fire-escapes and burning houses in the snow and gunshots; screams and laughter and blood all tangled together. The ticking of the kitchen clock invade his sleep, incessant beat become a forced march, a hospital machine, a bomb.

Past four, a thump came from above, clearing his half-conscious haze. Curious—the Tower’s floors were supposedly soundproofed. He turned over to continue his nap. If there was a threat, he’d know. Otherwise, why care?

Steve walked in at half-five, a bruise blooming on the side of his face. Bucky punched down the urge to clean him up, patch up his still-bleeding wound high on his forehead and hold a pack of frozen peas to his face. More habit than urge, but after he’d done it once, Steve’s face nearly breaking with happiness as Bucky wiped the dried blood off with a rarely seen tenderness, he’d never done it again. The pressure, the want—too much, always too much.
Instead of asking, Bucky waited and watched the ceiling. A new crack had begun to spiderweb across the plaster.

Steve paused behind the couch.

“How was your day, Buck?”

The inevitable question.

“Fine. I guess.” Silence slammed back into place after his words, heard only in the space between the ticking of the clock, but he couldn’t think how to fill it.

Steve moved around in the kitchen, making noise. Bucky listened without listening—or rather, he tried not to listen at all, but the sound of Steve invaded his senses, forcing their way into his awareness. More than that, Steve wanted him to ask, and that impulse crept up over him, into him, and he grimaced at it. He should have gone back to bed. The air in the room pressed into him, and his eyes itched with it.

“What happened to you,” he heard himself say. The words were there, even if the question wasn’t.

Steve gave the couch a wide berth as he sat heavy in an overstuffed armchair. “Bruce.”

Bucky eyed bruise on his face. Steve held his arm gingerly. “Hulk?”

Steve sighed. At least not at Bucky, though the weight of it pulled them both down.

“Yeah. An accident with Tony. What did you do today?” Bucky hated this—Steve, injured and pretending not to be, only concern for Bucky. The urge to destroy a throw pillow swept over him, and he assessed the few around the apartment he had not yet punched to death. The red plaid was objectively the worst, and honestly, he thought Steve wouldn’t mind seeing it go.

“Bucky?”


“Yeah? How was therapy?”

“Boring.”

“Oh.” Steve looked hurt at his clipped tone, which pissed him off more. He stopped looking that direction, instead concentrating on the ugly pillow. He narrowed his eyes.

A bugle sounded ‘Reveille’ from Steve’s phone, tossed on the countertop. Steve let it ring.

“Aren’t you gonna get that,” he said, waiting for Steve to leave. Leave, just leave.

“It can wait,” Steve said. His head fell back against the top of the chair. They didn’t speak. Bucky sprawled, limbs spread in a physical claim of the couch. His space. Don’t come here. Bucky closed his eyes, attempting to paint his face with a veneer of patience.

Steve huffed yet another sigh, one which Bucky knew was for his attention. He opened one eye, and met Steve’s in a sad-ass staring contest, Bucky resolute and petulant in his expressionless silence, Steve sad and eager and tired. The coffee table marked the no-man’s-land between them, the ground divided into trench warfare. Neither moved. Neither spoke. No one broke the eye contact, not after Bucky opened his other eye, not after Steve’s head lolled to the side. Steve drank his fill. Bucky
itched under the it.

The bugle called again, shrill as any real instrument and just as fucking annoying as the wake-up at basic. If Steve didn’t change that ringtone, he’d shoot it. He’d shoot the phone. He imagined it, metal and plastic exploding outward from cracked glass. Yes, that would be satisfactory. Satisfying.

Steve’s eyes darted sideways at the sound. And again, as it kept sounding. Steve frowned.

“I guess it can’t,” Steve said, to no one.

Bucky’s eyes closed, welcoming the darkness. All that he needed was the silence, to wrap himself up in the lack like a blanket.

“Hey Buck?” Steve’s voice arrived unwelcome.

Bucky waited to see if he would continue without prompting. Which, yes, he would, of course he would.

“They’re, uh—people are headed upstairs. They got takeout?” And he would loom over the couch, looking down at Bucky, his expression torn. “I’m going to get some dinner. Want to come with me?”

At Bucky’s noncommittal shrug, he tried again, a different tactic.

“Want me to bring you something?”

“Sure.”

Steve shuffled away, glancing forlornly over one shoulder.

“Alright, Bucky. Have a nice night.” He paused at the doorway, tension evident in the lines of his shoulders. “See you later, pal.”

He waited. Bucky said nothing.

Bucky heard the elevator ding closed. The darkness and silence fell around him, enveloping him in their soft bereavement, and coaxed him into sleep. It lasted for all of an hour—not a terrible nap, but not satisfying, not energizing—before Steve returned, an armful of boxes held against his chest.

“I got food?”

“You’re back early.”

Steve failed at smiling, broken as the rest of them. “Yeah, everyone—well, a bad day for everyone, I guess.” He tried to smile again, again failed. “What are you gonna do, you know?”

As Steve loaded the boxes in the icebox, Bucky stood, almost too quick—shit, had he been on the couch for six hours? Blackness crept around the edges of his vision. He ignored it, stretching tall and cracking his spine, and he watched the darkness recede. Dizziness and hunger and general fatigue pulled him down.

“I’m gonna hit the shower,” he said, and Steve’s face fall behind him, but he couldn’t beat to see it again, and again, every day the same fallen expression, lost and lonely.

The water fell hot and heavy against his skin for well over an hour. He stood, braced against the tile, thinking of nothing and no one—certainly not thinking of Steve. Certainly not restless and angry at
his uselessness and certainly not frustrated beyond belief at his boredom. At his cage. No, he stood thoughtless, blocking out any thought of why his muscles were tense after a day of inactivity, why he felt exhausted after a day of nothing.

It was a useless day, and he was glad it was over. He crawled into his bed, naked and wet, and let sleep pull him deep into the unsmiling darkness.

2.

Bucky awoke to the sound of a plate crashing.

That was strange.

Also strange—he was sprawled on his comforter in his briefs, which he didn’t remember slipping into last night.

Outside his door Steve swept up another mess.

“I made you breakfast?” One side of his mouth quirked up. “Best laid plans, huh.”

“What?” Was this Steve’s thing now—making him breakfast? Cure him with eggs? Break all their plates and half-ass jokes at seven in the morning?

Steve stood, the precarious mess piled in the dustbin. “Give me a minute, I can make some more.”

A creeping sense of wrongness inched over his skin. “Did you get clumsy in the last seventy years or something?”

Steve glanced at him sideways but laughed it off. “I must’ve. Here, let me cook you up something.”

This was weird. Bucky walked to the kitchen’s island and sat on a stool, curiosity winning out over habitual avoidance. Steve stuck bread in the toaster—and God, why did people need a whole appliance just to toast bread? Was the oven not good enough?—and cracked eggs into the skillet, the sound and smell of hot grease quickly making his mouth water.

Bucky hid his confusion and Steve failed to hide his pleasure, foot bouncing against the floor. This was weird, he thought, stuffing half a piece of egg-covered toast in his mouth. And Steve overcooked the eggs. Steve had always overcooked everything. No more eggs from Steve.

Steve departed with a cheery wave after they finished, bouncing on the balls of his feet. Bucky was left sitting at the counter at a loss.

+ He watched Animal Planet. That was fine.

He ate cold ham and pineapple pizza for lunch, wondering where the Chinese had gone. Mostly gross, but also fine.

He napped on Steve’s bed, telling himself the change of location was good for his rest. That was not
fine, but he told himself it was, pushing Steve’s pillow into his face and breathing in. He straightened the comforter, fluffed the pillows; he left no sign of his weakness where he lay.

He walked around, stir-crazy. He was healthy, functional. It should have been fine.

When Steve walked in at half-five, a new bruise on his face, Bucky thought back to the morning. Yesterday’s had healed the night before. Still—this was weird.

“Bucky?” Steve had his concerned face on. Bucky reviewed the events of the day, and couldn’t think of what he’d done. The look persisted, and it was directed at him.

“What?”

“You missed your meeting with Dr. Alvarez. Are you alright?”

“No I didn’t. It’s Saturday.”

“No, it’s Friday.”

Bucky looked around, startled. The last memory he had was a Friday. Had he lost time? Lost a whole week? This was bad—maybe the reason for his lingering sense of wrongness, of unease. Must be.

“Oh.” Steve, still concerned, reached out for Bucky’s arm before letting his hand fall. Bucky noticed—he always noticed—but refused to let himself react. Instead he searched his memory for lost time.

“It’s fine—you can meet with her tomorrow. If that’s alright with you.”

“Nope.”

“Yeah.” Bucky turned his clear blue eyes on Bucky and his gaze, sharp and earnest, pierced him clean through. “How was your day, Buck?”


Steve checked his phone, finger swiping across the screen. “The guys are headed upstairs. They got takeout.” He texted back before looking at Bucky. “Want to come with me?”

“Nope.”

Steve nodded. “I’ll grab you some dinner. See you in a bit.”

After Steve left, Bucky remained seated at the island, replaying the day in his head. Was this it—was he finally losing it? Losing days? Losing track of time? Feeling all the time like he’d done this before?

It had been months since he lost time like this, and even then—it was different. His skin itched with the wrongness of it all, and the muscles in his arms tensed hard enough to be painful, making his whole torso shudder. His eyes jumped from place to place, never settling; his breath came faster and faster. He bit his tongue, hard. The pain, bright and sharp, burst through the back of his skull, and let him exhale slowly, slowly, until his arms and shoulders released and swung easy. He swallowed,
distressed, and fought the urge to call Steve, call him home and crawl into his bed and sob out his

crazy.

Fear of encroaching madness heavy on his mind, he avoided Steve’s return to the floor, instead lying
in bed pretending to sleep while his thoughts raced and crashed and burned.

3.

Bucky awoke to the sound of a plate crashing.

Nope.

He walked out the door without a second thought. Steve was collecting the broom from the closet,
and spied Bucky walking toward the mess on the floor.

“I made you breakfast?” One side of his mouth quirked up. “Best laid plans, huh.”

“What.” Bucky said, his voice flat. “No.” He shook his head, hard and fast. His nostrils flared; his
eyes hardened. He turned and walked back into his room. This wasn’t fucking happening.

“I can make you some more?” Steve called out.

Bucky slammed the door.

+  

He sat in his room, crouched against the wall, face in his hands. What the fuck was going on. This
was it, maybe—the end of his tether, mentally. He’d lost it.

After a mild panic attack, he sat on the couch, looking around at the apartment like it was an alien
jungle. When had that pillow moved there? He walked to the fridge, looking inside—the same pizza
that he ate yesterday. He turned on the television—the same program as yesterday, down to the
trainers throwing a baby walrus a birthday party. Complete with fish cake and candles. They’d
trained the walrus to give them kisses. He wanted to punch the television.

He walked in late to Dr. Alvarez’ office, more perturbed than usual. He was jumpy, skittish even; he
couldn’t sit down for the life of him, instead pacing back and forth pulling at his hair. His impassive
doctor sat cross-legged in her chair, only watching him every few seconds.

“Is there something on your mind, James?”

He tugged his head back from his hair. His muscles tensed without warning, hard and painful, and
the full-body shudder left him weak as a kitten.

“James.” Her clear voice broke through his mental haze. He turned to look at her, panic written on
his face. “You don’t have to tell me anything you don’t want to. Maybe we could work on some of
your exercises today.”

He exhaled quick, thinking of what to say. So he said it. “My days are repeating.”

She raised her eyebrows in a non-expression. “Oh? How so?”
“I don’t know—everything’s the same? Steve and I—we’ve had the same conversation three times? The food’s the same. It just reappears. The shows are the same. I don’t—it’s just driving me crazy. I’m crazy. I’m crazy, aren’t I? Fuck.”

She nodded as he stopped in front of a wall. “So, this bothers you. The repetition.” Her hands turned in circles around one another. God, he could never get a read on her, and now he wanted one more than ever. Her words, always careful; her voice, always even and soothing.

“I mean, yeah? Wouldn’t it bother anyone?”

“Well, James, it’s not anyone else it’s bothering. It’s you. Will you tell me why it bothers you?”

He looked at her, confused and horrified. “I mean, it’s crazy. Having the same conversation, over and over, and him never realizing—I mean, it’s like nothing I do matters. I could say anything, and tomorrow it would be the same.”

She nodded for him to continue.

“I thought—I thought I was losing time? But it just—no, it’s the past three days, every one is the same. What am I—how am I supposed to talk to him if every conversation is the same?”

“You want your actions to have consequences. Your words to have meaning,” she said, knowing. But she couldn’t know. But she did. His mind stuttered in a loop.

“Well, yeah.” He knew she didn’t—couldn’t—believe him. That she didn’t get there was something to believe. And God, but it sounded so crazy to his own ears. “Doc, what would you do—if no matter what you did, it didn’t change anything?”

“You mean, act without consequences.” She pulled her reading glasses from her face and considered him, head tilting to the right. Overhead, the ceiling fan had begun to make a light ticking noise, fast and high, and the sound of it made his heart pick up.

“Yeah, or like—do something, and then have it never have happened.”

Surprised at his question, she turned her head to think, before chuckling to herself. “Honestly, James, the only thing I can think of would be to eat a whole cheesecake.” She smiled at her indulgence before meeting his eyes.

She watched as he fought the silence, but refused to speak.

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other than Doc’s office or the top floor on the occasions Steve forced him up there. He stood
unmoving until JARVIS prompted him.

“Sir? Is there something I can help you with?” The polite AI, everywhere and nowhere.

“JARVIS? I want to go down.”

“Down, sir? Which floor?”

“Outside.”

Brisk February snow flurries swirled against a white sky. Bucky was underdressed in sweats and a
hoodie, but the cold didn’t bother him. He warmed his muscles, walking quickly, blending in with
the mass of black-clad New Yorkers. Everyone looked straight ahead, no one at him, and that
warmed him more than the walk itself. The pleasure of invisibility, of being nothing to no one,
disappointing not a single person on the street. The air was sharp in his lungs, and he breathed it in,
greedy for more, unconditioned air.

Up Manhattan, across a bridge into Brooklyn, down the shore and across again, he walked for hours.
A giant circle, replete with pure snow turned black slush soaking into his pants. He was cold and
disgusting. It was wonderful, refreshing. Revitalizing.

When he entered the apartment at half-past nine, it came crashing down.

“Bucky—where have you been?” Steve’s voice was low, strained with anger, his brow furrowed
and body tense. But Bucky, stifled by his months of concern, was having none of it.

“Out.” He debated grabbing old pizza to eat, but thought better for it. Shower, then sleep.

“Out? Really? That’s all you have to say?” Bucky, obstinate in his own way, turned to face him. The
bruise was there, already fading to a garish yellow that made him look jaundiced.

“Yeah. Out.” Bucky thinned his lips and lifted an eyebrow. “There a problem with that?”

At Bucky’s challenge, Steve gave a little shake of his head, and sighed—that fucking sigh, that never
failed to set Bucky’s back up.

“You expect me to sit around here all day? That it?”

“Bucky—I don’t think that’s the best decision. I mean, you could have at least told someone you
were leaving. Where you were going.” Steve had mastered a commander’s voice, but Bucky knew
him from childhood, and could detect the strain of petulance hidden underneath.

“So now I need your permission. To take a fucking walk.”

“You know that’s not what I’m saying.”

“Sure sounds like it.” Bucky turned to go, but stopped, lifting his right hand to his face and pinching
the bridge of his nose. No. No consequences. He turned again. “You know what, Steve? No. That is
what you’re fucking saying. You want to know where I am, what I’m doing, all the time. You treat
me like a fucking kid—like a pet. But I can’t do it—I can’t just live here and do nothing and wait for
you to come home to me like some goddamn housewife. You wanted me here—you found me. And
if you don’t fucking quit this shit, I’ll leave. I swear it, I’ll fucking leave.”
His words, sharp and bitten-off with anger, hit the mark every time. The stubborn set of Steve’s jaw faded, replace with a dark look of despair and hurt and frustration. There was the barest tremor in his hands, little twitches in his jaw and forehead. It was fear, he recognized. Bucky told himself he didn’t care.

“Bucky, wait, I didn’t mean it that way,” Steve tried.

“Whatever,” he dismissed it with a one-shouldered shrug. “I don’t want to be here—why am I here? What am I doing here, Steve?”

He kept glancing at Steve’s face, unable to look at the developing pain, the anticipation of loss, for more than a sharp heartbeat. He felt lighter, more free; yet Steve’s slumped shoulders and downturned mouth and sad eyes all gave him a new weight to bear. Bucky couldn’t look at him any more. He walked in his door, slamming it shut with a pang in his gut. He slid to the floor with his back against the door and held his face in his hands. It was true—everything he said was true. And not.

He breathed free for once, and Steve’s self-righteous bullshit wasn’t his. And yet—Steve’s face, torn apart by his words, kept flashing behind his eyelids.

Steve knocked, a light tap that ran up his spine. “Buck?” Muffled by the thick door, Bucky felt the words rather than heard them. “Bucky, I’m sorry—I didn’t—I didn’t mean it. You can go where you want to, of course you can. I was just—I was worried. I’m sorry. I was worried.”

Bucky saw the shadow of his friend beneath the door they were both pressed against. They remained there, silence stretching out between them. In his head, their fingers touched underneath the door, an invitation or reconciliation or just a moment of connection—he watched his hand creep closer—but he never pushed his fingertips into the small, lingering strip of light. Bucky kept his hand in the shadow, a new guilt heavy on him. His eyes drooped; his body tired, he stood and fell into bed. No reason to change, to shower—he’d wake up clean the next morning either way. Or not—maybe this was it, maybe it was real and he’d fucked it up for real and for good. Either way, he was dead to the world.

4.

Bucky awoke to the sound of a plate crashing.

He lay in bed, his hands in fists. He grimaced. He breathed, in and out, in and out, just like Doc told him to. He moved, stood up, walked to the door.

Just like the past three days. Broom in hand, mess on the floor. Looking up at him.

“I made you breakfast?” One side of his mouth quirked up. “Best laid plans, huh.”

The worst part about this was that he couldn’t even say he was sorry.

“I can make you some more?” Steve said, as he cleared the mess.

“No.” Bucky spoke.
“No?” Steve said.

“Let me,” he said, and walked past Steve into the kitchen, pulling out eggs and bread and butter. He popped the bread into the toaster—still a ridiculous invention, or maybe that was his poverty speaking, and old jealousy—and set the butter to melting in the pan. “Fried or scrambled,” he said to the stove.

“Either is fine,” and he could hear the surprise in Steve’s voice.

“Scrambled it is,” he said, and broke the eggs into the pan, stirring them quick and soft with the rubber spatula, tossing salt and cracking pepper as they cooked. He tilted the pan side to side, pulling the opaque eggs from the hot surface.

He served them up, eggs on toast.

Steve bit into his breakfast and gave a pleased moan. “Jeez, Buck, this is delicious. How are your eggs so much better than mine?”

Steve’s face—pleased and eager and innocent—pulled hard at Bucky’s chest. He shrugged and devoured his breakfast in three bites.

“See you later,” he said, as he withdrew. He left the dishes for Steve

“Thanks for breakfast?” Steve called behind him.

+ 

After a silent meeting with Doc—why Friday, why—Bucky wandered through the floor, a nomad in his home. 

He wanted to leave again. Wanted to walk. Wanted to breathe the cold air.

He entered Steve’s room, as if for the first time. It was empty, bare—one bed, one dresser, one closet. One bedside table. One lamp. One trashcan. 

Nothing on the walls.

This seemed significant, but Bucky pushed that aside. He was on a reconnaissance mission—for clothing. He didn’t lack for clothes, honestly, but had little outside of soft pajamas and sweats. The only exception being his reinforced black gear. Which did not suit his purposes whatsoever.

He pilfered a pair of jeans from Steve’s drawer, pulling them on with a concerted effort. They were stiff and new, hard denim resistant to the shape of his legs. He zipped them up with some effort and did a series of squats to test their flexibility. They would do—other than the length, they fit fine. Steve was only a few inches taller. Bucky cuffed the jeans and stretched his legs.

Bucky pulled on an undershirt and a loose grey hoodie, suitably casual. His only shoes—serious combat boots—would have to suffice, prepared for the wet slush to come.

He left a note—the only concession he could make to their argument. 

Out for a walk, it read. Then, at second thought, he added: Be back later on.

And at the last moment before leaving, Bucky pulled Steve’s brown leather jacket from the hook by the elevator door. He tried not to think about why, or to feel guilty about stealing something so imminently Steve’s.
Bucky wandered.

Properly speaking, he wandered for days. But his days were simply “day,” weather and people and everything always constant. So, he wandered, chasing nothing, no one. And his mind wandered alongside his feet.

—Bereft, but what was it he lost? When had he last had it? Back all the way to that first moment, mother clipping his hair for mass. Just now, unthinking, the stranger he lived with became strange, proving with each moment the fact of his bereavement. Snow turned ice sat heavy outside, and here in the warm, tight confines of the Tower, he was frozen with it, with the loss of it.

Forward, backward, move, think—think hard. He had a mind, and the will to think. There’s always a logic to everything, and he was part of everything—right? How could he have lost that as well?

The refreezing snow cracked under his feet, melt and freeze and crack and melt. The already-dark of winter’s day hemmed him in but stretched the street out before him, darkness moving far out beyond an invisible horizon.

Soon, he can pretend, or at least hope, that sincerity can be bought with this, a forced and casual intimacy clamped together against the cold. He moved, he intersected, and abrupt, was gone forever. Left like whatever it was that left him, or he abandoned—the distinction unclear. The nameless city of nameless people that once belonged to him—or the other way around—was enclosed in a great bubble of orange-purple light, pierced only by the black angularity of shadows, alien buildings come to invade his memories.

Steve had said it once, like a prayer: “just for you to be happy.” The trick of the week, that prayer, that soft grin, that ruthless, heart-stopping sincerity. And so he left, always left. How could he not.

A siren’s anguish wailed past him, and he stopped by a deli. Remembering this, this particular place in this particular world, preserved in time as if in vinegar, he laughed into the empty, loving air, a sad remembrance of something that once was his—think, think hard, to when you last had it.

Pastrami on rye tasted the same. That alone, and he was a part of everything, had tasted this a year ago, no three, no, seventy. No place for him in the world of contingency.

He walked and walked, stretching the limbs that had pulled at him for so long in the Tower, that were sore with disuse. This lost its satisfaction, turning into a new monotony as random paths became familiar.

He found himself in a bar. How, he couldn’t say, such things just happened to him, didn’t they? At four in the afternoon. Sure, he couldn’t get drunk. But bars he liked, if only because they seemed conducive to the self-pity he’d been cultivating for weeks now. And self-pity in quiet, unobstructed silence had to be the best kind.

Sitting alone at the bar, not nursing his fifth whiskey, taking it straight down. The stool was not what he’d call comfortable—between its lack of back and the stiff raw denim, he sat hunched over, legs spread, an ache in his lower back blooming outward and upward. He shot another glass and lifted a finger and an eyebrow toward the bartender.

And when a not unattractive man slid into the seat next to his, it was how he ended up taking him in the bathroom, hands braced against the tile as this stranger’s mouth moved up and down his hard cock, coaxing the orgasm from his touch-starved body.
This—this was something to do, he supposed. A way to spend his time.

And when he got home, spent, to find Steve dead-relaxed on the couch, it was how he kept his cool, having a secret to keep from Steve. “Out walking,” he said when asked. Steve looked him up and down.

“I borrowed your clothes,” he said, stubborn every time. This, he should apologize for, if only to be polite. But no consequences—no politeness. Because fuck it, as they said.

“It’s fine, Buck,” Steve said, as if “I’m sorry” had come from Bucky’s petulant mouth. He paused, studying Bucky. “You look good in them.”

And Bucky beat a retreat to his room, not knowing why.

23.

He fucked men. How many, he lost track. It killed time. It felt good. And it got him out of the apartment. Three birds, one stone.

Sex could be as simple or as complicated as you made it, and Bucky preferred simple. And he’d missed it, missed it for more than seventy years, from one frame of reference. Or maybe, more like four. Either way, a fucking eternity.

Bucky avoided Steve and fucked every dude who he could. It was a way of life, he supposed, and knowing when Steve left and returned every day made his life simpler. Wait till nine, start his day, fake his way through therapy before he could steal the leather jacket and the tight jeans and make his way to whatever dive bar held the best options for late Friday afternoon. Guys liked Steve’s clothes. Bucky liked them too, although in his head he excused the theft by noting that a) he had few clothes of his own and b) Steve wasn’t wearing them today anyways. Besides, anything that happened to them had never happened when he woke in the morning. No consequences—no rips, no tears, no stains.

He’d only fucked one guy twice—the first man who picked him up. He’d returned to the same bar, eager for the easy lay, but the sex was too—too much the same, like eating that same slice of pizza over and over. After that, he’d sought novelty.

“Wanna hit?” The blond behemoth beside him said, offering him the lit joint. Bucky couldn’t remember his name, if he’d gotten it.

“No thanks,” he said, lying still. The man had taken Bucky back to his apartment from the bar. The sex was fine. The space was nice. And the nakedness. Nice.

He watched his naked partner cross the room, eager for a post-coital snack. From behind, he could almost be Steve—shoulders a little wider, and waist a little smaller, but the general outline was there, and the dark blond sheen of hair. The full beard was dark and clean, and Bucky wondered what Steve’s would look like. A path Bucky never allowed his mind to wander. In his spent haze, he let his head loll back and imagined it for just a moment, thinking of the fantasy he’d avoided for most of his life—the what-if that came before the God-no.
And he smiled to himself and huffed a dark laugh. No consequences. Might as well.

No place for him in a world of contingency—all what-if’s are become when’s if you wait long enough.

He shrugged off the jacket as he entered the apartment, but held onto it as he walked toward the kitchen. Steve should be home, he thought.

And he was.

Bucky sauntered in the room and tossed the jacket over the couch. Steve held a pack of frozen peas to his face but watched him moved across the room. Bucky shed his hoodie, leaving it in a huddled mass of gray on the floor. He turned and stretched, fingers laced high above his head, cracking his vertebra. His undershirt, damp and translucent from the layered heat, clung to his skin as he bent forward and hung, loosening the muscles in his back and thighs. Through his legs, Steve, upside-down, watched him.

Bucky continued the stretch upward, his arms held in front of him pulling his shoulder blades wide. As his arms fell, he caught Steve’s eye and watched as he swallowed.

“Hey Buck, how was your day?” Steve said, his voice caught low.

“I borrowed your clothes,” Bucky said.

“That’s fine,” Steve said, puzzled. “You look good in them?” And he scrunched up his face, eyes closed tight, and rubbed his forehead with two fingers. The bag of peas sat abandoned where they lay, melting in the warm apartment.

“What happened to your face?” Bucky said, and pulled the undershirt off in one fluid motion. He gathered ice in a dishcloth out of the freezer.

“Bruce—there was an accident in his lab.” His eyes lay closed, long dark eyelashes dark moons against his skin, until Bucky took hold of his jaw and turned it, pressing the ice against his face, when they went wide. Steve held himself still. Motionless, like you would around a skittish animal.

“Yeah, Steve? How’d you get mixed up in that?” He kept his voice low, breathy, the air from his lips passing over Steve’s face. He moved his hand from Steve’s jaw, lower, now wrapped around the side of Steve’s neck, his thumb on Steve’s pulse, beating away. His fingers found the edge of his hairline.

Steve glanced down at his bare chest and over his mouth and up to his eyes, over and over, never resting on any part of him. “Uh, Tony called me in. Couldn’t trust anyone else not to get hurt.”

“Didn’t seem to keep you from getting busted up either,” Bucky said, pushing closer in. He could feel Steve’s pulse beat hard, and a little faster, up his metal hand. It could be fear, but Steve’s eye were dark and wide, his mouth falling open in a low pant. Steve swallowed beneath the metal hand.

“Turned out fine, I suppose,” Steve said, eyes settling on his as Bucky pulled his face closer. He dug his fingers into the muscles of Steve’s neck, and watched as Steve’s eyelid fluttered close in pleasure. He licked his lips open and Steve watched. He bit his bottom lip, hard, and felt Steve’s pulse stutter. He let the cloth and ice fall from Steve’s face, and pulled him in by the shoulder. He hesitated for just a moment, their lips almost meeting, and they breathed in each other’s air. Bucky felt him swallow, hard, and laughed to himself before closing the distance and savoring the feel of Steve’s lips on his.
They were soft and warm and smooth, pressed sweetly for the duration of a few short kisses, before Bucky stepped into Steve’s open legs and used his hands on Steve’s face to deepen the kiss, mouth open, tongue sliding over Steve’s bottom lip before he sucked it into his mouth.

Steve moaned at that, and palmed Bucky’s hips, pulling them flush against each other, chest to chest. They devoured each other, hands grabbing and squeezing and forcing them so close no air could get between them. Bucky ran his fingertips down Steve’s spine and felt him arch up into Bucky’s body, and God if that hardness wasn’t everything he wanted.

“Bucky,” Steve said into his mouth. “Bucky.” He kept saying it, trying to pull away, but Bucky licked into his mouth, just behind his teeth, coaxing a moan from somewhere deep inside him. Bucky dipped his fingers beneath Steve’s waistband, pulling the shirt free. His hand slipped inside, first along his hip and sliding back to grab his ass. Steve grunted with surprise and jerked into him; Bucky, lost in pleasure, ground back against him and let their mouths fall apart, and he laughed, high of the feel of their bodies flush together.

Buck went for his throat next, at the precise spot where his jaw met his neck, sucking the warm, salty skin into his mouth. God, his cock was hard, and if he could just get at Steve’s…

He went for Steve’s belt, unbuckling it with a practiced motion and pulling it free. All the while, he licked and sucked at Steve’s neck, his open mouth dragging his teeth along the skin as he moved lower. He pulled his hand off Steve’s ass, following the line of his briefs to the front, now exposed, waiting, wanting Bucky’s hand. Licking along Steve’s collarbone, Bucky palmed Steve through his briefs, and smiled into his skin when Steve gave an exaggerated moan. Yes, good, and he started to wrap his fingers around him through the cloth.

But Steve stilled, and moved his hands off Bucky, moving himself back and out of Bucky’s reach. “Bucky, wait.”

Bucky rested his head against Steve’s shoulder for a second, breath racing. “What is it?”

“Can we move? I can’t—I can’t think when you’re so close.”

Bucky, wary and aroused and tense with anticipation, nodded before walking to the couch. His hips burned where Steve had grabbed them, and he felt their loss more than he’d felt after any actual fucking he’d done in the past—days? Day? Ever?

He sat and waited, knees spread in an open invitation. Steve sat in a chair, away from him, yet fixed on him. Their eyes met and held for a long, promising moment, and Bucky felt his pulse quicken again at Steve’s warm gaze. The world dimmed around them.

“Bucky,” Steve began, obviously unsure of what to say next. “We should—talk about this.”

He threaded his fingers together and looked at them, metal intertwined with flesh. And waited.

“What do you want, Buck,” Steve’s voice was gentle, tender. Concerned.

“I gotta spell it out for you, Rogers,” Bucky said.

“Please,” Steve said.

“You. I want you,” he said, with a small shake of his head. There was no reason it couldn’t still happen, he thought to himself. Just have to—have to play it right. His hands gripped each other, hard, verging on painful.
Steve moved next to him and took hold of his hands, separating them and gripping each lightly. “Ok, Buck. Ok.” Steve moved closer, and pulled him in for a hug.

They sat there in a warm embrace, with Bucky’s mind racing. Steve’s arms were around his shoulders, his back; his breath was hot on Bucky’s neck. The heat of it, the closeness, it all sparked the want Bucky had kept buried forever, since he was fifteen, since he learned what desire was. He turned into Steve’s neck and kissed him, hard, trying to convey all those years of wanting in one long suck.

But Steve pushed him away, pulled away, and said, “No, Bucky, wait.”

Want and hurt mingled in his eyes, but he waited.

Steve gathered himself in a long exhale. “I need to know where this is coming from. What you want.” He smiled ruefully. “How you’re doing.”

“I’m fine. I want you.” He tried tracing the inseam of Steve’s pants, still half-undone by his previous work. If only he could reclaim the moment, regain Steve’s gasps and moans and urgent hands. But Steve stopped him again, grasping his hands where they were.

“Ok, ok, ok,” he soothed. “Can we just—can we go slow? I’m just a little—I’m taking this in.” He smiled, sweet and tender. Steve’s face was an open book, and the hope blooming across it infected Bucky before he knew it.

Steve rubbed a finger along Bucky’s cheekbone. “It’s been a long day, Buck. Can we—can we talk more tomorrow? I need to think about this.” His sweet smile persisted. At Bucky’s falling face, Steve cupped his jaw and nodded. “Tomorrow. I promise.”

Tomorrow.

Tomorrow.

There was no tomorrow. Bucky felt sick. The promise of tomorrow was nothing more than a rejection, and he knew it, and Steve could never know it. It hurt worse, somehow, knowing how close he had been.

24.

And yet, he tried again.

He went slower this time. Waited longer. Kiss him longer, sweeter, pulling him to the couch and showering his face with soft lips. Fingers ghosting over his clothing, never urging.

They never outright stopped this time—instead, Steve’s earnest eyes bore into his, saying “Can we talk tomorrow?” between kisses. Bucky’s heart fell deep into his stomach.

25.
The third night, Bucky pinned Steve up against a wall and plastered their bodies together. He ignored every attempt Steve had of getting his attention, swallowing his own name with his mouth, until Steve shoved him away, hard, almost violent. Their chests mirrored each other with heavy breaths.

Steve shook his head with hurt. “What the hell, Buck.” Whereupon Bucky had disappeared into his room, into the shower, sitting on the shower floor with water cascading around him as he wrapped himself in self-loathing, face buried in his knees.

He could try again. He awoke to the sound of the plate crashing, and he ignored it. He could try again. But he knew Steve: knew that Steve waited until the right moment, for the right partner, and for the life of him, Bucky couldn’t figure out how to make that right moment happen for both of them. Not today.

The weight of it, that he missed his chance, that he’d be forever stuck here, living with the person he’d wanted forever and who, somehow, wanted him back—which Bucky had suspected, for years, but part and parcel with hiding his own desires was ignoring Steve’s, and feeling relieved and jealous when Steve found someone else—it hit him all, lying in bed.

He looked hard at the ceiling, as if somehow he could pierce it and see through to the center of the universe, to whatever force or presence had sentenced him to this hell. Because this was hell, if anything was—his punishment, he thought. For everything he’d done. For not fighting harder. For Steve.

Bucky rolled over on his side and clutched a pillow to his breast, crushing it in his hands until it popped with a soft sound and downy white feathers snowed around him, blanketing him in warm snow.

The object can talk, he told himself. What he said aloud was different.

“Rough day?” Tone blank, bleak, flat actuality. The unique residue of his presence. Nothing changes, when he’s here.

Steve convinced him to go to the Avengers’ floor, one night, or Bucky let it happen. He ended up there, either way, sitting in a room of people refusing to look at each other as they sipped on drinks and ate Thai food, red spicy grease beginning to congeal. A room full of people, tense at him,
miserable in themselves. Or was that projection? Steve was miserable, he knew: flat, tense smile, a terrible actor, but good at hiding what it is that he is hiding. The best-worst liar, but Bucky knew it all.

Field-situated, all the time, and past his introductory comments his speech isn’t need, though he was prepared for all contingencies. Two words, all that is necessary and sufficient, and he settled with a useless beer—tastes good, but to what purpose. Back to a corner, face toward the window, he watched glaring lights become mere pinpricks of light in a dark blanket. No stars, not in this city.

47.

He stole Steve’s keys.

The parking deck was full of Tony’s flashy cars, and no keys to be found. He’d thought about it, thought about taking one, but he recognized that stealing a car would attract more notice than he wanted. Steve’s bike it was, precarious and fast and exposed. It suited his purpose. Everything had purpose, everything in this world—not him.

Barton was there, holding up sweatpants with one hand with his head buried under a car hood. Unlike the sleek, shining machines of Stark’s, this was, to be frank, a piece of shit—paint flaking off the side, revealing rust, with tires running low on air and cracked leather seats inside.

“Aw, car, no,” Barton said. Bucky looked around for Steve’s bike and located it, attempting to walk past without being noticed. He failed.

“Hey, Barnes—you know anything about cars?”

Bucky sighed to himself. A few moments wouldn’t make a difference, he thought.

The engine was a mess, much like the car itself. A dozen things were currently wrong with the car, and he offered none of them.

“What’s the problem.”

“Car won’t start.” It would make sense. The battery was fried, in addition to the general corrosion he could eyeball. The belts didn’t look good neither. A jump would get the car going, but after that, the car was as good as dead.

Bucky shook his head. Barton looked worried, more worried than he’d ever seen him, and far more worried than he should be about a beat-up old car giving up its ghost.

“It’s dead, pal.”

“Aw, no, don’t tell me that,” Barton said, shoulders slumped in defeat.

“Wish I could help, sorry I can’t,” Bucky said, already turning to go. As he started up the bike, the car hood slammed shut and Barton rested his forehead on the car in supreme frustration. Can’t worry about that now, he thought. No use to anyone.

He burned through the New York City streets, car horns blaring as he ran red lights and wove in
between vehicles. He’d thought about this—crashing into other cars, crashing into a building, crashing into a pole. The crash was the thing that mattered, but a part of him held back, going further and further up the east side. Away from people.

In the end, he drove off a bridge into the river, and let the water claim him. As he sunk without swimming, metal arm carrying him deep to the bottom, he quelled the panic natural to his body and breathed in deep, lungs filled with dark green water, and he thought of Steve in the darkness, falling, always falling.

The roar of the water pressing into his eardrums beat like a train—the last nothing before silence, sudden silence. No breath came. The darkness filled his vision like light.

Either way, he awakes to a crash—woke anyway, alone in his bed.

51.

Today, he lasted until the afternoon. Therapy was what it was, that is to say, useless when you plan on offing yourself. They’d stared at each other for the duration of the hour, with Bucky offering monosyllabic grunts, no tales of childhood pain. Or whatever it was that she wanted out of him. Whatever. She could fuck off. Everyone could fuck off.

The motorcycle was a bust. He headed to the elevator, his dark mood hanging low about him like a cloud. Unfortunately, he’d caught a rare elevator occupied by other persons—namely, Ms. Potts.

Of all the people living in the Tower, Bucky would say he liked her best. Or to be precise, he disliked her least. Pepper was unassuming; she didn’t push or prod or do much of anything involving Bucky, except maybe make sure Steve’s and his fridge was regularly stocked with food enough for an army. Not a bad lady, he thought.

However, today she was tapping a hard staccato with a pointed shoe as she jabbed at a tablet, muttering to herself as the two of them ascended.

Out of another lifetime, he heard himself ask—“anything the matter?”

“No, not as Tony would—” Pepper began, breathed through open, pursed lips, and began again. She smiled, eyes tight in placid control. “No, James, but thank you for asking.” Her makeup was smudged just under the corner of her eye.

He nodded and half-smiled. They waited for the ding in silence.

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When he jumped, he closed his eyes against the fear and the anger and let the cold wind whip around his limbs, pulling him upward even as he reached his descent. He succumbed to the pull of gravity and fell. He woke up, eyes wide, gasping at the sudden pain that vanished into his dark room.

68.
He cried out out of that bright black square from joy or pain or breaking pieces of a self that was lost. The world continues, is contingent—if he jumped, he must fall.

If he awakes to a crash, had he even jumped at all?

76.

On a desperate Friday, he shot himself in the head with Steve’s gun. The next morning, he watched Steve over eggs and wondered if there was another Steve, one that found him bled out on his bed.

“What—not hungry?” Steve asked, swallowing half the bread in a gulp.

“Finish it for me,” Bucky said, and left the table. He felt Steve’s gaze on his back as he disappeared in the bathroom to quietly heave and retch but produce nothing at all.

Just an echo of a person who never existed at all.

81.

Surrender, surrender, the water called.

Submit, submit, gravity beckoned.

Succumb, succumb, the temptation of the gun.

Just fucking do it, he said.

He answered in the affirmative—yes, yes, he can follow orders like good boy, only thing left to do.

Even that—a failure.

82.

Hot air hit him like a wall, the answering extreme to the bitter cold outside. The tweet, sticky air clung to the little skin he left exposed—little to see, little to touch—he had made himself little in his blankness. Outside the sky was black and blue; inside the light a sickly white-blue-green, a fading
bruise, that turned the skin of his hands sallow.

“Cake doughnut, please,” he said. The cost should stagger him, but he handed over the money without words, or thought, or reaction, lost in himself.

He sat on a park bench, smoking. The naked branches stood stark against the white sky, a black skeleton, an inverted x-ray. A child in neon orange jumped from slush-pile to grey puddle. Bucky ashed his cigarette and blew smoke to the side of his face. The child, seeing him from across the sidewalk, zeroed in on his flesh hand, on the smoke.

“You shouldn’t smoke that,” it said, high voice reedy, undefined. “Mom says they give you cancer.”

“What,” Bucky said. He looked at the offending object, a waiting snake between his fingers.

“Yeah, and secondhand smoke is even worse,” the omniscient child-sage said. “It kills people who don’t even smoke.”

Eyes fixed on his hand, mouth pulled into a mournful frown, Bucky slumped. “Christ Almighty,” he said. The cigarette dropped in a puddle, landed with a small hiss.

“Have a nice day,” the child said with practiced precision, each word distinct from the others. It skipped along, and Bucky sat silent, newly alone—confused and muddled staring to grey water as the white paper turned brown.

84.

Bucky avoided Tony as a general rule.

Sure, it was about Howard, but it also wasn’t—the guilt, yes, that was there, but God if they weren’t peas in some asshole pod and Bucky couldn’t help but dislike him for that.

But it was the Tower as well, the creeping closeness, the watching eyes and godlike voice—a haven that served as a cage.

Steve and Tony had their spats, but had common ground as well, shared experiences. But Bucky—when he looked at Stark, he saw a child orphaned by his rifle, a benevolent dictator-captor, and an asshole.

To be completely honest, he just didn’t fucking like the guy.

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Comrade, Red Scare, the Menace; Bucky Bear, Bucky Bot, Bucky Balls. Lurch. You-Know-Who.

“What?” Barton asked, brow furrowed in his half-feigned dumb face.

“You know, because he killed my parents,” Stark said, glib as ever.

Bucky sat as if he’d heard nothing, but he saw it, saw the car flip as if it was happening now, the shriek of violent metal, the horror show of slow, bloody death. The guilt and the fear, and still he
wanted to slap the mouth off Tony’s face. He tried to hear nothing, think nothing, be nothing at all; he willed himself to stop listening while Steve yelled in his defense and Stark baited him, drank deeper and pulled them all down with him. Pepper had disappeared in a silent huff an hour before—unusual for her.

He let his mind go blank, the cacophony dulling to a low roar. He didn’t notice, made himself not notice—Natasha curled in the corner of the couch, limbs tucked in, walling herself off from the world, attention only on the pale wine slowly circling in her glass, arm in a deep blue sling.

He didn’t notice Barton, playing dumb and sucking down another beer, anxious glances sent her way.

He didn’t notice Bruce, dead-eyed and flinching at the raised voices, white knuckling the table’s edge like a falling man.

He noticed none of it and all of it. He caused it all, or not—guilty but meaningless, in this world without contingency. He guessed the fight happened whether he was there or not—no way to know. Maybe Tony picked at something else; maybe they fought about something else. But fight they did, every day, over and over, again and again.

He couldn’t find a way up from this—instead, he watched the snow fall and imagined himself lying in the ravine, arm crushed, white snow cradling him into death.

When had he last had it? Was it then? So close, within his grasp, the high train tracks cutting the white sky off from the white mountain—his body lying broken, a shattered icicle.

The black night, streaked with reflected light from falling snow, turned grey as his eyes lost focus. Outside his vision, the voices continued, raised and sharp and biting, but it was nothing to him. He was lost in the grey.

90.

He lit a cigarette. He watched it burn down to nothing. He tapped the ash. He made a little pile of grey dust fall in a mound. One after another, he wasted the cigarettes, never lifting them to his flat mouth past the first puff and burn. He held the burning cigarette still between his fingers and watched as the white paper became a precarious column of grey, holding on, holding on, until a flick of a finger made it come undone. A ring of white butts circled the tiny mountain of ash. He crushed them all under his boot.

He shambled about the apartment, unwilling to pick up his feet. He made a bag of rice and ate it plain. He chewed his nails to the quick, till they bled, and he tasted the copper tang of sharp blood.

This day was a waste; he saw no one, did nothing, and still, it didn’t matter. Forward or backward—nothing mattered. The floor smelled like pine and linoleum—clean, false-clean, super clean, it proclaimed, in case he had not noticed. The scent bit at his nostrils. Not enough to be clean—we must smell like clean, new, fresh things. The smell of new pine layered over old wood.

The water from the shower head fell straight down like rain. He stood motionless in the torrent.
“I tried to kill myself.”

Dr. Alvarez started in her seat. She opened her mouth to speak, yet nothing came out. She wasn’t often surprised, and a spike of petty satisfaction ran through him as she searched for words.

“I mean, I failed. A bunch of times actually. Every way I could think of. And still, I woke up this morning. Every fucking morning, to Steve dropping a plate.”

He could tell she was collecting herself, considering what to say. He could wait for her; instead, he kept on.

“I tried to fuck Steve, too. Failed at that, too. He wanted to—I know he did. But something was wrong, every time. Not the right moment.” Never the right time for them—bad timing, he supposed.

She used his pause to interrupt. “That’s a lot to take in, James.”

“We’ve had this conversation before you know.”

She was puzzled, and fairly good at hiding it. “Oh?”

“Yeah. I’ve been living the same day over and over for—forever it seems. And I don’t mean that figuratively, Doc—this isn’t some ‘everyday feels the same’ bullshit. I mean the same fucking day. It starts the same way, every time, and ends the same, every time. Nothing I do, no choice I make, makes a goddamn difference.” His voice was flat, his manner resigned. He slumped in an overstuffed chair. He stared at a smudge on the wall behind her head.

She struggled for words. Bucky was impatient with her, but he’d run out of options.

“I just want to know what is fucking wrong with me. Why the fuck is this happening? Why today?”

“James, I need you to sit down, please, for me,” she coaxed, the first indication he had that he was standing, pacing in the room.

He couldn’t sit, but he stopped moving. His hands clenched in tight fists, fingers digging into the flesh of his right arm. His left made the deep creak of metal on metal.

“James,” she said, voice strained. “Are you telling me it’s your intention to harm yourself?”

The fan overhead stirred his hair, and pieces of it fell into his eyes. He blinked, rapidly, without moving to brush it out of his face.

“No.” He said. “I already did.”

He looked in the mirror.

“Is this really me?” Of course not. Time is a distorted, distorting mirror, and the face in front of him

+ 

Of course not. Time is a distorted, distorting mirror, and the face in front of him

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Of course not. Time is a distorted, distorting mirror, and the face in front of him
was young with despair and old in its linelessness. Time is the mirror into which you stare. You must reevaluate the question.

Steve arrived, breathless and red-faced from the cold. Once it became apparent that not only did she not believe him, but thought he’d undergone a psychotic break of some sort, Bucky gave up, shut down. He refused a brain scan. He was desperate, tired, panicked. He trusted Doc, really, but he knew he wasn’t crazy. Or, at least, crazy the way she now thought he was. He might be regular crazy, but this was real.

He took one look at Steve, and said, “I want to go home.”

And Steve took him home, orbiting around him without touching, and silencing any further input from his therapist. Steve knew—Doc had disappeared for some time, obviously calling Steve and informing him of what had occurred. He didn’t care.

They sat on the couch, silent for a time.

“Can I make you some coffee?” Steve said.

“Yeah, that’s fine,” Bucky said.

Steve made him coffee, and a sandwich, and brought over a bowl of apples. Bucky sat hunched over on the leather seat, head in his hands; when Steve slid the mug over his way, he accepted it without comment, cupping it in his right hand so the warmth spread through his fingers. Soft heat, from the mug; the sharp smell of coffee cut by the bright, sweet smell of apples; the low click of the clock hanging in the kitchen. Bucky knew to concentrate on those, to turn his focus toward his senses and away from the swelling despair that pooled around him, rising higher and higher with each moment.

Steve shifted beside him, and Steve’s hand waited close by him. Steve didn’t touch him, never touched him—only waiting for Bucky to reach out, something he couldn’t do. Steve ate a sandwich. Bucky thought of doing so too, a nice pastrami on rye sitting before him—this he remembered—but he couldn’t make the effort, chew and swallow and go through the motions of a living person. He was dead, functionally, even if he couldn’t make that real or true.

His laugh turned maniacal and incessant, desperate bark of grief beyond sadness. The only gift he’d been given—teeth set on an edge against the promise of the future. The moment of silence descends with appalling speed. Nothingness pressed in on his ribs like angry elbows.

His mind was intact—there’s a logic to everything, and he was part of everything, but this day broke the form of the argument and the shape of the world had changed. The world meant only itself, in changing.

The death he had entered was a death where he can’t lie down—the walk of death followed him, and the footsteps he left behind marched up to him unceasing and continued past. But they step in a circle, or in a blink they’re forty, fifty steps back, the sky above him still and indifferent.

They sat for a while. Bucky, not moving, letting the coffee give up all its heat to his hands. Steve, unable to keep still but unwilling to leave. Neither able to start talking.
Eventually he napped. Dozed, lightly. The light filtering through the wall-sized window kept him from deep sleep, but the comforting blankness of sleep beckoned, and he answered. Steve puttered about the apartment, one eye on him, moving quiet but moving always.

He woke, easing back into consciousness, and saw the time.

“Steve,” he said, and with one word Steve’s focused on him alone.

“Steve—I know it sounds crazy. I do. In a couple minutes, Bruce loses it and they call you in. It happens every day.” He couldn’t look up from his lying position; instead, he stared at the bowl of apples, talking at their shining waxed skins.

“Ok, Buck,” Steve said, non-committal, soothing.

“I’ll have the peas ready for you,” Bucky said. Steve nodded, careful and sad, but Bucky let his eyes lose focus, so that Steve leaving his sight was a sad slow blur.

The best he could expect, he thought. And waited.

He listened to the clock tick away, counting to a hundred and starting over. The third time, he heard a thump overhead. He didn’t look up.

He waited.

And Steve’s phone buzzed. He closed his eyes.

“I—I have to go, Bucky,” Steve said, and Bucky couldn’t hear anything in his voice.

He didn’t answer, but Steve wouldn’t have heard him, sprinting out the door and grabbing the stairs that connected the few apartment floors.

He thought he should feel some satisfaction, some vindication at being right. Instead he felt nothing.

Steve came home, same time as ever, his bruise dark and purpled. Bucky pulled the bag of peas from the freezer and slid it across the counter. Holding it to his abused face, Steve gaped at Bucky, mouth open but words not yet coming. Bucky shrugged at him.

“Bucky, how—?”

“I told her. Same thing happens every day.”

“How long?”

“I don’t know. Weeks, maybe? A month?” He shook his head.

Steve was at a loss. Bucky could tell, knew how he feel, but couldn’t gather himself to explain more.

He started asking questions—what has Bucky been doing with his time?

“Not much,” he said. Too ashamed of the truth.

Has he tried to get out of it?
“Every way I could think of—literally. I ran away. I spent the night elsewhere. I—tried to end it. End it all. And I woke up here every time.”

Has it been hard?

Bucky sighed. “Yeah. It’s been hard.”

Steve swallowed and bit his lip. “Did you try staying up all night?”

Pot after pot of ineffectual coffee sludge, ever renewing on the stovetop. They sat, a cushion between them, and watched every episode of Dog Cops in an advertised marathon for the sad insomniac.

Bucky had little hopes for this—knew deep down it would fail—but the company, the camaraderie, the fact that Steve believed him, made him feel the thaw.

After a while, they turned to cards.

“Were you always this bad at rummy,” Bucky asked after winning his fifth hand. “Or are you letting me win?”

Steve didn’t smile at that; instead, he sighed and pushed himself back against the couch cushions, thinking loud in Bucky’s direction.

“What’s on your mind,” Bucky said. It couldn’t hurt to ask. Well, anything could hurt, he knew.

“Bucky,” he started, and stopped. He looked up at the ceiling. “I can’t imagine what this is like for you. But I—I want you to know. How much it means to me, that you’re here.”

They let that sink in. The cards spread in front of them, Bucky’s winning hand neat on the cushion. Every shifting motion made the cards quiver and slide apart.

“It’s not getting better,” Bucky said, surprised at his own quiet words. “I’m not getting better.”

“It will—you need to believe that,” the immediacy, the vehemence, in Steve’s voice startling them both. Bucky watched him gather himself, force his tension away. The whole time, Steve watched his hands as he choked out his next sentences. “I wasn’t doing well, when I woke up here. I felt—lost. And just the fact that you’re alive, and here, you can’t know how much easier it is.”

Steve’s eyes familiar blue eyes pleases with him. The force of it, the sting, clutched at Bucky’s insides and didn’t let go.

“Doesn’t seem to have made much of a difference,” Bucky offered, affectless.

“You have to believe me when I say—all the difference in the world.” Bucky could hear him swallow. “I’m so thankful to have you here. Even when it’s hard.”

Bucky shook his head, low against his chest. The night had deepened around them, their windowed-wall catching the lights of the glimmering city and spreading it around them.

Steve caught his hand, squeezed, and said, “One more game?”

“I’ll deal.” Steve released his hand. Bucky shuffled the cards. Their momentary intimacy, fleeting, already receding—always already gone. The day’s end moving steady toward their fleeing forms.

The evening became night, and they passed by midnight without noticing, deep in a game of two-
player Solitaire. When Steve won with a triumphant “hah!” (he was much better at this than gin rummy, which had never been his game—somehow he ended every game with two runs and two pair), he watched the clock hanging above the stove and turned to Bucky with a smile, bright and shining as the sun. His eagerness changed the mood of the room, thrumming with new electricity.

“What?” Bucky said.

“It’s past twelve,” Steve said, as keen as a kid on Christmas morning.

“And?”

“It’s the next day.” He gestured without meaning to. “Don’t you think this means—”

Bucky snorted. “I’ve stayed up past midnight before, Steve.”

To Steve’s credit, he kept tight control of his face, eyes wide, lips thinned in an imitation of a smile. “Well, we’ll just keep playing then.” Like it was a challenged for him in particular, a test just for him—how very Steve.

“Nah, something else. No more cards.”

“You just don’t want to get beat again.”

Bucky shook his head, rolled his eyes. “Yeah, that’s it, Steve. That’s definitely the reason.”

“Just so we’re agreed,” and now there was full-blown grin, that one might even call shit-eating—that face, Steve’s face just like that, was something Bucky had dreamed of for years, it seemed. He hadn’t realized its absence, till now, till it beckoned him, summoned its twin, infectious as a winter cold.

“More Dog Cops,” was all he said.

“More Dog Cops,” Steve agreed with a deep nod, reaching for the remote.

He watched the sunrise, too-bright in the winter sky. It wasn’t beautiful, or particularly notable, today—the sky was bleak and white, and the sun rose hazy and red, tracing a scar up from the horizon before burning pale. It looked to snow soon, and more than yesterday. Still. It was a sunrise.

Steve fell asleep near five o’clock after they’d switched to animated films he’d been itching for. Bucky draped the throw over him, watching his face grow slack in sleep, full pink lips falling apart in shallow breaths.

He’d watched Steve sleep for years, from childhood through war, and never grew tired of it. In the quiet dawn, he kept his hand on Steve’s ankle, studying the way the changing light caught the contours of a face he knew so well—peace in sleep, the only peace he wanted, please, please. He waited, always already waiting, knowing deep in his gut that he wouldn’t escape this way but waiting and watching, and waiting.
He awoke in his bed, plate crashing behind the door, and he felt his face turn slack in a deep, impenetrable sadness. A gasp of a sob pulled through him before he beat it down, buried it deep in his chest.

If he didn’t get up, nothing would happen. Steve would leave. He would stay. He’d avoid the day for longer. Instead, he gathered himself, all his energy from every reserve, and heaved himself out of bed through the door.

“I made you breakfast?” One side of his mouth quirked up. “Best laid plans, huh.”

He could do this. He really could. “Yeah,” he managed.

Steve stood, the precarious mess piled in the dust bin. “Give me a minute, I can make some more.”

Bucky waved a hand. “I got it, Steve.”

He made breakfast, eggs on toast again, mind lost in what-ifs. Running in circles. Tripping over the same obstacles. No death for him, no rest. Only breakfast, eggs on toast, forever, the strangest pointless purgatory.

Steve made a sound as he bit into his breakfast, a pleased, now familiar, moan, before chewing and swallowing. “Jeez, Buck, this is delicious. How are your eggs so much better than mine?”

At Bucky’s silence, Steve finished his breakfast. Bucky left his untouched, no stomach for it, his insides drawn in a well of sadness.

“Thanks, pal. Real nice of you,” he said, open and eager.

“It’s nothing. Just wanted to do something nice for my best pal.” The truth of that startled him. The gratitude that lay beneath it, even more so. He gazed up at Steve, standing over him, and smiled.

Steve reached out and took hold of his shoulder, grip warm and tight, and shook him lightly, touch as a response. Steve’s thumb sank deep under his collarbone. He wanted to lean into it, lean into Steve and grab him and hold him; wanted to ask, never let me go. Instead, he shrugged it off and laughed.

“You sure are easy, Stevie. All I gotta do is manage to cook better than you, and you’re worshipping at my feet.” Old habits fit as easy as old shoes, and get just as threadbare.

“What can I say? You’re a marvel.” He deposited their plates in the sink, talking over his shoulder as he rinsed his hands. “See you tonight, Buck.” He bounced where he stood.

“Yeah, Steve. Yeah.”

+ He wanted to be something else, something that is not what it is—he had been unmade, and made again, and he wanted neither, only to become—something. He’d been hunting for something but knew nothing of what it was.

He asked the world to forgive him everything, but give him something at least. The loving air was silent, soft.

+ He went to see Doc, as always. Every time he avoided it, it caused more problems than it solved.
“Was there something on your mind, James?”

What could he say? What did he want to say? He had no idea.

“I have no idea.” That, at least, was honest. “I don’t know.”

The silence stretched onward, outward, filling the small, comfortable room. They both started to speak at once, and stopped. She waved him onward.

“No, James, I interrupted you. Please start again.”

“I—“ how to say this, how to talk about this, “I feel like I’m running in circles.”

The silence enveloped him like a blanket, soft and familiar—but today it caught and pulled, and he wrestled out himself, testy, jumpy. He twitched in her general direction.

“I see.” She peered at him over thin-rimmed glasses. “In any specific context, or more generally?”

“I don’t know what to do with my time.” Bucky wished to God he couldn’t hear himself.

“Hmm?”

“I feel—all moped out. I’ve watched all the television I can handle,” he said, not mentioning that he’d seen most of the shows that were on today. “I’ve—walked around. I’ve met people,” glossing over that one, “and I don’t know what to do. To actually do. What I should be doing. With myself.”

“Well, James, there’s no ‘should’ here. It is, in its entirety, up to you.”

“Yeah, and that’s the problem,” he said, and gave a sad laugh. Her sympathetic eyes both comforted and irked him.

“Can I change the conversation for just a moment, James?”

“Shoot, Doc.”

“What did you like to do, before the war?” After a moment of his non-reaction, she continued. “We’ve talked about a few things during that time—your family, your friendship with Steve, the hardships you faced. But you’re a lively, charming young man—no, don’t laugh!. And I know you had interests, and still have them. We just have to discover them together. What made you happy?”

He stood in the elevator alone.

“Back to your floor, sir?” The disembodied voice, once disconcerting, no longer gave him pause.

He looked up at a corner, addressing his comments in that general direction. It helped. “Is there a piano somewhere in this place?”

He had a few false starts: one, when Pepper, flustered more than was usual, scared him into a bathroom to hide (and felt suitably embarrassed thereafter); two, when he put his fingers on the keys and heard the tell-tale click of metal on ivory. Click-click-click-click as he ran his fingers over the keys, like his mother with her long nails, like the incessant kitchen clock. But he’d gathered himself and fetched a leather glove, and here he was, sitting at the keys like he was seven again.
“You should try it out,” Doc had said.

“You know, they say every year you don’t play is worth three years of practicing. I guess that means I’m out two hundred years of scales, huh,” he’d tried for a joke.

“You’ll be surprised how quickly it comes back,” she’d said. “And besides, even for a beginner, it’s something to do, yes?”

“Yeah,” he’d shrugged.

Scales. And chords. Start with C, move through each half-step. Major chord, minor chord, 4, 6, 5/7, major, minor, major. He remembered this, remembered far more than he was knew. The press of the smooth keys, the light depressions he made, together with the deep sonorous sound, all of it brought him back, hearing a metronome in his mind’s ear and playing notes to its rigid beat, distant laughter and slanted afternoon sunlight on old wooden floors. This, he could do.

111.

Day is desire and night is sleep. There are no shadows anywhere, for they are everywhere, no sleep for him, for day is endless—sleep without dream, fall asleep but never achieve it. Live in a haze, restless, restless, moving without moving.

He played the tune beyond the light of day, yet nothing changed. The music arrived immediate out of the sleek black instrument, and he marveled at his finger’s memories. Yet nothing changed.

Music is feeling, not sound, but what did he feel.

The quiver of old desire—down that road leads despair, he knew. That memory, not real but not unreal either, of Steve’s lips on his, hands on his, body on his, the exquisite moment before parting—this was a memory he had felt and heard and had not imagined. Real, not real. Real enough, he supposed, and bent his fingers to the keys. His own, and only his own.

This quiver—here in this room, desiring—itched to crash into chords. The bass of him pulsed like old pain, no room for a feeling heart near Steve, Steve who shined.

Shined like a star, shined like a fire that mirrored nothing. Bucky had been his mirror once, he thought; instead, he stared into the glass and saw a stranger.

123.

111.

Some days he played. Some days he wandered. Each day he made breakfast, both out of gratitude and a deep sadness that he couldn’t do more, say more. It was a gesture, but it was so little, especially when Steve smiled at him, every morning, like eggs on toast was a gift from heaven above. He wanted his friend back, more than anything, push and pull, shove and shove back. Today’s Steve
treated him with kid gloves without fail. He tried without trying—or rather, he tried not to care, but
couldn’t fight the push and pull of Steve, sweet and flustered in the morning, dead tired, bruised and
sad in the evening. Every day, the bright eagerness Steve greeted him with—well, it broke Bucky a
little more, knowing Steve, how bad he wanted to make this work. Make his broken friend better.

The pantry was bereft of most items, but he could manage eggs, toast. Pancakes. Waffles, if they had
a waffle iron, which they didn’t, and he couldn’t buy ahead. French toast, minus the powdered sugar
and syrup. Quiche took too long; his frittata was sadly lacking almost anything but egg and a small,
withered onion. He was sick of eggs. And of himself, yesterday, or months ago—why didn’t you
buy food, you asshole. Don’t you ever think of anyone but your sad-sack self.

131.

He cut his light out; a scythe downed another day. Nights, he remembers that there is something he
cannot remember. The perfected pain of his conscience, his burdened tongue unable to speak of his
heavy dead—and yet he knew he lost it, knew when he last had it, but couldn’t—

His eyes stared out into nothingness, jaw unmoving against the night mist that curled up his face. He
thought that nothing would ever happen again.

134.

Day is bright and public, but night is personal, personal.

The river trudged along, slow and thick with a hard crust of ice advancing across the surface toward
the center. The river moved; it did not stop. It was going, somewhere.

+ 

Some days he went to museums. Why not. The Met, the Guggenheim. Art galleries. All of it
reminded him of Steve. Charcoal-fingerprints smudged on doorways and tabletops. Dark ash dusting
everything but the paper.

He flipped through pads, blank pages bereft of charcoal, paint, ink, aching for that one black smudge
of a print.

+ 

He could not recognize the face in the mirror; still, this flesh was his. He stared in the mirror and
thought of snow falling, fallen—not now, nor here, snow in the night, first fat flakes come sparse out
of inbreathing darkness.
He started reading—there were sequels to the Hobbit, now, and how about that. And so many science fiction books, uploaded to a reader by JARVIS’ helpful recommendations—Frank Herbert and Kurt Vonnegut and Ursula LeGuin. The books twisted at him, turned his insides out. Gave his racing mind a track to run down. Helpful, in its way. Made sense of the senseless, a little pocket of sanity. His life was a novel, in its conceit, only boring, terribly boring, enough to make him want to fucking kill himself already. Except that didn’t work.

He wandered, sodden with melancholy and muddy snow, his petty misery shrouded about his shoulders. The essential dark—to live at war, forever and ever, amen, once with cause, now only with himself. Cold was his element, it seemed; winter’s air agreed with him, and ushered him to and from the clinging, comforting, clawing heat into blessed cold freedom. Evening, when the measure of time skipped a beat, then another, one by one until the song started again.

Everything fell back to coldness. Everything ticked like a clock—time had gone mad with a mania for clocks.

And every day, the plate crashed. Cracked. Spread its contents everywhere, mixing food and shards of porcelain indiscriminately.

And every day, Steve came home bruised and battered, Bucky waiting for him with frozen peas and ice in a cloth, pressing it to his cheek with practiced care and a healthy, considered distance. Fully clothed. Hands never straying. Eyes never catching. Concerned only with Steve, with his welfare, with his ceaseless bruises and how familiar that was, his own inability to keep Steve’s flesh from blooming with color and swelling with blood. If he could do this, if he could take care of Steve—maybe this was it, the purpose of the day. Except he could only react—he could only wait with peas melting against his friend’s bruised flesh. Powerless to change anything else but his own reaction. Until he thought about it.

There’s always a logic to everything.

—He is part of everything, and his heart bleeds out, out, far beyond the edges of the visible universe.

Think hard on the problem and under no circumstances look in the mirror, for you might not recognize what you find there. The face in the mirror stared back, puffy-eyed and sullen and dead, no man he knew. He shuffled about, slippers sliding on the floor like a wind-moving newspaper in the sea of dead night.
The violets on their bathroom counter, scissor clips and falling hair and streaks of light, all decayed beyond recognition. But these violets here, delivered yesterday (only yesterday? What was yesterday, what could that word signify) persist onward, immortal flowers, the only of his acquaintance, happy and garish in their happiness. Once he ripped them apart, plucked their petals one by one and fed their disparate parts to the disposal. They showed no resentment upon their resurrection.

154.

Bucky wrote a list.

The list became a web. It spanned the living room, tiling the floor in torn white paper crossed with black lines and his chicken scratch writing. An inverted web.

Think—think hard. There’s a logic to everything, and he was a part of everything—did it matter that he lived under an indifferent sky?

Think hard on the problem. The face in the mirror burned bright with gaunt frustration. There is an end to this. There is a ‘then’ where there is an ‘if.’ He had to think so, and thought he did.

Scratched on the paper he saw names, times, if-then, if-then. Memory is a sense no one can trust. He’d figure it out. There is a place for him in this world of contingency, if only he can find it.

156.

The door slid open. Bucky had a mug in each hand, light wisps of steam curling above the lip of each. Bruce lifted his eyes from a paper on his desk and eyed him with interest—maybe apprehension, maybe confusion. Hard to say. He found himself out of practice at this—reading people. He remember that he’d been good at this, once, but couldn’t remember the doing of it.

“Hello.” Bucky caught in the doorway.

“Hi, Bucky,” Bruce said, tentative. His chin dipped low, and his look was a question.

“I brought you tea.” He cringed inside. Outside, he extended the mug of herbal tea, mint and chamomile and a hint of lavender, all the soothing herbs he could find in their limited kitchen. Possibly stale. No caffeine. This was idiotic, he thought, but he held fast where he stood, fighting the urge to cut and run.

“Thank you,” Bruce said, rising. “Come in.”

They sipped their tea in silence. Bucky found his tea a little bland. Honey would be nice. Maybe it should have steeped longer? Waiting for Bruce to speak was maybe an ineffectual tactic, but he couldn’t think what to say. This was a shitty plan. What reason did he have to be here? Could they
just sit in silence? Was that something people did?

Out of the corner of his eye, he watched Bruce struggle with confusion, staring down at his tea like he’d never encountered lukewarm leaf-water before.

“What brings you up here, if I can ask,” Bruce gave a muddled smile, scrunching up his face.

“Oh I just—“ he breathed in, and started again. He could do this. “What do you—do to relax?” It came out strangled, and the part of him that remembered that old charmer, Bucky Barnes, why he could talk to a wall—it wanted to crawl in a hole and die.

Bruce gave a self-deprecating snort and looked at the floor. “Oh, yeah.” He nodded, deep into his chest, and continued while he thought. “Other than tea, you mean?”

Bucky nodded.

Bruce gestured without form or meaning, hand curling up as his arm went out before him. He looked Bucky dead on, kind eyes crinkling up. “Have you tried yoga?”

+ 

The basics of a sun salutation. Breathe in, breathe out. Up, down, curl forward, press back and up. Bucky saw Tony enter the room through the vee of his legs. Happy to be upside-down, facing away as he moved down to the mat.

“Banner, I need to pick your brain, the feedback system just here is giving me—‘ and he stopped, grasping for words. Mouth opening and closing like a fish gulping air instead of water. “Yoga, huh? You and the Terminator, finding nirvana?”

Bruce pulled himself up out of downward dog and breathed out a smooth, long exhale. “Yes, Tony.”

“Well I’ll choose to ignore it this time. I have to pick your brain—the blaster in the arm is malfunctioning—“ and here, he lifted his arm, encased in part of a suit, and pointed his palm in their general direction.

From his position on the ground, Bucky hooked a foot behind Bruce’s knees and pulled forward, letting Bruce fall down and back onto the padded mat, just as the malfunctioning hand let out a pulse of bright, hot energy that shattered the glass on the workspace behind them.

He watched Bruce, intent on the man’s breath and face and general markers of stress, panic, anger. “Bruce?” He said, quiet as he could.

Bruce coughed—wheezed, really—and rolled onto his side. “Jesus Christ, Tony. Don’t point that at anyone.”

Tony was staring at his palm. “Why is it working now? I can’t even—I swear, this day is cursed. Definitely not just me, right? Doesn’t it seem off to you?” His head turned quick, seeking object after object like a nervous bird.

Bucky lay prone on his mat, staring at the ceiling. He sure as hell thought it was, but—

He felt a hand on his shoulder. The face above his was frustrated but calm, mouth twisted in a rueful grin. “Bucky, thank you.”

He shook his head, averted his eyes. “It’s nothing.”
“I didn’t even notice it happening before the glass was breaking.” Bruce extended a hand and pulled him upright. “I guess I’m just lucky you’re here. Well, we’re lucky you’re here,” he laughed.

Having removed his arm from the suit piece, Tony was fiddling with something behind the palm. “Can you take a look at this? The wiring’s all correct and I can’t find the bug.” Bruce sighed and extended a hand for the metal contraption. They held their heads together, pointing and poking at the insides with the palm facing square away, toward the remains of the lab.

“I’m—gonna go,” Bucky said. “Thanks for the yoga.” He retreated, uncomfortable, and unsure of his victory. Was that it? Maybe that was it. All he had to do. Cause and effect, if and then—what happens when ‘if not’ is the case?

+ 

Steve got home later than usual, coming up on nine o’clock, tired, weary, close to defeated. Weight of the world pulling him down.

Bucky had made dinner: a pot roast with little potatoes and tiny carrots and plenty of salt. Better even than Ma had made it, considering how good the meat was. The roast sat on the stove, thick layer of fat turning solid as the night wore on, meat uncarved, pot untouched. He’d sat there, waiting, watching the time tick by on the shitty clock above the stove, relentless second hand proclaiming each moment that passed in the silent, darkened apartment. The scent of cooked meat hung still in the air, mouth-watering; yet he’d left the roast where it sat, waiting for Steve, wanting a meal with Steve, time with Steve. To look at him across the table and see his perfect golden face unblemished by its rainbow bruise.

Instead, Steve hadn’t come home.

“Hey, Buck,” Steve managed, slumping onto a stool. He rested his chin in a palm, and sniffed at the air. “Did you make dinner?”

“Yeah, pot roast.”

“Oh. Smells amazing. Any left?”

“Whole thing.”

Steve turned to him, expression coming alive, all soft and caring. “Did you wait for me? I’m sorry, Bucky, I didn’t—“

“Not long. Just finished,” Bucky lied. He lifted the meat out onto a carving board, and sliced off four thick pieces, red juices pooling on the wood underneath. “Want some?”

“Of course. I could eat a horse, you don’t even know,” Steve said.

As they set into the meal, Steve stuffing his face like he’d never seen food before, Bucky asked, casual as he could make himself, “how was your day?”

Steve swallowed in a loud gulp, mouthful visible as it moved down his throat. “Fine, I guess.”

“But, you know, what did you do?” Bucky said to his plate, messy with meat and carrots and gravy. A rhythm in his head itched to be tapped out, foot against the floor, knife against the plate. He stilled both limbs.

“I don’t know—Natasha had a problem, needed backup that didn’t come in time. Tony and I had to
He stole Steve’s keys.

He remembered this. Barton was there, standing in the deck, sweatpants held in one hand while he fiddled under a worthless hood.

“Aw, car, no,” Barton said. A whole day long exercise in deja vu. Bucky stood and watched him, lurking uncomfortably against a cement pillar. He lit a cigarette and waited. Waited for this actual human disaster to notice his presence. Jesus Christ, and this was the guy Steve trusted with his six. Fucking idiots, all of them. He started clicking the lighter open and shut, over and over, against his thigh, half in boredom, half in an attempt to gain Clint’s attention. He failed. The fuck, pal.

After several tense minutes of watching and wondering whether gravity would finally defeat the soft cotton holding onto Barton’s ass, Bucky cleared his throat. God damn, but if he didn’t have to do everything himself today. Clint straightened quick, too quick, and banged his head on the hood.

Rubbing his head, Barton turned his way.

“Hey Barnes—you know anything about cars?”

Fucking bullshit, this day.

“What’s the problem?” He tried to be helpful, and took another look at the useless engine.

“Car won’t start.”

Bucky peered and poked around for a good half a minute, to be convincing, but he wasn’t patient. He pulled himself out of the car and tossed the keys towards Barton, who watched them sail through the air and land on the ground. Bucky rolled his eyes.

“Here, take Steve’s.”

“The bike?”

“Yeah, the bike.” Bucky pinned him with a glance. “He doesn’t mind. Not for an emergency.”

Clint shuffled toward the grounded keys. “Yeah, yeah. Thanks, man.”

“Hmm,” Bucky sounded, and nodded. Clint tried to stand up holding the keys in one hand and his
pants in another, but mostly fell over. He stifled a laugh, turned it into a cough. “See you later.”

“Yeah,” Clint called, distracted.

Well, it was a start.

“Have you ever heard this phrase,” Doc started, stopped herself. Bucky watched her, nervous-tapping at his knee. Doc’s mannerisms were light, almost nonexistent, but times like these brought them out. She bit the inside of her lip, just so, and laughed soft under her breath. “It’s this thing people say now—fake it till you make it.”

Bucky grinned. He wished he could tell Steve. Instead, he had a good laugh with his psychiatrist.

161.

“I didn’t know you could play the piano,” Bruce said.

Bucky nodded, unwilling to say more. That was still new to him, or new in its oldness—new to this life, new to this day.

“I can’t remember you without it,” Steve said, smiling at the memory. “Every time I went over to your house, it was you or your Ma, tickling the ivories.”

The warmth in Steve’s voice wrapped him up in affection. They sat around, sprawled on couches. Bucky tucked himself into an overstuffed chair, knees up against his chest. Not a threat, not a threat. Act like a normal fucking person.

Music piped in from speakers around the tiered great room, quiet enough to be a background canvas for conversation. He’d been uncomfortable in the past, every night he’d been here. Now, he had a purpose, and he watched the gathered Avengers with a critical eye, studying each. They were louder tonight, talking more, but underneath it all was a new strain of nervous tension, fraught nerves making even the best of them testy.

Tony sat with a whisky in one hand, screwdriver in another, hunched over a handless metal forearm laid out on the coffee table. On occasion, he bit off sharp questions at Bruce, who offered simple answers and bemused smiles his way. Natasha gulped down a tall vodka tonic, more vodka than tonic; Clint watched her, arm in a sling, and sipped at a beer.

Steve watched them all, tried to relax. He was bad at it. More than anything, he tried not to watch Bucky, and failed at that too. Bucky smiled to himself—partners in failure, if nothing else.

“How long have you played?” Bruce asked.

He tapped out a rhythm on his thigh. “Not sure, exactly. Six or seven, I think?”

“You must be good,” Bruce said, kind smile opening up his tight face. “Do you play now?”

“Yeah,” Bucky ignored Steve’s surprise. “Just took it up again.”
Tony lifted his head from the machine in front of him, eyes on Bucky’s arm. “Really, it’s good enough for that?”

“Yup,” he said, popping the p with a hard sound, looking elsewhere.

“Doesn’t it make a noise?” Tony asked, carelessly.

“I. Wear a glove,” Bucky said, fumbling, graceless in the moment. Too much time spent in his head—as soon as he spoke, he felt the idiot he was.

Steve stared at Bucky, agape. He closed his mouth. He swallowed. He started to speak—a great effort, as he chose his words, each one particular and thought out as it exited his mouth.

“How long since you picked it up again,” he said. His smile was an effort, an attempt not to bite his lip like he had years ago.

“Few weeks, I guess,” Bucky said, unsure of how off he was, how much was a lie. Calculus for another day.

“That’s great, really,” Steve tried.

“Yeah,” Bucky said.

He scratched the back of his head and stared into his own worthless drink. He wondered. He knew—he should offer. It would break the tension, maybe, the new tension of tonight, where everyone was trying but still something lurked beneath the surface. Every interaction strained, straining—they wanted to be here, wanted something that was just out of reach.

Before he could, Pepper walked in. Walked in upset, he could tell from one look, tight shoulders and clenched jaw and rapidly blinking eyes. She sought out Tony, whose head was buried again in the machine in front of him. Foot pulsing pizzicati against the hard stone floor, she paused, the picture of patience as its end.

“Tony, I need to talk to you.”

“Hold on,” he said, lifting one finger from the glass he held. He didn’t look up.

“Tony, it’s—” she stopped, collected herself. “It’s important.”

“Course it is, just give me—oh there you are, I’ve been looking for you all day,” and he held the machine above him, peering into its depths and twisting the screwdriver with a deft turn inside.

She waited. He ignored her. The rest of them had the grace to look elsewhere as the air in the room grew thick with her frustration. Pepper, ever patient with Bucky and Steve and every other individual who crossed her path, had reached the end of her tether, today. At this moment.

Bucky glanced around, saw Bruce and Clint and Steve all looking sheepish, awkward and pretending ignorance. Natasha looked bored. Well, he’d done reconnaissance, at least, for this new development. He stood and stretched, and Steve stood with him.

“Tony,” and her voice, forever collected and gentle and full of grace, had turned sharp. “I need to talk to you, and seeing as I am not your mother, and you are not a child, I don’t expect I’ll have to repeat myself.”

Tony looked up, screwdriver caught in his mouth; he opened it to speak, and the tool fell out, hitting
the rug with a dull thud. Still, no sound came forth; instead, he gaped, speechless for the first time since Bucky met him. It was a wonder anyone could handle Tony, and her kind of poise had to be necessary for loving someone so—Tony. Lord knows Bruce had it, in his own mild-mannered, self-effacing way. Steve, though—Steve was never patient, not as much as he wanted to be, and Tony ruffled all the feathers Steve pretended not to have.

“Pep. What is it?”

Her eyebrows lifted a fraction, for an instance, and Bucky knew it was their cue to leave.

He nudged Steve with an elbow and gestured toward the elevator door. They walked; the others followed, leaving a steaming Pepper and befuddled Tony alone, staring at one another, the walled wave of anger about to crash.

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They filed into the elevator, eager to escape.

Clint flinched as Bruce brushed by him. Natasha snorted, cruel.

“How bad, Barton?”

Clint lifted his good shoulder in a shrug and gave half a smile, but it was a painful, weak effort. “What can I say, guess I’m just a pansy.”

“That’s one word for it,” she said, and within the small confines of the elevator, three of them swallowed convulsively at that. She flinched at her own works, but her face became a mask of indifference that Bucky recognized clear as day. Guilt; resistance. They hit a floor, and she left without a word to anyone. No one said anything in response.

+  

“Do you ever wonder what she sees in him?” Steve asked.

Bucky snorted, and considered that an answer.

“I mean, seriously. She runs his company, for God’s sake. And he’s just so—Tony. About everything. Can you imagine?” Steve shook his head to himself and shrugged. Threw his hands up. “I don’t get it.”

“You don’t have to,” Bucky said, pulling open the fridge door to look inside. Why did he do this? He had the contents memorized. Fuck’s sake, though, he could have bought himself groceries this afternoon. It’s not as if his social calendar was that full. Instead he came home hungry and bored to this—near empty, with a preponderance of condiments. He pulled out a jar of pickles, and set to eating them all whole, face over the sink to catch the brine as it slipped down his jaw. He caught Steve watching and slurped hard at the obscene pickle. No consequences, but in another life he would have done it anyway, consequences be damned.

Steve watched, paused, blinked—continued his rant.

“I know, I shouldn’t judge, I just—she was obviously upset. And Pepper has the patience of a saint. Imagine how thoughtless you’d have to be to make her angry. How little consideration she would need to feel heard. Appreciated.” He shrugged again. Bucky watched him while crunching on a pickle. “It just really doesn’t take that much effort to make someone happy. Especially someone you love.”
“Yup,” Bucky said through a mouthful. He chomped, thoughtfully—or, rather, chomped and thought, two distinct actions. What a pickle. He laughed at his own joke and refused to tell Steve why.

164.

“Pepper’s aunt is in the hospital—she’s leaving late tomorrow, after a morning meeting,” Bucky said, as if in response. Tony held a screwdriver half-raised above the tabletop, and kept glancing to and from Bucky’s face, bewildered, both at his words and his unannounced appearance in the workshop.

“What?”

“She’s stressed, and all she wants is a cold bottle of chardonnay, nice Italian food, and for you to shut up for once in your ‘whole dang life’ and listen to her,” Bucky said. He remembered the “dang” more than anything, the way she brought herself to the precipice of swearing, but refused to make that jump, no matter how much “damn” suited the situation, her mood, everything. She was a creature of specific habits, and speaking well is nothing if not habituated. In another life, he remembered the taste of soap and his mother’s sharp accented voice informing him so.

Bucky turned to go.

“What, did you hack into JARVIS? Is someone filming us all right now?” Tony said, half-joking, but an undercurrent of worry threading through his tone. He let the driver fall, and he typed as he spoke, looking through a transparent screen back and forth between his guest and the text that appeared.

“Come on, Bucky Bot, give me something.”

“No, I spoke with her. Earlier today.”

“And she said all that?”

“Didn’t have to,” Buck said, and backed out the room, unwilling—unable—to offer a cogent explanation.

“Wait—stop. Stop moving, I see you moving. Come one, just stop for one—“

Bucky paused, raised an eyebrow, crossed his arms and leaned against the doorframe. Uncomfortable glass doorframe, all this glass everywhere.

“I realize I can be—a challenging person,” and Bucky snorted to himself, but didn’t interrupt. “But I just—why would she tell you?”

He shrugged. “She probably tried, and you were busy,” he said, answering the unasked question. It’s hard to listen—hard to see, Bucky knew.

He left at that, waiting to see if it was enough.

167.
Another day, another try. The model of success is not fail or succeed—it is fail and fail and fail, and then succeed. Maybe. Or fail continuously, forever. There is only one path, and he is taking it.

Think back to when last he had it—nothing. The violets bloom every day.

181.

He stood in the elevator, waiting, thumbing through Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland. ‘If it was so, it might be, and it it were so, it would be, but as it isn’t, it ain’t.’

Who knows what’s so, today?

He’d ridden the lift up, ridden it down; he cannot exist, not yet, not yet.

Natasha’s gaze fell on him through sliding doors. At three in the afternoon, today, she’d made it here. Third time so far, so close, so close, last puzzle piece. This day that went wrong for all people, a closed loop tragedy, and Bucky stuck alone in first row.

She was quiet. He was quiet. They were quiet, and not together. The elevator as well, almost more so than either of them; whereas the sound of their combined breath held a constant presence, the machine moved silently, imperceptibly. Her clothes were neat—‘business casual,’ he heard it described, dark suit pants and silk blouse falling just so, a costume she wore as easily as her placid face. But beneath her ear was a white butterfly bandage, and she favored her wrist. Her shoulders hung down in bone-deep weariness; she was well-groomed, yet not alert, not like she needed to be.

“Going up?” He initiated.

She nodded. “Top floor, please.” Her ‘please’ was its regular balance of genuine and sardonic, but the cruel twist of her mouth made the balance fall to one side. “Decided to work for a living, or are you content to mooch?”

The only way to get answers, he knew, was to get someone talking. So, as an exchange, he started talking.

“You think I’m a good person,” he said, but despite his flat tone, it was a question he posed to her, signified by a lifted eyebrow.

She peered at him, mirroring his expression. For all her composure, he knew she was ruffled; her body tensed as she tried to figure him out.

“I’m sure you don’t need my opinion,” she said with soft assurance.

“Why not yours, if anyone’s,” he said.

She only looked at him, unblinking as an owl. But he met her gaze and stared back—no backing down, not from this. Besides, nothing to lose, no consequences; only everything to win. She broke
their contest after a handful of silent moments, glancing down at her hands as they rearranged themselves loose and together. He watched her tap her wrist with one finger, tap tap tap, a gesture not as much nervous as considering.

“Why would you ask me,” her voice growing softer yet. He imagined this was a trick of hers, quiet voice drawing you in and convincing you of her harmlessness—see my soft underbelly, my vulnerability? To Bucky it said something else. A threat—he was still a threat to her, and they both knew that.

But here it came, one of the moments upon which this day turned, pivoted, changed. Try, try again. He’d failed this day, this particular day, more than the others—struggled with it, what to say, what to say.

“Because you’re a good person, Natasha,” he said, ducking his face in discomfort. It was harder to say than to think. “I trust you to tell me the truth. Or to know what the difference is.”

Her nostrils flared, he saw, but otherwise, her face became a mask, a still lake hiding a flurry of activity. The doors slid open behind her, bring fresh natural light into the dull grey room of the elevator, fringing her hair in a halo of rose gold as she faced him. Still, she said nothing, narrowing her eyes after a moment’s thought.

“I guess I wonder why you would say that,” she said, head tilting to one side as she softened her face with a half-smile belying the predator’s gleam in her eyes. She backed away from him, out from the elevator, never breaking her gaze.

He pushed a button and looked back. “I mean it,” he said.

“I know what you’re doing,” she said, eyes narrowing.

“Great.” He shrunk into the wall.

They stood in breathtaking silence until the doors cut them off from each other. Once alone, Bucky let his head fall back on his shoulders and he sighed, loud in the still air.

“Jesus Christ, she’s fucking terrifying,” he said to the empty, still air. Time to wait and see.

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Every day he left a bag for Steve—sometimes, it was never found. But those charcoal fingerprints, maybe one day he’d come home to them again, marking up the blank white of the page. He missed Steve’s dust all over him.

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He’d never know what he’d lost. He could only try to walk in the world; to love it, even.

182. // 1.

The morning light pierced into his room through sheer curtains, scattering bright spots across his bedspread. Steve stretched and sighed and pulled himself upright. Today’s another day, and all I can
do is my best. He laughed at himself—did he really need to cheer himself out of bed? But, he did.

The world began around him—he felt it as he had years ago, in an earlier city, the largeness of the world waking to work and to endure, just as he would, and he felt himself a part of that world, unable to hide, unable to spectate, forced always to be a part of this constant, heavy, involuntary life.

Last night had been—not bad, precisely, but not great. They’d reached a stable point, he and Buck, and stability was better than what came before—the nightmares and the episodes and the look of sheer emptiness in his friend’s cold eyes. Now—now Bucky spoke to him, at least. Acted the part of a human being, even if he resembled his old self not at all. Steve shook his head, stirring the few dust motes hanging still in the air. It didn’t do to think like that. Comparing them, the old Bucky of his memories and the man living a room away, only hurt him more. Hurt them both more. Wasn’t fair. And yet, in his quiet moments, Steve couldn’t help himself. Couldn’t help but remember the only person to look out for him after his mother passed, to force food on him, and dancing on him, and blind dates with girls, and pencils when he couldn’t find any, and company when he couldn’t ask for it. His friend, who had cleaned him up after fights, who took care of family, only thoughts for those he loved.

The thought of him, the old Bucky—don’t think like that, Steve—made Steve crack his knuckles at his impotence. He felt lost, bereft—that was the word, bereavement, grief for a man he’d mourned for years and now had to mourn again, anew.

The city already bustled with life far below his feet. The skyscrapers around the Tower cleaved the blue air, casting early shadows that split the sidewalks into darkness and light. His heart hung heavy in his chest, and yet he pulled on his tight, bright face and went to face the day. Steve rarely let himself feel what he’d woke up to—the loss of a person still living—and he felt the need to make amends, apologize for his thoughts even if he never said them aloud.

Breakfast. He’d make breakfast.

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Steve watched Bucky’s face—he seemed resigned to his eggs on toast, grimacing just a little as he took the first bite. Tasting his own, he wondered why—the eggs were creaming and thick and warm, far better than his own rubbery attempts. While he knew not to let them cook too long, it never failed to happen, every morning. He heard his mother in his head, “take the pan off while they’re still glistening,” yet he’d never managed to do it. Just thick-headed like that, he supposed.

“Jeez, Buck, this is delicious. How are your eggs so much better than mine?” He ventured. The side of his eye saw Bucky nod.

“Just effort, I guess.” Bucky stuffed the remaining toast in his mouth and swallowed after minimal chewing, gulping down coffee. “Glad you liked it.”

“Thanks, pal. Real nice of you,” Steve tried. It was—more than he’d ever done before, making Steve breakfast. It seemed like everything, and as bright hope bloomed in his chest, Steve tried not to wish for the moon.

“It’s nothing. Just wanted to do something nice for my best pal.” The words felt rote, but Bucky tilted his head to the side and looked at him full on. Their eyes met, and the kitchen dissolved into silence after his words finished, and the world dropped away to nothing but their faces, near and turned toward each other and smiling, gentle in the quiet room. The minutes ticked by, clock on the wall announcing the progression of time, onward and onward, moving ever forward. The light in the room shone brighter, as if the sun found a gap in the clouds. Bucky blinked, and smiled, and ducked
his head, before gathering up their plates. The scent of fresh violets hung in the air; the bouquet sat in
the vase they’d brought the day before, which Steve had not yet admired. Lovely, ephemeral,
blooming but soon to droop. The moment was over, and yet Steve let himself continue as if it never
ended, buoyed on their brief, renewed connection. It was a whole new day.

Steve drummed his fingers on his thigh, careful not to make a sound. The meeting stretched onward,
and while he attempted to pay attention, his mind was elsewhere. His mood, still buoyant from the
morning, continued unabated even in the face of bureaucratic monotony. And he wanted to keep it
that way.

They wanted to trot him out at a joint meeting of the intelligence agencies—the last, true symbol of
American goodness, whole and pure. Put on the suit and dance for the crowd. Captain America, they
wanted. Captain America, to gloss over the injustices each of them committed daily, hourly. It made
his heart sink—that wasn’t him, but no one seemed to know.

He said he’d think on it.

Steve was happy, weightless, on cloud nine. And yet—he didn’t want to spoil it. He haunted the
SHIELD offices for a while, ran and boxed and lifted, past the point when it turned repetitive,
boring. He took lunch in Central Park, sketching a tree with a ball point pen on the back of a receipt.
His own therapist, his own meeting, for an hour that went faster than he realized; he didn’t talk about
Bucky, today; instead, they talked over SHIELD’s request for his dancing monkey routine. He
visited to his favorite bakery. Talking to the waitress, Steve walked the line between friendly and
flirty over a cinnamon scone. His body alight with nervous energy, he walked on—he could go on
like this forever. He could go on like this.

He called Sam. Who was busy. Which was fine.

He avoided the Tower.

The weather, February brisk, threatened a storm, and the thick white clouds overhead cautioned him
not to get stuck outside. Still—he waited. He justified this to himself, saying he was “giving Bucky
space,” but avoidance was the real term. Why spoil a good day?

The apartment was empty.

The stone in his stomach weighed heavier. That feeling, anticipation, waiting for the other shoe to
drop, had grown since the morning. Nervous energy, that he couldn’t get out no matter how much he
walked and ran and fought, rose to the surface, his hairs standing on end. Steve tried, he really did,
tried not to hope for too much, but the hope was there, blooming, burning, growing and consuming
him even as he tried to pin it in. The danger of hope, he knew, was that it made disappointment all
the more bleak.

He only knew despair because of hope.

He thought of Peggy—“always so dramatic,” and Christ, she wasn’t wrong.

The kitchen was empty, clean, white. The clock ticked on the wall. Pepper’s violets, a gift “just
because,” which meant “because you look sad,” bloomed violently outward, dusting the kitchen with
sweet, heady scent, overpowering. A nice gesture, if overwhelming, and the flowers looked out of place in the austere space.

Maybe he’d take her up on her suggestion, decorate the walls, add ‘personality’ to the place. Steve didn’t quite understand what that meant, but he could feel the difference in the spaces she made for herself, for Tony. They were friendlier, more welcoming somehow, and he thought it was more than color and texture and blankets. It was warmth, intimacy maybe, and his place—their place—lacked it.

He wandered through the rooms, looking for anything, everything. It was uncomfortable, too similar to its familiar emptiness before Bucky—had come home.

But there was something—white MOMA bag, sitting on his bed, which spilled into notebooks and pens and charcoal and ink and paint—no note, no indication of the giver, but the gift said it all. He thumbed his finger over the soft bristle tip of a brush and slid to the floor, back against his bed, and the enormity of this small hoard crashed over him. The sun, setting later each day, broke through the blanching clouds just for a minute, casting a slanted, pale, orange glow on the late afternoon. Rubbing his thumb over his lip, he watched his brush paint the air. Neither happy, nor sad, nor anything—overcome. He could not say what it was in him, but felt only the endless pulse of his own heart.

+ 

The roof of the Tower bustled, brimmed, overflowed with noise. The warm, heavy smell of Italian food wafted from aluminum containers, laid out on a counter. Beer bottle, wine glasses, lay scattered across available surfaces.

It was later than he thought.

Lost in his head, he had paced, room to room; it was unlike Bucky to have left, and the absence pulled his pensive mood further downward. His silent cell phone had almost gone ignored, but he’d gotten that habit that everyone had now, lighting up the screen out of reflex more than desire.

It read: come up already if lost text pep

And: Rogers there’s a party waiting for you xoxo :D

And one that only had pictures—pizza slice, beer mug, Flamenco dancing lady, balloon, confetti, music note, alarm clock?

His mood wasn’t there, really—he’d seen none of them all day and could stand a few more hours distance. Listless, he’d looked for something to occupy his mind, but the loneliness—or rather, his awareness at being alone—pressed in on him from all sides. And up he’d gone, expecting little, worried for Bucky, resigned to a sad, restless night where he painted on his smile and laughed along with everyone else and felt the itch rise under his skin until he could run a marathon or five, or punch dozens of bags until they split, or ride off in the night, head west and never come back. But the thought alone let his blood settle, and he’d ridden the elevator up, smiling at no one, pulling his eyebrows up, his expression bright—your mood is what you make of it, after all.

Natasha saw him first, padding over to the elevator door with a wine glass in hand. She was barefoot, and the liquid in the glass lay still as she glided over. A tinkling piano filled the room with music, quick and light, and the energy answered in high spirits.

“You made it up, Rogers,” she said. She had a small white bandage under an ear, and Steve looked
at it, unable to hide his attention.

“What’s this?” he asked, tapping the corner of her jaw beside the butterfly.

“Old ghost, come to haunt me,” she said. Her smile was not a smile.

“You could have called me.”

“Barton had it.” She turned toward the room, the sunk floor and the couch, Clint sprawled out on leather and dotted with bandages himself.

Steve tried to read her mood—failure.

“I’m glad he could help,” he decided to say, as little as it meant.

She slid an arm through his, guiding him into the room. “Me too.” Her voice, deep and full-throated, was soft with affection, and though he couldn’t guess at what she felt, he squeezed her arm where he found it. Natasha let her head rest against his shoulder for a brief moment before pulling away.

“You never said how—talented your boy is,” she teased. Steve drew his eyebrows together in confusion, and followed her gaze toward a corner of the room.

Steve saw him, and the world fell away. Amazing, really, how all attention could narrow to a pinprick, the great room disappearing along with all the guests it contained, leaving Bucky, only Bucky, fingers dancing over the keys. Familiar, so familiar, the way his hands ghosted over the notes and jumped up, resting in the air, after striking a chord. He’d always had beautiful hands, and the thoughtless memory turned Steve’s stomach over.

Bucky wore a glove now, as he played.

Steve went to him, hovered over as he finished.

“How long have you played?” Bruce asked, relaxing into the couch.

“Oh, since I was six or seven, I guess?” Bucky said, finishing a short ragtime tune. A scale, playful and chromatic, followed. “Ma taught piano, you know.”

“No, I didn’t—your whole family was musical?”

“Just Ma and me—the girls didn’t have a lick of song in them, and ole George couldn’t hold a tune if it were tied to his hands.” Bucky was looking at the keys, smiling a little to himself. Steve remembered them, of course—loud girls, ‘Bucky play Danny Boy again,’ ‘Bucky something we can dance to,’ ‘James, maybe something with less…song?’

The whole Barnes clan, loud and welcoming and full of life, who’d pulled Steve into their hard embrace without a second thought. They’d lost so much.

“Steve, do you play at all,” Bruce said, and Steve couldn’t help the surprised, half-embarrassed laugh that came out.

“I could barely handle Chopsticks, are you kidding? Bucky’s the talented one here,” an old answer, old rhythms falling into place.

Bucky started a simple chord progression. “Whether or not that’s slander—I do remember you helping me out with Heart and Soul,” and Steve laughed, anxious, but performing on cue wasn’t anything new.
“Buck, you sure about this,” he said. “If I remember right, I think you said I had the rhythm of a drunk three-legged dog.”

Bucky switched to the arpeggio arrangement. “It’s calling out for you, Stevie. Listen to how lonely it sounds.” That irrepressible grin didn’t leave his face for a moment; instead, his eyebrows waggled at Steve, one at a time, inviting, challenging, daring him to sit down.

“Remind me how this goes,” Steve said, delaying the inevitable.

“Oh no, this is your test, not mine,” Bucky laughed at him, repeating the progression over and over, only slight variations in the arrangement. Now the chords bounced, fervent; now they spread note by note. Either way, the progression continued, never stopping, beginning anew every four measures.

Steve sat, put his hand on the keys. “I start here, right?”

“Who even knows,” Bucky shrugged, grinned.

He listened to the incessant progression, the repetition grating with time. Just jump in, he knew, but he held back, waiting for that right moment. But there would never be a right moment, and there he was, hitting that one key three times, struggling to remember what comes next.

“Doing great, pal,” Bucky said, at the end of one round. They did it again.

“Are you speeding up?” Steve said.

“Now why would I do a thing like that,” Bucky said. His hands moved unmistakably faster. Steve watched his glove hand and almost lost his rhythm. The beat came faster, and he struggled to keep up. That slight edge of competition, of challenge—he saw it in Bucky’s eye, and his heart, in response, beat harder, faster.

They kept at it, quicker and quicker, Steve making mistake after mistake, jarring discord pulling a laugh from Bucky every time.

“Ok, as the owner of this space and this piano, I’m going to exercise my executive power to veto this sad excuse for a song,” Tony said, hand on the cover to the keys. “Move your fingers before I turn them into tiny morsels for a tiny carnivore.”

The song stopped in the middle with a clang, one last heavy note, melody and harmony unresolved.

Bucky stretched and cracked his back in response. They stared each other down, Tony and Bucky, and Steve fought an impulse to intervene. A broken face waiting to happen, the two of them.

“And how are we doing, Bucky,” Tony said, sardonic but impatient, somehow. He broke their eye contact and watched the amber liquid in his glass swirl and swirl.

Bucky’s answer was a shrug and a smile. “We’re doing—” he looked across the room, “—fine, it seems. Maybe in need of wine.”

“Point taken.” Tony turned towards Pepper, who sat on the arm of a chair, tablet in one hand, heeled shoes in another. An empty glass on the table next to her. With that, Tony walked off.

“What the hell.” Steve said, more to himself. “What was that about?”

His face the picture of innocence, Bucky shook his head. “Couldn’t tell you.” His shrug was comical.
“Yeah, I’m sure.” Drinking deep from his pint glass, Bucky licked a line of foam off the top of his lip; Steve’s eyes followed. He drained it, and the heavy glass made a sharp noise on the surface of the piano. He gestured toward the empty glass.

“Want one?” Bucky rose from the bench.

Steve noticed his ass—he didn’t mean to, but there it was.

“Are those my jeans,” he said.

“Yup,” he popped.

Steve paused, struggling what to say.

“They look—good on you,” he managed, trailing up at the end.

“I know,” Bucky said, closed lips and smiling eyes, before ducking his head and laughing to himself. And Steve smiled, and in a moment, without thinking, there they were, seventy years before, laughing alone in their kitchen like no one else existed. Bucky stood over him, and Steve looked up at him, and that alone was enough to remember a lifetime ago. Natasha raised an eyebrow at them, across the room, but he couldn’t find it in himself to care, let alone think why.

Clint stood up. “Sit down, let me,” he said in their general direction.

Bucky sat, facing outward on the bench. Their shoulders brushed; their heads turned to look at each other, inverse mirror images.

“How’s your day been, Steve,” Bucky said, breaking their eye contact.

“Oh, you know. You?”

At this he tilted his head and looked out the window. He held his chin in a hand, stroked the underside with a thumb. “Not bad, so far.” His grin was full of teeth when he turned to Steve. “Day’s not over yet, though.”

Bucky had this smile, an undrawable smile, Steve had noticed. No matter how it started, wicked grin or kind-eyed, he always managed to laugh at himself in the middle, and his nose would scrunch up like a mouse or a squirrel or something equally small and unthreatening. That was his real smile, where some stray thought ran through his mind and crumpled his face, where he couldn’t hold his expression together and instead let it fall away, laughing and laughing, authentic, exposed.

“Buck I found this bag—“ Steve began, but Clint walked up with beers. Steve stopped his thought mid-sentence, even while an expectant look came over Bucky’s face. He accepted his drink with thanks, and Clint threw something at him in response.

He caught it, felt his keys.

“Thanks for the loan, Rogers,” Clint said.

“I guess I’ve been loaning out a lot of my stuff,” Steve said. He tried not to be a little smug, but failed. Predicable. He rarely got to be smug with Bucky.

“I suppose so,” Bucky said, taking down half the pint in a gulp.

“Thirsty?” He said, continuing the light, teasing mood of the night.
“What, not like it does anything,” Bucky popped back. His eyes crinkled up, the way they did before a laugh.

They relaxed together, letting the settling night wash over them. The beer was cold and the company fresh. Something rose up in Steve’s chest, high and bright. His skin felt on fire.

“I’m heading in for the night, but I wanted to offer—if you want, I’d be happy to do more yoga together. Or if you wanted to stop by for more tea.” Bruce rose to leave, gave an awkward half-wave in passing.

“You do yoga,” Steve said.

“I contain multitudes,” Bucky said. Their faces were identically deadpan, and it was impossible to say who broke first.

Some part of Steve wanted to ask—who was this person, where had he come from? But more of him felt, or rather knew, the rightness of it, that certainty of a puzzle nearing its completion, remaining pieces slotting together almost as an afterthought. The world righting itself like clockwork.

Off by the bar, Tony and Pepper swayed in a slow dance, turning in gentle circles to soft music, shoes and work and life forgotten for a moment.

Leaning over the leather couch, sunk in the middle of the room, Natasha swiped foam off Clint’s upper lip and spoke something low and tender that only he could hear.

“Everyone’s happy tonight,” Steve said, realizing the truth of it as he heard himself speak.

“You think?” Bucky tapped at his nose with a finger, surveying the room. “What about you, Steve. You happy?”

A serious question, and while most of him wanted to shrug it off with a quip and a smile, Steve gave a serious answer.

“Happier, I guess.”

Bucky nodded, said nothing.

“Did you get me that bag?”

“Yeah, you like it?”

“It was—real nice,” he managed to say. So little, for so much. “It’s been a while since I got to draw.”

“You’ve been busy,” Bucky said, gazing elsewhere, rubbing his fingertips against one another. Never still, but he seemed anxious at the moment, anticipating something.

“No, but, I appreciate it, Buck, really I do.” Steve tried to put all his feeling, his sincere gratitude and pleasure and affection, all of it into his voice in that one small affirmation. It must have done something, since Bucky turned and caught his gaze for a long, stretched moment.

“You get the painting?” Bucky scratched the back of his head. Steve shook his head. “Come on, it’s kind of dumb, but it’s the best part.”

+ “Van Gogh, huh?” Steve looked down at the lilies, frame between his hands. A large print, as large
as the original, vibrant colors shining out into the blanched white room. “There’s something beautiful about flowers that never wilt.”

Rubbing his nose, Bucky laughed under his breath. “If you say so, pal.” He shrugged. “Seemed like the kind of thing you’d like.”

Well, that was true. But it was the gesture, more than the piece, that pulled something out of his chest, broke something he hadn’t realized was there, and suddenly his skin felt raw.

“Should we head back up?” Steve regretted the words as soon as he spoke them, but Bucky didn’t seem inclined to say yes. He pursed his mouth before chewing on the underside of his bottom lip. He shook his head.

“Nah, let’s stay in. I made lasagna.”

“Wait, really?”

+

The light grew more and more somber. The darkening evening enveloped them, casting shadows long and full behind them. Still, they looked at each other with easy grins, old patterns, old habits, resurfacing in a familiar rhythm. They ate. They cleaned. They laughed; Bucky looked down and up, Steve side to side, eyes meeting and passing and never holding. What would it be like, to hold each other’s gaze, for a second, for a minute, for ever?

There was a vivid flash in his heart, a vision of them—he kept denial wrapped around him like the warmest blanket, but tonight it fell away, leaving only the cold pierce of desire, the stricken terror of not knowing.

Steve’s heart was full of something that he wanted to say, and yet the words wouldn’t come. Yet they overcame him, these words—this feeling. The night would not pass by him; he was owned by this feeling in this moment, and had no self outside it.

They stood alone—Steve, ignorant to everything else, only knew it as much as he realized an absence, not caring, only thankful that nothing intruded on their privacy. The laughter faded; Bucky looked out the windowed wall into the falling white snow, the city become a blurred string of lights. Steve looked nowhere else, tracing familiar planes of cheekbones, nose, eyebrows, jaw. Eyelids. Chin. Lips. He swallowed, overcome, and moved without thinking.

“Buck,” he said, and Bucky turned to him. Their faces were close. Steve could feel their breath, swirling in the same air. He pushed forward.

It was soft, this kiss, and still—time passed and stood, the world shrank and grew from that perfect moment of connection. Their lips, pressed together, were constant; everything else moved about that fixed point. His hands clenched into fists at his sides; his body leaned forward, no touch except those soft lips on his, moving the smallest amount, necessary for his satisfaction, just enough, just enough. Nothing but a tender mouth on his own, a hint of sweet, bitter breath behind it, touching his lips and leaving no trace.

Steve drew back, breathless. He could look nowhere else. His heart rose in his chest, beating hard, high in his throat. Their breaths stretched on and on, Bucky, surprised and gazing, hands clenched on the edge of the bar, moving nowhere, saying nothing. A decisive moment, a fundamental shift in the world, had occurred, and they stared at each other, as if wondering how the ground would move next.
“You’ve never done that before,” Bucky said. He lifted a hand, maybe to touch his lips, but ran it over his chin instead. His eyes were startled wide, his face full of those eyes.

Steve smiled, fell back against the counter. “No, I guess not.”

“No, I mean—” Buck began, stopped. He looked away, confused, evaluating, and Steve’s breath came a little faster, heart beat a little harder.

Should he apologize? He wasn’t sorry, but it was the first impulse he had. What should he say? What could he say? He watched, and Bucky looked down, brow furrowed—Steve broke through himself, for a moment.

“Was that—alright?”

The sharp look Bucky gave him—what did it mean? He wanted to say something, but found nothing, no words, other than a full confession of a lifetime of sins, waiting to be absolved—or not.

He bit his lip, waited. Bucky’s eyes fell on his mouth, and he smirked, and it was fine. The rightness of the world restored. That smirk, that expression, that small quirk of mouth and eyes: that Bucky reserved for only him.

“Yeah, Steve,” Bucky said, tilting his head to one side, “that was fine.” He was grinning with his eyes, not his mouth. Or daring him. Either way, it set a flutter beating high in Steve’s chest, and he felt dizzy with a lack of oxygen. The anxiety, the adrenaline, he was nervous with it, this itch, couldn’t stay still—need, this was need, and he needed to move to Bucky, press their bodies together, and holding himself back was all he could do. He bounced on his heels, pressed himself backward, the air he breathed thrumming with heat, unexpected, but as necessary as satisfaction.

He couldn’t look forward—couldn’t look for more than a moment. Bucky was fixed on him, fixed with something he couldn’t identify. This was a moment they couldn’t pull back from—still, he buzzed with anticipation, waiting, waiting—waiting for what? Bucky stood still, stock still, a fixed point, holding onto the bar just as Steve held onto the counter, and then Steve saw them as mirror images, waiting, pulling back, always waiting—and he moved.

One step, less than a step, and their bodies were together, Steve pressing Bucky into the counter, Bucky’s hands on his hips, Steve’s sliding around his shoulders up into his hair, around his neck, gripping, gripping hard but turning gentle—God, he wanted to climb into him, enter him and never leave, but he held back, gentle, gentle, be tender. But Bucky’s hands coasted over his hips, around to his back, pulled him in, their bodies flush together, chest to chest, thigh to thigh. Bucky’s breath in his mouth, their kisses becoming open-mouthed, a little wet. Harder, a touch of tongue, skimming along his lower lip. Sucking Bucky’s lip between his own, feeling the arch of his body when Steve grazed his lips with teeth. His whole body reduced to those points of connection, nothing more than lips and a handprint of his back, lower chest and upper thigh—and hot, heavy hardness between his thighs, answering him as his legs spread, welcoming the intrusion of Bucky’s leg.

Christ Almighty, how much he’d thought about this, thought without thinking—denial was a blanket, but inside of its shroud he’d thought without thinking, had imagined this and discarded it, had wanted this, had promised himself that one day, just one day—one day he’d be honest. Or push it down so far it wouldn’t matter, but today the decision was made for him, made for them, and there they were.

Steve pulled Bucky’s lip between him again, tongue running over flesh just as Bucky licked into his upper lip—and the graze of tongue against tongue made him moan, made them moan, and it was harder, deeper, hands clutching flesh and pressing them deeper into each other, gripping so hard that
on anyone else would leave a bruise. Bucky’s hand pushed his lower back forward; the hand moved down, traced the edge of his shirt, ducked up and under the fabric to find bare skin at the small of Steve’s back, and suddenly nothing existed but that hot point of contact; his head fell back with pleasure, and he gasped a sigh, just as Bucky’s lips found his neck, moving up from his collarbone to the beat of his pulse just under his jaw. Steve moaned, again, pulling himself forward, pulling Bucky’s leg between his thigh and feeling an answering heat and hardness against it. He thrust up against Bucky, unable to stop himself, and felt, more than heard, Bucky’s answering groan. The sound of it intoxicated him; deep somewhere in his gut, he felt a possessive “mine” that he would never admit to unless alone.

Bucky’s lips stilled against his neck. Bucky’s hand paused against his back, then disappeared from his skin. They stood together, still pressed together, but motionless, and Steve feared movement would break the moment, their perfect, fleeting moment that he wanted preserved in amber. That acknowledged, if only to himself, he breathed out, long and hard, more a sigh than anything else. He worried, but his blood was still up, still beating hard and fast, and his head could not figure why.

Pressing his head into the juncture of Steve’s shoulder, Bucky’s lips moved against bared skin. “Let’s take a breather, ok?” He spoke, more air than sound. But when Steve attempted to pull back, Bucky didn’t let him go. “Just stay here for a minute.”

Steve breathed his affirmative “yeah,” and arranged his loose arms around Bucky’s shoulders, consciously matching his breaths. After a minute, after a million years, this old intimacy made new, he knew what should be done, even if the words weren’t there at all—or meant too much to say.

“We should talk about this, Buck,” he heard himself say.

“Of course, yeah,” Bucky said.

And they stood quiet in each other’s arms. The minutes passed by, and Steve’s breath evened out. His pulse lowered. His overwhelming sense of anticipation, his eager blood, his nervous skin, all slowed, returned to the ground, and he was left at a loss, or full of loss, unsure what had occurred. Did this change everything? Or nothing? With his arms around his best friend’s shoulders, yesterday’s silence, resentment—the abyss between them—how could that have been yesterday? And thinking of that, he was glad of their pause, glad to catch his breath and not move forward in anything premature.

“It’s been a day, I guess,” he began.

“Yeah, you wouldn’t believe,” Bucky said, laughing against his chest.

He struggled with his next words. “Is this—what you want? Are you—how are you, Buck?” He said all of this, stumbling through, to the top of Bucky’s head, a few loose, long hairs clinging to his lips and attempting to be swallowed.

“Stevie,” Bucky said, gripping him in a deep hug, desperate, “Stevie. I want you, and I love you, and I’m doing just fine.” Bucky tensed in his embrace, tensed at his own words, but relaxed after a moment. The hug held for a good while, then Bucky pushed him back, gentle, moving them apart. Steve was without words, wanting to say everything, unable to say anything. Bucky smiled and traced the side of his face with two soft fingertips.

“Stevie, let’s go to bed, ok?” And Bucky’s smile was sad, so sad, and Steve had no reason for it, for this sadness, this sense of loss that Bucky gave off, so antithetical to his words, sweet and tender and altogether life-changing. “We’ll figure it out tomorrow. We got all the time in the world.”
It sounded like a lie, but really—what was one more night?

“Tomorrow,” he said, and smiled into Bucky eyes. He held his friend, his—Bucky, held his neck and felt his pulse, life-giving blood beating under soft warm skin. “We’ll talk tomorrow.” He held their heads together, and this thing between them stretched on and on, out into the world around them, spread infinitely thin and infinitely large.

Bucky closed his eyes, licked his lips. “There’s always tomorrow,” he said, “but now, let’s go to bed.” He pulled away, walked to his room—Steve followed, without thought, as if tethered to him.

Steve held himself in the doorway—unwilling to enter without permission, unable to leave without asking. Bucky turned to him, a questioning, raised eyebrow prompting him. He couldn’t find the words.

“Good night, Steve,” Bucky said.

Steve opened his mouth—but ducked his head, silent, and pulled his shoulders in, awkward and wanting and wishing all at once that he knew what to say.

Bucky’s eyes passed over the hands shoved hard in his pockets, the legs braced for a fight, the tight, pressed lips in a mockery of a smile. He paused, considering, and tilted his head to one side, fondness curling his eyes up at the corners. He laughed, to himself.

“You wanna stay,” he said, as if realizing it for the first time.

“I—if that’s alright with you,” Steve managed, the shame that comes with desire flaring up in an instant.

Bucky ran a hand over his face, as if in pain, but his words were measured. “Stay, please stay,” his voice low and slow. He watched Steve as he pulled his belt open, his jeans undone, falling to the floor, stepping out of them; watched as he shrugged out of his shirt, left in nothing but briefs, moving neither fast nor slow into bed, under covers that did little to hide the scars spreading out like roots, like a web, from the socket of his arm across his chest and back. He sat in bed, looking with a frank gaze that invited, without beckoning.

It was what he wanted, what Steve wanted, but saying yes—saying yes after all these years was the hardest thing he’d done, somehow.

He stepped into the room, closed the door. Undressed, trying not to think of it. Slid between soft cotton sheets that slithered over his skin with little sound. Their feet found each other, lightly cold, and Bucky hooked an ankle around his. The lamp went out, and the little light that escaped under the door left Bucky’s face a shadow. Their hands met, finger next to finger, until Steve’s rested over Bucky’s, joined hands palm to palm between their shadowed faces. He didn’t know how, but they slept.

1. // 1.

Bucky awoke to a crash. He rolled to the side of the bed, stretched his arms above his head and felt his muscles pull, warm and tight and loosening. The dark of his room was total, just as it was every
morning, blackout drapes concealing the world outside. He pulled himself up, out of bed, and stumbled out his door, sleep still heavy in his body.

He walked into the living room and became confused.

“I can’t believe this happened two days in a row,” Steve said, picking up shards of porcelain off the floor, coffee spreading out over the hardwood. “You’d think I could carry a cup of coffee, but no luck, huh.”

Bucky stared at the dark liquid pooled and pushing outward. He looked out the window, and saw white.

“It’s snowing,” was all he could say.

“Yeah, coming down hard. White-out conditions. I guess we’re trapped inside for the day.” Steve gave him a sunny smile, bright as the white outside, but Bucky saw him rub his palms on his shirt, nervous and waiting.

Waiting for him.

Still, he couldn’t say anything—his eyes jumped between Steve and the window, coffee on the floor and snow outside that blanketed the buildings, smoothing out their sharp edges in a soft calm.

“I thought—well, even I can’t mess up coffee too much, even if my eggs will never beat yours,” Steve said. Nervous, and rambling. “I thought I’d—wake you up?”

But Bucky could only look at the snow, falling and falling. Cold and white. Snow on his face as he stared upward into the white abyss, snow on his arm laying half a yard away, red snow turning white, nothing, nothing. Snow on his face as he wandered the city. Snow on his face as he ran and ran, throwing snowball after snowball, waiting for Steve to catch up, hiding in the alley.

He blinked. Until—

“It’s Saturday.”

“Yeah, I don’t—there’s nothing planned. We could stay in, if you wanted,” he offered.

“It’s Saturday.” he said again, to himself, and walked up to Steve and kissed him, drawing his face down the little bit to his own, kissing him sweet and tender. “Let’s stay in. Let’s never leave.”

Steve kissed him back, soft mouths pressed against each other, gentle and inviting.

“Let me clean this up—” Steve broke off.

“Leave it,” Bucky said, and drew them both back to his room, where he opened the curtains and let the snow fall around them as they lay in bed, bright morning light cascading around them as they showered each other with kisses, soft and hard, fast and gentle, never stopping.

They faced each other, lying on the bed, limbs in a tangle. Their breath heavy, their fingers intertwined.

Steve traced the line of Bucky’s jaw with a knuckle. “So what happened yesterday?”

Bucky shrugged
“You ever gonna tell me?”

“Yeah.” Bucky said, unwilling to lie, to misdirect. “Sometime.”

“I don’t want to pry, but—” he watched Steve struggle. “Whenever you want to talk about it.”

“You’re here.”

“Yeah. I’m here.”

Bucky leaned forward, kissed him on the forehead. “I’m here too, Stevie. I’m not going anywhere.”

They lay silent, day outside changing from harsh white to bright day as the snow dropped off and the sun made a sporadic appearance, crepuscular rays shining down on the city. Bucky watched the day pass by beyond the outline of Steve’s face; he felt Steve’s attention, pulling him in.

“You meant it, Buck?”

“Hmmm?” He hummed into Steve’s skin.

“What you said yesterday. Tell me again,” Steve said. When Bucky pulled back, his eyes were soft and aching.

In his head, he thought—yesterday. How long was yesterday, how many yesterdays did he have. But he said, “Steve. I love you. I’ve been in love with you forever, and I’m never gonna leave,” and Steve sighed against his mouth and moved against him, pulling their bodies flush together. They melted against one another.

“Me too,” he said. “I missed you.”

+ On another day, he woke up, dew-bright and stunned, tasted the new electric tang of joy and sorrow and blessed feeling.

—We must learn to live in the world. He did—he found it. The world of contingency arrived once more, measured clockwork steps ticking forward, only forward. The day was bright and new—just as all the days that would surely follow. The violets were drooping with decay, soon to die, beautiful in their transience. And he would learn to live in this world.

End Notes

Obviously inspired by the film Groundhog Day, but also by the poem "Loss, of Perhaps Love, in Our World of Contingency," by Robert Penn Warren.
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