“It’s eleven-thirty. My parents aren’t going to let me leave now. Maybe if I’d gone out earlier...”

“Your parents won’t know, because we’re gonna go out this window,” Bender explained patiently, shoving a thumb over his shoulder at the curtains fluttering in the breeze. “You live in the basement and you never sneak out of the house?”

“I sneak out,” Brian protested.

“Get a coat,” Bender said, flipping hair out of his eyes. “Come on.”

As expected, everybody on detention didn’t suddenly become best buds after that weekend, but things changed, as they always do. You know Jason Simmons? Maybe you don’t know him, but he was pretty popular and student government Treasurer, so maybe. Well, he moved, and Brian got elected to take his place in a write-in. He thought that was probably down to Claire Standish and Andrew Clark putting in a good word, though he didn’t know for sure. He was grateful anyway.

Then Allison got a job at The Limited at Shermer Court Mall and started wearing colors and Brian was hired three stores down at Sam Goody’s.

His parents were not impressed.

“Your job is school, Brian,” his mom had said, but Brian argued successfully that working would
make him look more well-rounded on his college applications, just like the Treasurer thing, and because of his disciplinary infraction, he needed to save for college, because maybe he wouldn’t be getting a full scholarship anywhere, Math, Latin, and Physics clubs aside.

He’d spent his first and second paychecks on clothes that Allison advised him on.

“I look stupid. These jeans are way too tight,” he’d protested, turning around in front of the mirror outside the dressing rooms at County Seat.

“Wrong. They’re not tight at all. They fit perfectly. And they’re not too short, which is the most important thing here.” She clucked critically and picked at the bottom of the dark blue flannel shirt he was trying on out of his waistband and yanked him forward, cuffing up his sleeves. It reminded him of something Bender might wear; he wouldn’t tuck it in either or button the cuffs and he’d throw a tee-shirt under it and it would smell more like cigarette smoke. “More casual. That’s much better.” Brian decided to trust her judgment.

The other day after school, Claire came in to his work waving an Orange Julius cup and bought a- ha’s Hunting High and Low and Boy in the Box by Corey Hart. Brian bagged them up as she chatted about prom with the two friends she was with. She wasn’t going with Bender, apparently, or Andrew, either. She winked at him as she turned to leave the store.

“You just missed Claire,” Brian told Allison after they’d both finished their shifts. She shrugged.

“Whatever. We’re not pals.”

“Yeah, but…”

“She comes into The Limited and buys stuff sometimes. We don’t hang, though.”

“Okay.”

“We don’t hang.” Allison repeated.

“Okay.”

“Just because we’re both women doesn’t mean we’re best friends now.”

Brian rolled his eyes.

“What.”

“Women. You’re like, 16.”

“Shut up, Brian.”

***

Tonight, Brian found John Bender sitting in his bedroom like he owned the place, feet propped up on Brian’s desk, his backpack in Bender’s lap with half of Brian’s books out.

“Shit. Bender. How did you get in here?” Brian hissed. He could faintly hear the TV upstairs, but that didn’t mean his parents would stay up there. The laundry room was right across from his room, after all.

“Hydrogen can form four bonds. It can also bond with itself, and it also exists as a crystal,” Bender recited from Brian’s spiral notebook. “So…it’s a slut that jacks off a lot.”
“And it’s also a crystal. Give me that. I’m not doing your homework for you.”

“I’m not here for that, Brian,” Bender scoffed, shoving the notebook into Brian’s hands. “I’m here to get you out of the house.”

“Why would I want to get out of the house? It’s really chilly out, if you haven’t noticed. Also, I have to work tomorrow.” The room was freezing, and Brian noticed his window was cracked halfway open. So that explained how Bender had appeared out of nowhere.

“Because it’s...Friday night?”

“I have to work tomorrow,” Brian repeated, but he wasn’t due in until 9:30 to open and Bender was standing there making simultaneous masturbatory motions with both hands and Brian knew his argument was weak. He checked his watch. “It’s eleven-thirty. My parents aren’t going to let me leave now. Maybe if I’d gone out earlier...”

“Your parents won’t know, because we’re gonna go out this window,” Bender explained patiently, shoving a thumb over his shoulder at the curtains fluttering in the breeze. “You live in the basement and you never sneak out of the house?”

“I sneak out,” Brian protested.

“Get a coat,” Bender said, flipping hair out of his eyes. “Come on.”

“I sneak out constantly,” Brian muttered, pulling the new suede jacket Allison had talked him into out of his closet. But he listened to Bender’s whispered instructions about walking on the bark and not the rocks when they get over the threshold, because actually, no, he’d never sneaked out.

“Where are we going?”

“Well, first we’re getting some beer, and then we’re going to drink said beer, because it’s Friday night.”

“Yeah, but why me? Why with me, I mean.”

Bender stopped in the middle of the darkened street and gave him a look that conveyed that he thought Brian was probably too stupid to live. “Because it’s psychologically unhealthy to drink alone. I thought you’d probably be home on a Friday night, is why you. And I was right, so let’s go.”

The convenience store was four streets over and across the main road. “Do you have a fake ID?” Brian asked, and Bender shook his head as a station wagon pulled into a parking spot. Brian watched as he approached the driver, a rotund guy with a mustache wearing a bright blue parka, and a few moments later, Bender ambled back to Brian over at the ice cooler when the man went inside.

“I asked him to get Schlitz or Meister Brau. You have four bucks, right?”

Brian sighed. “Yeah.” More than an hour’s pay, thank you. He handed over the money to Blue Parka as Bender took possession of the brown paper bag.

“Sorry to hear you fellas both lost your driver’s licences,” the man said. “Hey, so you two have a good night. Don’t drink that all in one place.”

“Sure. Thanks, man,” Bender said as Blue Parka headed back to his car. “Okay, so the park for the rest.”
“The park?” Brian asked.

“The park is where I stashed the other six-pack. Fuck’s sake, try and keep up, Bri.”

***

Brian popped the tab on his second beer as Bender downed his third swinging next to him. His hands were cold on the aluminum can, but he was warming up a little.

“I’m surprised you don’t have, uh, marijuana,” Brian remarked.

“Well. My doobage source, he got picked up by the cops this afternoon.”

“Really?”

“His sister told me. You know Tiffany? A junior, I think. Wears a lot of eye makeup?”

“Tiffany. Isn’t she kind of um...you know...” Brian sipped.

“A whore? Yeah, that’s her. Anyway, he’s not available to supply any fine smokeables, so Schlitz it is.”

Two beers later, Brian asked Bender if he’d ever slept with Tiffany.

“Slept with? No.”

“How about Claire?”

“Claire? Claire the princess, Claire?”

“Yeah.”

“No.” In the half-dark, Brian saw Bender’s hand go to his earring.

“Do you want to?”

“Not particularly, no,” Bender said.

“Why not?”

“What is this, 20 fuckin’ questions?” Bender crumpled an empty and tossed it into a bush. “She probably has the clap.”

“Didn’t she say she was a virgin, though?”

Bender crossed one leg over his knee. “Yeah, that was then. Anyway, you fucking Allison?”

“No.”

“Why not?” he asked smarmily. “Doesn’t she pick out your clothes now? If you’re gonna be pussywhipped, you should at least be getting some pussy out of the deal.”

Brian sighed, plucking at the collar of his shirt. “Allison, she’s my friend, I guess.”

“So you’re her gay best friend. Oh, wait. I guess if that was the case, you’d be picking out her clothes.”
Brian let out a held breath and felt suddenly sober. “Look, so I have to get up early for work.”

“Fine.”

“You’re not gonna litter,” Brian warned, and Bender picked up the cans by his feet as he stood, turning to crack his back.

“Fine.”

***

The rest of the year was pretty routine, really. Andrew Clark was prom king but Claire Standish wasn’t queen, and she told Allison she wasn’t even pissed, but that was an absolute bullshit lie, in Bender’s opinion. Bender almost dropped out but Brian convinced him to complete senior year because although a GED seems easier in theory and Shermer High sucks, he was almost to the finish line.

“So what are you doing after high school?” Brian asked him. They weren’t at the park; his little sister had a speech meet and his parents were in Coal City for that, leaving the house to him. He’d been warned not to have any wild parties or anything while they were gone, but he figured having Bender over didn’t count. Technically. He was actually ”over” at the house three nights a week anyway.

“Do your parents have any booze?” Bender replied, changing the subject.

Brian sighed. “Nope. Well, cooking sherry? They don’t really drink.”

“Are they Mormons? Are you a Mormon, Brian?”

“Not since I last checked.”

“Well, it’s a good thing I have this, then.” Bender reached into the front of his jeans and extracted a baggie of weed that he shoved into Brian’s hand. It was kind of warm.

“My parents will smell this.”

“Open. A. Window.” Bender said.

Brian rolled his eyes, but he did. They ended up in Brian’s room by the end of the night as usual, after demolishing three joints and two pizzas.

“I still can’t believe you have a child-sized waterbed,” Bender snorted.

“It’s not child-sized. It’s called a super single.”

Bender shook both legs, making waves, which was somehow hilarious. “Super SINGLE. Whoa.”

“If you upchuck on my super single waterbed, I swear to god I’ll fucking kill you,” Brian warned. Somewhat belatedly, with Bender’s head on his shoulder, Brian realized that he could say whatever he wanted to John Bender now without fearing getting his ass kicked.

He guessed that meant they were friends. “You’re an asshole sometimes, Bender.”

Bender chuckled in reply. It turned into a snore.
On Sunday night, Brian’s mother sniffed the air after she dropped her suitcase in the foyer. “Have you been smoking in here?”

“No mom, the potpourri caught fire,” Brian told them. “Uh, I had it in the kitchen, to get rid of the um...toast smell. I had to throw it away.”

“Brian, if you wanted to kill yourself, you’d tell us, right?”

“Pretty sweet gig, huh?” Bender said with a wink, pushing the trash can into the service hallway near the bathrooms at Shermer Court Mall as Brian followed.

“So, you’re a janitor now?” Brian asked. “That’s your big career plan?”

“Yeah, well, colleges aren’t exactly knocking down my door, Bri,” Bender retorted, sniffing a discarded can of Mountain Dew before pitching it. “And you’re a cassette tape salesman, so maybe you shouldn’t judge.”

“I’m still in high school. It’s a high school mall job.”

“Yeah, and I’m not, so whatever the fuck,” Bender said. “Anyway, I’m off at 7. Wanna get lit?”

“Sure. Yeah. Good.” Brian replied, turning back down the hall. “You’re buying. You have a career.”

“Fuck youuuuu, Bri!” Bender shouted through a cupped hand. But he did pay for the beer.

Six mall stores were hit the next month in an overnight burglary.

“I got questioned by the cops.” Bender complained.

“Mall cops or actual cops?”

“Real cops. Fuzz. I don’t believe this shit.”

“Do you have a record?” Brian asked, tentatively.

“I have a few things on my juvenile record. But not like, grand larceny. Or I wouldn’t have gotten this job. Fuckin’ A.” Bender was clearly steamed.

“There was video, though. Two old guys. One of ‘em has a gold tooth and a ski hat. Clearly not you.”

“It’s the principle,” Bender said, frowning. and Brian leaned in and kissed him. It was the principle.
“I got in,” Brian said gleefully. He shoved the letter onto Bender’s knees. “Look! I got in.”

“Pacific Tech? I thought you wanted to go to school in Chicago.”

“That’s what my parents wanted,” Brian said, “I’ve dreamed of going to Pac since I was seven years old.”

“Undergraduate engineering program,” Bender read, then nailed Brian with a glare. “You can’t even make a lamp work.”

“Software engineering. Code. This is gonna be amazing.”

“Whatever you say, Bri.”

“Full scholarship, PLUS, I got a waiver to live off campus. They never do that.”

“You don’t want to live in the dorms with the other dweebs?” Bender asked.

“No, because Allison’s coming too and we’re getting an apartment. She got into the Pasadena College of Art and Design.”

“Well,” Bender put his socked feet up on the waterbed. ”Goody for Allison.”

“You coming with us?”

There was a long pause. “In case you haven’t noticed, I’m not exactly college material.”

Brian pulled his desk chair around and sat on it backward. “Yeah, about that,” he said, pulling out a brochure. “There’s a tech school there too...you could study to be an electrician, since you’re a lamp genius. Look. they also have HVAC. That’s air conditioning and uh, heating technology.”

Bender rolled his eyes.

“Chiropractic assistant?” Brian read off the back of the brochure. “You can get student loans.”

“Yeah, whatever. Not interested.”

“It’s sunny. It’s warm. It’s California, Bender.”

“Whatever.”

“Fine.”

“Fine.”

“Fine, I’m coming out there,” Bender said over the phone. He’d called collect, and Brian could hear the sounds of mall muzak in the background. “I’m not going to some fucking technical school, though. I’m getting a job.”

“You only need to pay utilities,” Brian said, elated. “I mean, when you get a job or whatever. I mean, you can be a mall janitor here if you want to.”
“That’ll work. Shermer blows.”

“I know. Good. That’s...that’s good. We have a two-bedroom apartment though, but we have this couch, so...” Brian trailed off. He’d planned to offer Bender the couch. It was an okay couch, for college students, anyway. In case he wanted to sleep on a couch.

“Nah. You bring the child-sized waterbed?”

“Yeah. But it’s super single.”

“Oh, fuck you, Brian, with your ‘super single’.”

“Fuck you too, Bender.” Brian retorted, grinning. "I missed you."

“Whatever you say. See you on Thursday. I got a bus ticket.”

“Good. Yeah. See you then.”

End Notes

Okay, confession: I Easter-egged some other John Hughes films into this... blue parka guy, who buys Bender and Brian beer, is Del Griffith from Planes, Trains, and Automobiles. Tiffany, who Bender did NOT sleep with, is this guy's sister from Ferris Bueller's Day Off, and the mall robbers are these guys from Home Alone. Brian's college, Pacific Tech, isn't from a John Hughes film, but I'm pretty sure he went to the same school as Chris Knight and Mitch Taylor in Real Genius. ;)

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