Salvation (A Discography)

by woollen_pharaohs

Summary

An epic alternative universe retelling of Daredevil in which Matt and Foggy start a band together.

Amidst their humble beginnings, something bigger is happening in Hell's Kitchen. Matt tries to help his friends and the people of the city, but ultimately all he ends up doing is helping it change into the form he's been fighting against.

Meanwhile, Foggy suffers in a state of unrequited love, but is not brave enough to make a public declaration. Something is going to have to influence him to change the way he coddles Matt and his behaviour, may that be for better or worse...

The story features angst, action, violence, love, and more angst. Based heavily off Black
Rebel Motorcycle Club, but you don't need to know anything about the band to enjoy this fic. In fact, it's better if you don't know anything to prevent spoilers!

Notes

(So i apologise in advance because idek how this fic came into being but it has and here we are.)

I have done a lot of research so it's very much like a biographic but ... not? I've taken creative license to transplant Daredevil in a universe where Matt (Peter) and Foggy (Rob) start a band together. But there's still Daredevil crime fighting stuff going on and love triangles and all this other drama, which is all planned across ten chapters.

Also, the band so happens to be BRMC because i personally think so many of their songs and lyrics work so well with the ~themes of Daredevil, however, i don't think readers need to know or even like the band to enjoy this fic.

And lastly I want to also say that I've been told the first lot is quite dense, because it's sort of establishing where characters are at in this AU, but please persevere. It gets better!!
Anyway, hope there's some souls out there who enjoyed this? I'd love to know what you think :) (also if there are any tags that you felt i should have warned people about please let me know!)

Prologue/Introduction

Chapter Notes

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prologue.

[1997-1999]

i. rifles

Onion and mustard sauce drips over his hands as Foggy shovels the hot dog into his mouth on his way to the record store. He curses at himself for forgetting to grab a handful of napkins, his saucy hands hovering over the front of his jeans—except he hesitates. If Greggory Thompson sees the traces of hot dog on his front he isn’t going to let Foggy near the records, let alone the tapes. So he opts to wipe his hands on the back of his jeans.

Thinking about it he should be cursing his cousin for putting him in this situation in the first place. One thing lead to another after the bong was passed around, and in the end, it was Liam who left his record in the player and got it all wrecked up. That’s what Foggy gets for letting his family touch his shit. A scratched up record at home in the garage, twenty bucks in his pocket to buy a replacement. And Liam didn’t even give him money to cover it. Typical.

It’s a wonder the records don’t melt from the lack of air conditioning. Although the warmth probably explains why Greg’s records don’t last long anyway, wears out the durability. Foggy can’t complain much, Greg has the best deals. Plus Greggory doesn’t mind too much when Foggy just hangs out in the place whereas some of the newer joints have this loitering policy that really gets on Foggy’s nerves. Can’t a guy look through some records and listen to music? Doesn’t mean he has to buy something, it’s the atmosphere. Still, Greg’s pretty strict on the no food policy, which is fair. Foggy’s understands it, except, does Greg really have to have his store on the same street as the quarter hot dog stand? Like, come on. How’s a guy meant to pass up that deal? Cheap lunch and cheap records, the best of both worlds.

The bell hanging over the entrance dingles when Foggy enters and Greg gives him a nod from the counter. Foggy returns with a similar nod and then heads straight for the Rock section. If he hadn’t been in the place a million times before it would be pretty hard to locate anything. The lights are dimly lit and the air’s all trapped and hot. Makes you not really want to be in there.

The Rolling Stones plays over the speakers, loud. Foggy thinks he can just about feel the vibrations through the braised salmon coloured carpet. That’s the other good thing about Greg’s. The big flashy stores don’t play the music loud enough. The louder it is, the better it sounds. Should be the best selling point for any record. Still, the new places have their merits. Good lighting, good selection, even guaranteed selection of new releases most of the time. Smells pretty clean. Foggy’s not big on that though because he knows he always smells a little funny anyway. Being at Greg’s
makes him feel comfortable. He’s actually fond of the dimness, the records stacked to the rafters, how crowded and stifled it is. It’s homely. What’s not to like about that?

So it’s not a bad place to relax in all honesty. He’s not afraid to admit that the man himself has invited him around the counter a few times to smoke a bong on those slow days. Greg is cool like that. Gets in a real fluster when a customer does make that bell ding. People in this area are usually cool with him though. He still thinks it’s necessary to make a big deal about not getting ‘caught’ but it’s not like it’s a secret. Anyone can sniff it out. And everyone around here knows what he’s up to anyway. Despite appearances, Greg is actually a pretty smart guy. He purposely gets to know most of the people who are interested in buying, and he’s good at influencing others who aren’t so sure. That’s why Foggy reckons Greg’s good at deals. He can find out how much you can pay and how much you’re willing to pay. But in all honesty Foggy never feels like he’s getting ripped off. Must be part of Greg’s yellow teethed charm.

As for how Foggy is going to go about buying the same record twice, well, he’s thinking about how he can spin his story best to Greg. He could walk away with a half priced record or even a free one. Just depends on how Greg feels about Foggy that day. That’s why he’s got to keep Greg’s sight away from his grubby fingers and ass.

Foggy flips through the records jammed into the milk crates. They’re all records he’s seen before but there’s something about running his fingers between the creased cardboard, some old suckers fraying. Somewhere there’s got to be ‘...The Dandy Warhols Come Down’. It was only released last year but surely there’s a copy. Foggy’s trying to convince himself it’s going to be there as he digs around the piles. It’s not like he has anything better to do this sunny afternoon.

Admittedly though sometimes Foggy gets frustrated with how unorganised everything is. Sure, he’s got the genres down on general designated areas, but nothing’s alphabetised like in the chains. You could have My Bloody Valentine right next to the Dandy’s and not even all of what they’ve released. Foggy can tell Greg tries but the order gets all messed up when customers sift through the records and put them back in the wrong spot. Over a bong one slow day, Greg told Foggy that there was a time when he used to meticulously organise every record. He’s be out on the floor all day, picking up after customers, but he just got sick of it, and so did his back. Most of the time Greg knows the general area of a record, but if you want a particular one and it’s not in the genre it’s meant to be in, then good luck on your treasure hunt. Guess it’s part of the fun. If you’re really dying for a record you’ll be so ecstatic when you finally find it. And you’d have done it all on your own. That’s what people like, to discover shit for themselves. Makes them feel special.

Foggy’s lifting a pile of records to access the bottom layer when the music over the speakers reduces in volume. He glances over to the counter, spots Greg leering at a kid at the counter with a bunch of flyers under his arm.

Greg’s got his hand on the knob still, leaning forward and squinting as he tries to hear what the kid’s saying, “What? What have you got? Right, and you want to do what with them?”

Greg’s all about shouting, even when the music’s low. But come to think of it, the music’s never this quiet, so maybe Greg’s just talking normally. Foggy drops the stack of records back in the milk crate and walks up the aisle. He doesn’t want to get too close to the counter in case Greg looks at him too hard and notices traces of food, but at the moment it looks like Greg can’t take his eyes of this kid. Foggy risks it and comes up to the front, holding his hands behind his back.

He hears the stress in Greg’s voice reduce, “Alright kid, I’m all for supporting locals. You can stick one up over there.”

Greg’s nodding to the wall to the right of him, up on the corkboard. There’s not much space.
There’s always shows going on and such and Greg’s shop is always a good spot to advertise your band, if he likes your attitude.

“Where?” the kid asks.

Except he’s probably not a kid. The guy’s pretty skinny, at least he looks it in his black attire. He’s taller than Foggy, probably a bit older too. Dark brown hair long around his neck. As Foggy gets closer to the front of the shop he starts to think this kid looks a little familiar.

“Right there,” Greg points at the cork board, “just take an old one down and make room for yourself.”

Foggy watches from the periphery of the long counter as the kid hovers in front of Greg. He readjusts the flyers under his arm and then takes something out of his pocket. Foggy can’t see it at first because it’s on the other side but in a second he hears plastic clack against the front of the counter. The kid steps back as the stick extends and he drops it to the carpet. The bounce of plastic on carpet jolts Foggy’s memory.

Foggy comes forward, “Hey, are you that blind kid? From the rumours and such, when you were a kid?”

The kid flinches.

“Sorry, I shouldn’t have said that. I mean, you can’t be the only blind kid in Hell’s Kitchen, that’d be nuts.”

Greg just gives Foggy a look but it’s not like he needed it, Foggy already knew he fucked up.

The kid just stands there, frozen.

“Sorry man, I ugh-“ Foggy starts again, flustered.

He glares at Greg, alarmed.

“Franklin how about you help the boy put the flyer up,” Greg says flatly.

Foggy sighs heavily, “Don’t call me that,” but he goes over to the kid anyway.

This guy’s definitely taller than him. Foggy stands right next to him but doesn’t have the courage to look at his face, not because he’s afraid of not seeing any eyes there but there’s something else, maybe he’s just embarrassed.

The kid then lifts his hand up as if to hold onto Foggy. Before Foggy can do anything he quickly glances up at Greg, fully expecting him to be scrutinizing his every move. But Greg’s sat back in his chair, gone back to reading the Rolling Stone. With that worry alleviated, Foggy takes the kid’s hand and leads him over to the corkboard.

“What’s your name again?” Foggy asks as they stop in front of the board.

“I’ll give you a hint,” the kid says with a small smile, “it’s not that blind kid.”

Foggy cringes, “jeez, it just popped out alright.”

The kid shrugs, “it’s fine. I actually get it all the time.” The kid – or guy – slips the strap of his stick over his wrist, then pulls out a single flyer. “Where should I stick this?”
Foggy takes the flier and measures it against the size of the board. Greg’s right, there are a few out of date posters that he can rip off in order to make room for this kid’s flier. It’s bigger and shinier than just some print out, must have been printed at a store.

“I’ve got some tacks,” the kid says fishing through his satchel.

Foggy can hear the small container rattling around in there and he has this urge to just open up the bag for the kid, help him out a little, but in a second the kid’s found the container and has popped it open for Foggy. He takes a few and secures the poster on the board, nice and straight. He runs his fingers over the title, it read, ‘Brian Jonestown Massacre takes on Hell’s Kitchen with their sixth studio album, *Give It Back!*’

“Hey man, you running errands for a big band like this?” Foggy asks, still facing the poster.

The kid doesn’t say anything for a bit, so Foggy turns to him and sees his face up close for the first time.

“You’re pretty, pretty ugh,” he stammers again, words stuck in his throat and his eyes get stuck on this kid’s brown eyes – which are very much *there* – and his pink lips, and jawline speckled with the early growth of a youth’s beard. And he sees this kid hold in his breath, as if he’s waiting for what’s coming next because oh yeah, Foggy’s halfway through a sentence and he’s just called this kid pretty. Twice. Not that it’s a lie, but it’s not what he was trying to say. He’s really hoping Greg’s not paying any attention to him. “Pretty, ugh, pretty cool. I mean these guys, they’re ugh, they’re p-pretty cool and just doing something like this for them, that’s ugh, really something.”

Foggy throws his hands to his face and presses his fingers over his closed eyes, grimacing out of embarrassment.

“Yeah, I guess it is,” the kid says after an awkward moment. He pulls out another flier and presents it to Foggy, “here, have this.”

Foggy takes it dumbly, staring at the album art for something to keep his mind focused on.

The kid takes a hold of his stick and excuses him past Foggy, calling back a thank you to Greg, who merely nods.

Foggy stands glued to his spot, listening to the kid’s stick tap across the carpet. At the door of the store, the kid stops and addresses Foggy, “hope to see you at the show Franklin.”

Foggy reacts to the wrong name, “hey, it’s Foggy!”

But the kid just looks confused, frowning as he leaves. Foggy takes the poster with him as he heads back over to the rock section and reads over the details. Then he notices the stripe of colour in the centre of the poster is not just some random artistic expression, but a photo of people. And second from the left, well, after that encounter, how could Foggy not recognise that face.

He folds the poster into quarters and shove it in the pocket of his jeans. He’s about to get back into trying to find his record when he hears Greg push out of his chair. That’s when he knows he’s in shit.

“Franklin Nelson. Don’t think I can’t see that *mustard* on your pants!”

“
It’s a cinch to convince his Dad to let him go to see the Brian Jonestown Massacre play, especially since it’s at a local bar. Ed’s good like that, willing to ignore the rules in favour of experiencing a good live show. But it doesn’t really matter in the end because the owner of the shop doesn’t card anyone. Not even Matt. Oh yeah, he remembered the kid’s name. Pretty stupid of him to not connect the dots when he met the guy. Something about a story when Matthew Murdock was ten, saved an old guy from being hit by a truck. He’d always thought that the kid had had his peepers knocked out but guess that’s a tall tale.

A waitress plonks two sodas on their table and winks at Foggy as she wipes her hands on the front of her apron. Foggy gives her a shy smile, then turns back to the show. He sips earnestly on his soda, trying to reject the idea that he’s falling just a little bit in love. Just a bit. Matt has a way with his guitar, but not only that, he plays well with the rest of the band members. He’s good at reading cues, listening to the rhythm to make sure his deviation works well with the songs. Foggy can tell his Dad’s impressed too. When he witnesses a good musician he goes silent, taking in the music, admiring the skill. Foggy has to admit, he’s a little jealous. He’s never seen his Dad approve of him like he does Matt. Playing didn’t come to Foggy like it came to his Dad. He picked up a guitar when he was 13 and it just didn’t work for him. The look in his Dad’s eyes... disappointment, and his Mom’s? Relief!

That experience didn’t ever turn him off music entirely though. Sure, he hasn’t picked up an instrument in front of his family since then, he can’t very well be the son of a successful musician and be shit at music can he? It would be pretty fucking sad if he truly didn’t have the music genes in him. He just doesn’t like the attention. Good thing about his Dad’s studio is how goddamn thick the walls are. You could turn the amps all the way up or drum like a maniac and no one would be the wiser. And he’s almost positive his Dad doesn’t know he’s been practicing. And it better fucking stay that way.

That’s why he’s dreading the coming holidays. His extended family is meant to be staying at the house, and they’re going to get all up in his Dad’s grill about his music and his upcoming album and about his home studio and about playing something for the family. And not just once, not just one song. Foggy can’t stand it. Every time, every time, they ask Foggy if he can play too. And he always says no and always feels so fucking guilty about it. Like he’s betrayed his Dad by making him be manipulated like a puppet by the rest of the Nelsons. At least it makes them happy, right?

And it’s not like he feels ashamed about what he’s doing, he just doesn’t want to be conflated with his Dad’s skill, if that makes sense. If people found out Foggy was playing they’d come up with all these assumptions. That he’s learning his Dad’s songs or that he’s playing a completely opposite genre or that he’s trying to start a band or go solo or use his Father’s success to boost his own reputation. And Foggy knows that even if he tells it straight to the Nelsons, they’re still going to make up their own minds about what’s going on. It’s not like he minds following his Father’s footsteps onto becoming a famous musician, because come on, who wouldn’t want that? But it’s that part the he foresees others will see him as. That he’s famous because of his Father. He wants to get there on his own, make music on his own, provide for himself. That’s how he’ll know his skill is his own and not a replica. Except in reality he doesn’t want to do it alone. He knows he can’t make the music he wants without help, but there’s no way in hell he’s starting a family band.
After the show Foggy doesn’t get the chance to talk to Matt. He gets swept up with the other guys, helping to pack their stuff back up. In the car on the way home his Dad rolls a joint. It’s probably not a good idea but Foggy’s awake enough still to slap him over, or grab onto the wheel if he needs to. Ed drives slow through the suburbs, his hands gripping the steering wheel sporting white knuckles.

And even though Foggy’s pretty tired out too, there’s something about seeing live music that really gets him going. Gets his creative juices flowing, his mind spinning with ideas. Especially seeing the way Matt plays. He uses a lot of pedals for layering the reverb. It’s got Foggy thinking about how he could double up the bass, make it sound heavier, more ominous.

His Dad used to tell him that no artist can make good art without witnessing other artist’s work. That the whole isolating oneself in a cabin in the woods does shit all to your creativity because to make good art, to make relatable art, you have to have connections with people. As pretentious as that sounds. You’ve got to spend time with people, with friends, with strangers, in crowds out in the street and at live music. You’ve got to go out and do things and get influenced by others. That’s how Ed reckons the best hits are made. Because you can empathise with them. You feel the music and you hear the lyrics and they don’t sound forced or over produced. Everything fits together, the melodies, the words, the emotions. It all seems real, not like fantasies made up in isolation.

But some people think there’s an algorithm to music, a mathematical solution to creating a hit. As if songs could be worked out mathematically! But some artists do it. Timed drums, repetition of certain chords and riffs and the structure of lyrics, verses and bridges and choruses. Ed opposes all of that. Foggy guesses his Dad’s a bit of a music elitist in that way. That if you don’t pick up music right away then you’re no good for it.

Foggy yawns but it’s not often that his Dad goes to sleep before him, not before midnight anyway. The music from the show still ripples through him, a song caught in his head and he remembers the way Matt looked up on that cramped little stage, and the way he played, but it’s a fifty/fifty thing. Foggy can’t decide if he’s more turned on or more inspired to play. He shakes the former off, determined to make some noise. Best to do it now before the studio gets locked up, a safety and security precaution his Dad is planning to put in place to reduce Nelson mischief.

He enters the studio and shuts the door carefully behind him. It’s dark but he knows his way around the room. His Dad is pretty meticulous about where things go. Anything used must go back to its original location, keeping up with the order of the place. Which is why he gets pretty pissed off when it comes to his turn to host the family reunions. This year is going to be the first time he’s going to lock it up and the family is not going to be happy about that. Which means Foggy is going to have to keep the peace. He’s so looking forward to that.

He can’t see a thing. He imagines he’s on a stage. The crowd quiet in anticipation, and with one kick on a button, the lights spill over the stage, illuminating the instruments, the mics, and him. Ideally with other band members too. Foggy can’t imagine himself doing a solo project. Maybe because he’s too afraid that he’s incapable when he’s on his own. He shrugs that thought off as he runs his fingers across the various instruments arranged around the room. He’s careful not to apply pressure, even though with the door firmly shut, noise shouldn’t reach his Dad. Still, he feels like an intruder. He doesn’t come into Dad’s studio by himself too often. He doesn’t think Ed would mind, especially since he knows where things go, and understands how important it is to his Dad that everything goes back where they were. But he still feels weird, like he’s doing something naughty, sneaking into the equivalent of his Dad’s study to rifle through his confidential material.

That’s another reason why Ed doesn’t like having family members in their house. Last reunion at their house, one of the cousins had a great idea to find Ed’s song notes and tried to sell them. Foggy
understands why his Dad wants to lock the studio this time round, and why he protested in having it at their house in the first place. But the Nelsons always have their way, one way or another.

Foggy hovers by the guitar racks, thinking about plucking some strings, but then he spots his Dad’s bass. He takes the bass over to the couch and plonks down, the leather squeaking underneath his ass. He props the bass in his lap and plays with the four strings. Gently at first, quiet, hollow strums. He never did think the bass sounded good analogue, it’s the kind of instrument that only works plugged in.

He sets it aside and goes to find the small amp. After all, he’s not looking to make any impressive noise. There’s some sort of stigma around bass players, that idea that playing bass is easy. Four strings making a simple chord. But that’s not really the case. Bass lines aren’t all about repetition, Ed Nelson’s proved that. Krist Novoselic, Simon Jones, Debbie Googe, Andy Bell, they’ve all proved that there’s more to bass than providing that undertone.

Foggy positions the amp by the foot of the couch and plugs in the cord, messing around with playing some chords. Looking back, just a couple of years ago he didn’t really have any understanding of musical foundations. He used to listen to a lot of heavy metal with his friends, but in reflection, he doesn’t think he was very actually listening to it. It was just a sort of communal thing that you’d do, hang out and get stoned. Most of his friends were really into the music but for Foggy it was just in the background. Guess that’s why he wasn’t good at guitar back when he tried it out, the music he wanted to play didn’t make sense with how his fingers thought he should play. And as a result the sounds he made on that guitar weren’t much of anything, a confused snatch of different genres that he hadn’t pieced together in his mind properly.

He’d been with his Dad at Greg’s and this song he hadn’t heard before came on over the speakers. Leave Them All Behind by Ride. It was eight minutes long but he’d made his Dad stay in the store until it was over, even though Ed had gotten what he wanted already. Foggy had bought the record that day because after listening to that song, it had felt as if suddenly his world was in colour, like he didn’t know he was living in a black and white world before that. That’s when he started really getting into the logistics of music. Trying to identify the layers of sound, how it’s all put together.

Foggy jumps when he hears his Dad’s voice, “look at you kid,” he says with sleepy admiration.

Foggy freezes around the bass, starting at his Dad standing in the doorway. He gets this sick feeling in his stomach, like his Dad’s going to ground him or something. Not like he ever has before, but Foggy still feels like he’s a deer caught in headlights.

“Sorry, did I wake you?” Foggy apologises. He starts to put the bass back on the rack and hisses, “I shouldn’t be in here,“

Ed yawns and scratches his beard, “it’s alright kiddo. You look good with my bass. Sound good too.”

Foggy’s cheeks become hot and he fumbles with coiling the amp cord together, scuffling on the thick carpet.

“How long’ve you been working on it?” Ed asks, coming over to sit on the couch.

“I haven’t!” Foggy says defensively.

Ed cocks his head to the side, “Son, I really don’t give a shit that you’re using the studio. You can come in here whenever you want.”
Foggy hovers by the arm of the couch, one hand twisting a loose thread, “I know, I just felt like playing on my own.”

Ed scratches his bears, “well, that’s what this room’s for isn’t it? Sounds like you’re coming along nicely anyways.”

Foggy blushes again. He doesn’t have the courage to tell his Dad that he literally only started playing an hour ago. That would attract far too much attention to himself.

Ed pushes up off the couch then embraces Foggy in a warm hug. He presses a kiss on top of Foggy’s head, then holds him back, looking into his eyes. “I’m so proud of you son. I always knew music was in your blood,” He gives Foggy a beardy smile, then continues, “I’ll leave you to it. Just don’t stay up too late, we’ve got a lot of preparing to do tomorrow.”

His Dad closes the door and Foggy sighs in relief, then holds his breath when he thinks about the last thing his Dad said. The family’s arriving tomorrow afternoon. Maybe he can just stay up late and sleep through it all, then keep sleeping and only wake up when they’re all gone. That would be nice. Except now that his Dad knows he’s playing again, he might deflect propositions of family members trying to get his Dad to play and instead try and get Foggy to play. Play a song that he hasn’t even learnt yet. Original or cover. And there’s no saying no to a Nelson.

Shit. He’s practically welcomed it already.

ii. too real

“I’m gonna start a music revolution!” Anton Newcombe bellows from his room.

Matt ignores him. He lounges on the couch, guitar in his lap. He can hear Matt Hollywood in the other room kicking his feet against the wall. Bang, bang, bang. They tried to get along at the start. At least Hollywood had tried. But Anton… he’s completely uncontrollable. Wild in the truest sense. Most people excuse Anton’s behaviour for his genius. In all honesty Matt wouldn’t even be here if it wasn’t for Anton. No one would be on this tour if it wasn’t for Anton. The Brian Jonestown Massacre’s first national tour.

Matt’s never been on tour before. First time being on a recorded album too. His Dad would’ve never approved. His Dad was a boxer but didn’t ever want him fighting, didn’t believe in art either for that matter. Only thing he would’ve liked Matt doing would’ve been doing something practical and useful, like becoming a doctor or a lawyer. Lucky his Dad isn’t around anymore to see how much Matt would’ve disappointed him.

There’s not much for a blind kid to do at an Orphanage. Music really helped Matt through some hard times, seems only natural that he started playing himself. Anton had heard him playing on the street by chance. Probably thought he was some kind of saviour plucking Matt off the streets, getting him on his record, on stage with him. That’s part of Anton’s thing, part of his ego. He thinks he’s some kind of second coming. Although it’s not too much of a stretch. Anton did make Matt better. Not to mention that he can write a thousand songs in a year all on his own. Mix them all himself, produce them into album after album. He’s truly phenomenal.

“You can’t just say that to people Anton!” Hollywood screams from the other room, his voice sounding upside down, inside out.
Anton stomps down the hallway, crushing the carpet with his bare soles, “what, did I hurt your feelings?”

The banging stops and Matt hears Hollywood’s shoes scrape down the thin plaster walls as he sits up, his voice matching the direction of Earth’s gravity, ”Yeah, you hurt my feelings but you can’t go around in the world like this. Nearly – hey!”

Anton stomps back up the hall as Hollywood shouts at him, “Nearly every religion in the world damns you to hell for thinking you’re a God. You can’t excuse yourself for treating people like shit. You have no right!”

The stomping feet trails down the back of the house, then stomps all the way back down to the front room. Hollywood howls when he passes and Matt hears a light switch flick on, off, on off on off on off on off, accompanied by Anton’s cackles. A lighter ignites, gas flaming, extinguished with a metal cap. Hollywood goes back to kicking the wall and it’s clear its antagonising Anton. Anton starts screaming at Hollywood through the walls, about new shit, about the same old shit, waking the rest of the touring group up over and over again, a vicious cycle of flame and silence and repeated ignition.

Matt doesn’t even know what time it is. He doesn’t know if he should be up or asleep, everyone else is so out of sync as well. He plays his guitar anyway, quiet, gentle. Cars roar down the busy highway, curtains flap against the open window. A kid, a toddler, Matt can’t tell the age but he hears the small heartbeats drum rapid and their tiny feet pattering over the starched carpet. They drop a toy gun on the ground, the plastic trigger clicks.

A light sweater clings to his skin from cold sweat. It’s cold out but the liquor in Matt’s breath has him warmed up, the altercation in his lungs keeps him heated. He runs with Hollywood, their feet slamming the concrete, drumming like the hammer in their hearts. Eventually Hollywood slows and Matt matches his speed, listening to the guy pant as they walk through the streets of Chicago. The plan is to walk back to California. Matt supposes he may as well go with him, the band’s practically dissolved anyway.

Still, Matt’s got a right to be angry too. He’d thought this was it. The big break. And all it took was one man to destroy everything. Anton might’ve made him a better musician but that doesn’t mean he should owe him anything. The guy’s toxic as hell. Always angry about something, insistent to be rebelling against anything. Hollywood didn’t even do anything that bad and Anton still flew off the rails at him. Yeah, he might have taken a couple of smokes out without asking but Anton owes his band mates as much in smokes as they earn on the road doing gigs. Besides the fact that Anton’s basically homeless, a squatter at best. How’s he to pick fights about ownership when he doesn’t even pay rent.

It seemed like the smokes were the last straw. Anton was the type of guy who would pull you aside and tell you that you were doing it wrong when he felt like you were playing his songs wrong. He’d pick fights on stage with band members, with the film crew, even with the audience if they weren’t behaving the way he wanted them to behave. Hollywood was the only one who would stand up to him, try and curb his vehemence. And Anton was getting sick of being told what not to do. Things got worse when Anton sung Hollywood’s part on the love song Hollywood wrote. Hollywood had jumped out to the front of the stage, unplugged Anton’s mic and went back to his
own to sing *his* song. Anton had pushed Jeff Davies aside to use his mic only to scream obscenities at Hollywood. That was the show their manager had organised to impress a big record company and get a bigger and better deal. But it seemed like Anton wanted to start his music revolution by rejecting all traditional means of success, even by playing the worst show on Earth in front of record company representatives. It was like he *wanted* the band to fail.

Still, he had the audacity to pick a fight with Hollywood over a pack of cigarettes. Matt had felt Anton’s rage split the carpet and the floorboards underneath like an earthquake, magnitude 10. Anyone could’ve guessed what was coming and he’d grabbed Hollywood and ran. Didn’t have time to grab anything, didn’t have time to say farewell to Courtney and the rest of the Dandy’s. They both heard Anton howling at them from the doorstep and Matt felt Hollywood’s frame shivering in fright. Sometimes Matt wonders if Anton has it out for Hollywood. For this guy in particular. There’s no competition, and maybe that’s Hollywood’s issue. Sure, he wrote a few good hits on *Give it Back!* but he’s not on Anton’s level. Matt’s getting close. Part of why Matt felt like he had to go with Hollywood. Anton was bad enough when he was secure in his superiority.

Every so often Hollywood curses, says he’s never going back, says they’re walking to California because there’s no way he’s going back in that house with Anton Newcombe. Matt doesn’t blame him. He's honestly starting to wonder if he’d made a mistake by willingly joining the guys on this tour in the first place.

**iii. evol**

Ed didn’t stop it from happening at the start. He just sat back, arms crossed, happy that their family’s attention was on someone other than himself. Foggy played well but there’s no way his Dad couldn’t hear the frustration through the tension of the strings. Foggy was screaming internally until his Dad finally thought it was a good idea to step in.

Maximum stay was a week but it felt like a month. Cousins and aunts and uncles coming late and staying extra days and claiming absence warranted them more time. By the time Ed had finally kicked out the last squatter, straggling cousin Liam, they both heaved a sigh of relief that was far too long overdue. Hopefully they could avoid this kind of encounter for another two years, hopefully more.

The house couldn’t be described as anything but a pig sty. Considering the Nelsons are a generally annoying and loud bunch, Foggy shouldn’t have been surprised by just how intensely they partied. One night extended to another, and another, until it was endless. Music and singing and laughing and stories and screaming and fights and passing out and Foggy reckons he’s all partied out for a decade. And of course they don’t know how to clean up after themselves.

Foggy takes the bong from his Dad when it’s passed to him. Getting stoned was really the only way they could have survived such an intense ‘holiday’. Distracted them from all the stress and anxiety they would have otherwise experienced with the Nelsons wrecking up the place. And they just needed that hit of encouragement to get themselves out of the arm chairs, get to putting the house back together again. At least the studio was untouched. There was only one way in and Ed was the only one with the keys. And he’d hidden them well. Went on to pretend like the room didn’t even exist. Never went in, never mentioned it. So there was no doubt it would be fine.

Every single other room in the house had been tipped upside down. Foggy’s and Ed’s rooms somehow more wrecked than the guest rooms from raucous parties. It’s absolutely daunting.
Endless parties generating endless mess. Foggy suspects he might have to spend what’s left of his holidays helping his Dad to clean everything up. As if he wants to do that.

“Having to deal with all this mess kinda puts me off wanting to tour if I ever started a band,” Foggy says after passing the bong back to his father.

Ed laughs, “it’s not your problem if you’re touring. That’s other people’s jobs to clean up the mess you’ve made.”

“I’d still feel bad.”

Ed kicks his feet up on the now beer stained coffee table, “believe me, you get used to it. Some people are even honoured to clean up after you,” Ed glances at Foggy, then says meaningfully, “but it’s still good to put in your time to help out.”

Foggy sighs, “I get it. Just, give me another and I’ll make a start in fifteen.”

Ed holds the bong momentarily before passing it to his son, “sure you will.”

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When school starts back up again Foggy doesn’t go for the first week and a half. Ed had been trying to clean up the mess the Nelsons made and had popped a disc out in his back, had to go to the hospital for a handful of weeks. Foggy’d wanted to call up every single family member and blame them for what had happened to Ed but he knew that in the end that would only mean they would come up again. And no one wanted that. So he’d put off cleaning for a bit to take care of his Dad, take the trips up to the hospital. He hadn’t actually known school had started up again until he was on his way up to see his Dad and had seen a school bus go down the opposite side of the street. But his Dad’s going to be released soon anyway, and how’s he to know if Foggy’s going to school or not.

Foggy spends the rest of the time leading up to when the doctors approve Ed’s release just cleaning up the house. It’s disastrous at first because Jesus there’s a lot of stuff to do. The first few days Foggy attempts to do anything he takes big hits in preparation and plans to start with the rubbish on the floor but ends up just lying in it for hours. It’s a slow incline, alright?

So the house isn’t perfect when he goes to pick up his Dad on the bus but it’s passable. At least it doesn’t stink anymore. Ed won’t feel so much like he’s some kind of hippy hobo again when he comes home. And when Ed does get settled back at home Foggy resumes going to school, like he’d never missed a day. Except he had missed something. He’d missed the transfer of a new student. Normally it wouldn’t be too important to him because this transfer student is in the grade above him, except he’d heard rumours about this kid. That’s he’s in a big band, went on tour with them, always seen with a guitar. Things like that.

Oh, and that’s he’s blind.

Now it just feels like some weird spell of fate.
iv. salvation

Back to school, same old life. Without the drugs, or the music, or even the drama, time seems to move slower. He finds himself actually missing the BJM boys. At least with them there was always something going on. Some noise, singing or screaming, sometimes both. It was brutal and he loved it. Complete violence on his soul and he misses it, he honestly misses their violent music and the travelling and the lives whipping passed with the wind, car window rolled down, feeling the blood boil in their veins. Things were always going on and now he’s meant to be still. Be quiet and shut the hell up.

People are invisible to him, present in other ways, in the way wind bumps up against their bodies, the funny little noises they make to each other, conversation, the herd of heartbeats beating like an applaud. But he can’t see them and he wishes they couldn’t see him, that he was as invisible to them as they are to him. His father always wanted him to study hard, make something of himself. Become a doctor, a lawyer, do some good in the world. But the violence has always been with him since the day his father was shot. The anger to ruin those who do wrong.

Revenge felt like betrayal. His father had worked so hard to steer him away from the fighting path, and he was so young, he hadn’t done anything. But it never sat right. He still felt the itch, the burn in his knuckles, the fire in his fingertips like the fire in his eyes. He’d tried to immerse himself in his studies, but he couldn’t ever completely assimilate. He couldn’t be like the rest because he wasn’t like the rest. Then he’d found music and be breathed fire through it. Caught Anton in the hot embers, but Anton wouldn’t have stood for any of that social expectations shit. He’d had the opportunity to go big practically set up for him and he’d still rebelled against it. Denied his destiny was to get rich in any conventional way. Anton’s music was art and he knew it, Matt knew it, the world knew it. Then again, Anton’s discipline in his craft broke him and everyone around him. That’s the price Anton willingly paid for excellence.

Now, without his band, without his guitar, stagnation is imminent. He doesn’t want to study when music is filling him to the brim. A tumour in his mind, a cancer in his stomach, swelling, but with no outlet, it just gets bigger and bigger and it hurts. It hurts him and he wants it to stop, wants to let it all out. He spits on the concrete and he hears the sound loud, the slap, the fizzing into the hot ground. It’s white noise to him because the music is lost, there’s nowhere else for it to go and even out of his mouth the music is flat, unsubstantial. He’s not a singer, but he’s not a guitarist either. He’s a musician. And all this whining gets him so fucking frustrated because he doesn’t want to be pretentious like Anton Newcombe but he can’t function without his guitar. He’s blind and limbless and everything’s going to make sense when he gets his guitar back.

He’s counting on it.

Matt sits on the short brick fencing that encircles the oak trees by the oval. Students have left their balls and shoes and bags over the oval, the buses having filled up and shipped off hours ago. The leaves shiver in the afternoon breeze, cool. The sun should be setting soon. He grips his guitar strap in his hands, running his fingers over the fraying leather. It smells so freshly of splintered wood. If he’s going to take anything away from St. Agnes’ Orphanage it should be not to share stuff with anybody. He should have also learnt that on tour with the boys but he’s too trusting. He wish he could sense the evil in people, would make his life much easier.

All disaster can be drawn back to Anton Newcombe. Anton probably fucking deserted the hotel
when the band dissolved, left everyone’s belongings as property of the hotel. He’d tried calling Anton’s last known residence on the St. Agnes’ landline but he only got static every time. His landline must have been disconnected. No surprises there, Anton failed three inspections in a row. He’d tried the label next but the managers don’t want anything to do with him anymore. Anton really screwed them over. Matt almost feels bad for him. It’s going to be really hard for Anton to move on from damaging his reputation so badly. No label is going to want to sign with him again. Maybe that’s what Anton wanted in the end.

Matt had tried Hollywood last. It took him a few tries to get through to him on a comprehensive level. Hollywood’s taking it hard too. He could still do something though. Still make good music. But Matt guesses Hollywood’s music won’t ever be as good without Anton. Together they were awful on a personal level, brilliant on a musical level. Anton was Hollywood’s amp. He brought out Hollywood’s skill but whenever Anton thought Hollywood was getting too good he’d put Hollywood back in his place. Hollywood was never happy about that.

Hollywood’s information was mostly fruitless. Only made Matt crave for the light. He couldn’t see but drugs made him see colour. Fragments of memories, visual identifiers. He hears a fire truck and he knows it’s red, or he hears an airplane and he knows it’s white. Sounds get all mixed up and turned inside out so he see colours in faint swirls, nothing solid but it creates the illusion of seeing. Plus it feels good too. Feels like God has his hand on Matt’s shoulder, like everything will be alright. And Jesus does Matt need that guidance right now, needed to hear words of forgiveness from the Father himself. And if he couldn’t take drugs in the halls of the Orphanage, and he doesn’t have his guitar, what could he do? Lack of answers indicated to him that nobody gives a shit where their new kid guitarist left his only guitar.

No one’s going to help him. No one’s going to stop him.

He should have stopped himself.

His new school, though a public one, has a sufficiently stocked music room. It’s definitely a big motivator for Matt to even go back to school. He didn’t feel like a career in academics could be for him anymore when music worked. Music was for him. He’d been borrowing one of the school’s guitars. Which meant it wasn’t really his. But he always had it, so it was sort of his. This crappy old acoustic, cheap wood, plastic finishing. The sound output wasn’t great but it was his and they took it from him.

The bricks beneath him are warm in the afternoon sunlight, the brittle clay scratching at his jeans. He thinks about dropping out. He’d be good at school if he tried. He tries at music class. Before Anton it wasn’t like that. Anton had a way of wrecking everyone. Stripping their identities down until he got the raw product. His father wouldn’t stand for Matt missing school, slacking on his studies. The two moral drivers. Battlin’ Jack Murdock vs. Anton Newcombe. Assimilation vs. Rebellion. They both pushed and pushed, got out of Matt what they wanted from themselves.

“This is who you are,” Anton had screamed at him, spit flaying from his lips. “This is who you’re meant to be.”

His hands were bleeding. Anton made him play better, made him see that music was more than a business, it was more than getting big. It was an art and for a while Matt was a part of Anton’s masterpiece.

Before Matt got involved with Anton he was a different person. He was his father’s creation. He was dedicated to getting good grades. Music was just a hobby. But here, after all that mess, he’s torn about who he’s meant to be. Cue Stick coming in to tell him he should be a fighter. After what he did to those kids, maybe he should be. He’d only been coming to school for the guitar and now
he’s not going to even have that. Before, he’d thought his point was to be in the Brian Jonestown Massacre. Wasn’t his fault that Anton embarrassed the label, outraged the press.

Straight off the bat Matt could tell Anton was mad. Not that he could sense the madness in people but Anton spoke in this way like he was high all the time, like he was prophetic, like his words were divine. He used to look up to Anton. He still does, from a distance. He wasn’t really anyone of interest when he first joined the boys. They’d been desperate for a backup and Matt had just been handy. Plucked off the streets and into Anton’s pocket. From the outer ring Matt saw this dynamic between Anton and Hollywood, caught the tail end of this master teaching an amateur kind of power thing going on. And when Anton moved on to Matt… he wouldn’t dream of attribute his skill to Anton because it just so happened that when Anton started paying attention to him, he started to get good. Get really good. Anton would probably furiously take the credit for that to his grave. The change was a combination of honing his own skill and hearing others, getting influenced by the boys, getting ideas. But Anton was ready to snap and Matt had left in time before it got as bad as Anton had it with Hollywood.

And if Jonestown wasn’t his point then music wasn’t his point and then what was the point in going to school? What was the point of worrying about not returning his loaned guitar in on time. All because some Sophomore jocks thought it would be a good idea to run off with a blind kid’s guitar and smash it to smithereens. The borrowing and returns student committee aren’t going to let him borrow again. They had already issued him a final warning. He’d taken one of the guitars home for the weekend. The boys in his hall had scratched it all up, drawn crude drawings on the surface. He’d been awoken by the poignant smell of permanent market, quickly followed by the sound of scissors being dragged through the cheap wood. He’d liked that guitar. But he hadn’t done anything about it. He’d let them do it with his dragon scales prickling on his back, belly coiling magma within. Because of what those kids did, he won’t be able to have access to a musical instrument at this school again. He’s not only let it get defaced, but destroyed.

This time he’d done something about it.

Thinking about it, those kids had planned it. They’d made a crowd around him, asked him if they could each have a go. They’d passed the guitar around, strumming all the strings at once, random finger placement on the frets. Then one of them, on the outer ring, had grabbed it and fled and the crowd was so thick around Matt that he couldn’t move. Couldn’t very well punch and kick everyone around him until they backed the fuck up. He’d get suspended, or expelled. But he’d wanted to do it. He’d wanted to back flip out of there, pummel the sophomores into the dirt. He’d heard Anton and Stick either side of his ears, egging him on. His fists were swollen and red, boxer’s gloves, but he couldn’t do it out in the open. His father before him told him to make use of his brain.

He had to hunt them. He’d walked over the school grounds, sniffing them out. He’d missed his class after lunch because of it. He sifted through the influx of data until he could find the sound of air swinging into the body of the guitar, singing out. The sound of soft fingers on the strings, pulling them wrong. The dull pat of cheap wood on cotton clothes. The bells for the end of lunch rang into his sick stomach but he wouldn’t give up. With students allocated to their respective classrooms it made it easier to search.

He found them in the concert hall, their voices booming echoes in the tall ceiling. He’d heard them up on the stage, messing around, laughing. Then he’d heard the smash, the destruction. The splintering and the disintegration and their hysterics. The first slam was jarringly loud, like they were active within his body, withdrawals in the form of human agitators. Matt had gone behind the stage to the change rooms, stolen a costume. He changed his band shirt to a plain black, the cloth smelt faintly of sweat. He’d found a black cloak and ripped it up and made a mask to hide his face.
Then he’d hung by the curtains, surveying the area.

He didn’t have much time. Kids like those only had so much attention span for any given activity. Matt quickly analysed the air currents in the hall, listened to the way air moved around objects, where it stopped, where it curved. He listened to their breathing, their cackles, their heartbeats. Within seconds he identified that there were three of them. Two stood close to the destruction, the other stood afar, just on the edge of the stage. The distant boy was short, maybe 5’4”, thin, a squeaky voice. The boy closest to Matt, his back turned to him, was about 5’7”, voice brassy, perhaps a bit heavy. Matt wouldn’t be able to tell until the guy starts fighting as to whether it’s muscle or fat. And the other boy, jeering as the second lifts the guitar in the air and smashes it on the floorboards, was extremely tall, 6’2”, lanky.

The scent of his guitar under his nose, Matt emerged from the curtains. The distant one’s laughter changed to hysterical, but Matt ignored him. He went straight up behind the beefy guy, who hadn’t yet noticed his presence, and made a calculated leg sweep. He heard the guy’s toned body crash against the floorboards, as satisfying to Matt as his guitar smashing was to the sophomore. He grinned when he heard the other two gasp. The short one split, the other stagnant. With the beefy guy down he went for the deer caught in headlights. He slid easily across the floorboards, fist clenched, slinging a punch into the gut of a bully. Matt winded the boy, then reverted back to the first who was getting up. Matt kicked him in the back, spun around to the second again. He used his elbow to hook over the guy’s shoulder, brought him to the ground. Matt heard the boy’s jaw hitting the floor, a crack.

He thought about doing a speech but as he ran through his lines he figured they’d know Matthew Murdock tried to get someone to protect him. That moment of contemplation proved a weakness. The beefy guy made a move, a frightened punch to Matt’s head and Matt reeled, shocked from the hit. Matt’s head throbs and his father, Stick and Anton’s words rumble in his mind, broken lines fitted together until it’s his father granting him permission.

He found his footing quickly, located the guy from his heaving breath, his rapid heart. Matt dashed toward him, slid across the floor and swept his foot underneath the guy, flooring him again. From there he turned around, started kicking the guy. The lanky student tried to punch Matt, always the punch, but Matt evaded, used his elbow to hook the tall guy under his chin, flipped him back. The smell of splintered wood was so strong around the guy beneath Matt, so potent it was the fuel for his rage.

He heard the other guy desist, remain stationary in his protestations to stop. But Matt did not stop. The kid underneath him pleaded with him as Matt punched his sore spots. But any vocal protestations were white noise. Toneless music, non-music, non-art. All Matt could hear were the bones snapping, the blood spitting, the skin tearing and breaking and the guy’s muscles crying. His tears, crying, the body’s way of telling him to stop.

Revenge still felt like betrayal. His vengeance was selfish. Only Anton would be proud. His father scornful, disappointed. Stick questioning his selflessness, disdainful of Matt’s motivations.

He came away with his guitar strap and remnants of a man in the cuts in his knuckles.

Now he sits away from it all. To breathe, to recover. Stick had told him, always keep your wits about you. His father had told him to use his brain. Anton was sick and his desire for rebellion laid a trail of ruin Matt keeps trailing back to. He doesn’t want to be Anton. Not solely. His joints sigh in pain and he won’t be a fighter, or a lawyer. He’s too young to decide on a career anything beyond becoming a full-fledged musician. But he can’t even do that without a guitar.

A breeze flows over him and the absence of the whistle through the body of his companion makes
him weep. The tipping point. The desire for committing mass violence having subsided, he’s raw. Hurt, lonely and with no intentions to get up. He imagines he’ll just sleep here, freeze to death in the night. He loops his fingers in the metal hooks either side of the strap and, clenching his teeth, he stretches the leather strap out straight. The pop of the leather is satisfying, sends a ripple down his spine. The fighting felt good, but the sickness afterwards… all he needs to do is never stop, never hold back.

He picks up on someone trotting across the oval. The direction of the wind circling around the person’s feet indicates that they’re heading towards Matt. The scent smells familiar. Instant noodles, the fizz from two buck soda, and pot. Matt slips the strap under his legs, hidden. He smelt this before, he’d smelt it last year. Felt the guy’s heart flutter, remembered his pleasant voice.

The guy comes to a halt in front of Matt, kicks his falling apart sneakers up on the stacked bricks. Matt can hear the fibres of the sole grating off against the bricks. And he doesn’t miss for a second, that familiar fluttering heart. He notices a sense of trepidation in the guy as well, and he wonders if the guy recognises who Matt is. Hell’s Kitchen might be pretty big but a hell of a lot of people seem to know who he is. Matt Murdock. But not just Matt Murdock. Comma, the blind kid, italics, with the guitar, hyphenated. An enigma for the able bodied.

The guy doesn’t say anything. Maybe he’s forgotten their encounter last year. Instead of introducing himself the guy swivels on his feet and plonks down on the wall beside Matt. The zip of a bag slashes open fast, revealing a guitar housed inside. Matt hears the air move through it as the guy lifts it out, and he quickly wipes his eyes, remembering he’d been crying moments before.

Well I’m-a just outta school, like I’m real real cool,

Gotta shake, gotta jive,

Got the message that I gotta be a live, I’m a wild one

Ooh yay I’m a wild one

The guy pauses and taps the body of his guitar, “sorry, had this song stuck in my head,” Matt doesn’t say anything in reply so he keeps talking, “sometimes you just gotta play what’s in your mind all the way through to make it stop. Do you ever get like that?”

Matt straightens. Here’s this guy pulling out a guitar like he’s about to jam with an old mate. He starts to wonder if he identified the guy wrong. He hears the guy shrug after Matt doesn’t answer again, and continues playing the song. He laughs as he plays, and close to the end he abruptly stops.

He sighs, “Dude, I’m sorry about the guitar.”

Matt shakes his head, wanting him to continue, “No you should keep playing, it’s a fun song.”

The guy hesitates, “I meant yours… I heard they beat it up. Turned themselves in after some random beat them up. Didn’t anyone tell you?”

Matt bites his lip, touching the leather of the strap under his thigh. The sawdust on his fingers irritate his open wounds. Good to know that no speech was required.
The guy takes Matt’s silence as a negative and says, “Thought as much. I figured that’s why you were sitting out here, purposely missing the bus. Did returns revoke your license anyway? They shouldn’t have, wasn’t your fault.”

Matt feels the guy nudge him and warmth spreads through his body.

He blinks rapidly, “I haven’t told returns yet.”

“Oh man,” the guy whistles, “they’re going to hunt you down you know. Kids at public schools, they’ve got more time on their hands than they should.”

“Sounds likely. It was my last strike,” Matt admits.

The guy clicks his tongue, “Dude you’ve just gotta go in and explain it. Those jocks have already told the principal what they did, Returns will understand.”

“They might forgive me but I don’t think they’ll let me borrow again. Trouble seems to follow me.”

“Here’s hoping they’ll be lenient.”

“I’ll try playing the blind card again,” Matt jokes.

“So the rumours are true!”

Matt grins and it hurts, almost, his face sore from determination. Maybe there’s still hope for him.

He feels an elbow nudge him again and the guy says, “Hey, you know the buses don’t wait for you right? You’ve totally missed the last bus, you’ll probably have to walk to a city station.”

“Yeah I know, I could have made the last one if you didn’t make me sit through that lame song,” Matt smirks.

“Hey,” the guy hisses, “It’s a classic. A stupid pop classic that’s stuck in my head.”

Matt hesitates. He quite likes the sound of this guy, of his voice, of his banter. Making a friend at this stupid school might be good for him. Or else getting his hands on a guitar might make him feel better too.

“I’ll play you a classic,” he says finally, moving his hands to the guy’s guitar.

Briefly their hands meet and Matt does not miss the sharp intake of breath.

Then, the guy dramatically shouts, “no way am I letting a trouble maker like you touch my baby. You’ll bring me bad karma and get it wrecked up somehow.”

Matt frowns and the guy must’ve seen it because he quickly back tracks, “hey, I’m just kidding around. Let’s see what you can do.”

Matt receives the guitar and he runs his fingers over it. Music really is his drug, he feels instantly better with the instrument poised in his lap. He finds the strings and the frets and tunes it to his liking. And while he’s getting used to the feel of the thing the guy next to him kicks his feet up cross legged, whips out a bag of weed from his pocket. He starts rolling up a joint right then and there on the school grounds. Of course he has to play a song fitting the situation. One of Matt Hollywood’s favourite off Give it Back! just to make a point.
It’s like a fifties movie (fifties movie)

You know the one I mean

And you look cool (and you look so groovy)

And you look so high (looking groovy)

He finishes after the chorus and passes the guitar back to his new friend.

“Show off,” the guy mutters, licking the paper before finishing off the blunt.

The guy lights up, and after a couple of drags he offers it to Matt. Matt can smell the marijuana burn in front of him and he clutches on to the guy’s wrist to help himself to the drug.

The guy’s voice wavers when he speaks, “you still with the band?”

Matt catches his breath. So he does remember who Matt is.

“Nah, everything kind of—“

Matt doesn’t get to finish his sentence because he’s interrupted by booming honks from a car which are amplified by the empty parking lot. Matt slams his hands to his ears. Even though he’s been around loud noises a lot over the past couple of years, he can still be pretty sensitive. Especially when he’s not anticipating it.

The guy next to him sits up, swinging his guitar over his shoulder and Matt can hear the wind whoosh through the body of it.

“… Exploded…” Matt finishes quietly.

The guy doesn’t seem to hear him as he speaks over Matt, “that’s my Dad. Did you need a lift?”

Matt fidgets with the strap beside him, “I was just going to walk.”

His friend scoffs, “it’s no trouble man. You’re at the Orphanage right? That’s on the way… sort of.”

He scoops his arm around Matt’s and hoists him up to his feet. Matt quickly discards the strap behind him, hoping his friend doesn’t take notice of it. He’s taken towards the car park and finally he thinks he should ask, “what’s… what’s your name?”

The guy starts for a second, “You forgot? I told you last year.”

“Did you?” Matt frowns.

“Yeah… it’s Foggy.”

Matt takes a second. “Oh. I thought… I thought you were warning me about the weather.”
Matt briefly feels the lift of the wind behind his legs then *slam*, his feet land on the damp concrete of the next roof. He pushes up again, dashing for the next leap. The landing rockets through him, a natural thrill. It’s the closest feeling he can get to being high. The Orphanage justly won’t let him do drugs. No drugs, no alcohol, no sex, no staying out late, no more than one friend over at a time, no hoarding of possessions, no loud voices. The list goes on. More and more rules to limit deviance, and consequently creativity.

He should probably catch a bus like a normal person, except this way he’s saving money *and* getting a work out. It’s not like he has much money in the first place anyway. If he were to catch buses to get to Foggy’s every weekend he’d be broke. He has no income to support such a lifestyle. Besides, he’s far too excited to sit still on a bus for hours this time round. Foggy’s invited him to a movie night.

He’s been to Foggy’s almost every weekend since Foggy found him at school. Just to hang out in his garage, play some music together. Matt has a limited access to instruments, Foggy broadens his horizons in that respect. Playing is Matt’s relief, a release. The violence is still in him but he channels his fury through music, makes music with Foggy mirroring the fights he’s had, that he wishes he could have. At least music doesn’t make him feel sick. It doesn’t make him hate himself because he loves what he does, loves the collaboration and the output. He loves the sound of his fist on flesh but he hates the doubt. The after effects are like a bad trip that won’t cease.

Matt feels guilty that he can’t ever reciprocate the invitation because the Orphanage doesn’t accept guests beyond the foyer. He makes a point of finding Foggy at school during lunch and his free periods. The school staff had decided to suspend the sophomores for destroying school property. They’d issued a warning to the school body about the mysterious person who beat the boys up, but ultimately the teachers were with Matt on this one. It’s pretty low brow to pick on a disabled kid. Matt had been let off the hook which means he’s permitted to use the music room equipment on the school grounds still. It’s the main reason why he’s still even going to school. That and Foggy’s there.

It’s refreshing having someone to hang out with at school, someone to look forward to being around. He supposes at his old school he studied too hard to make friends. That all changed when he chanced upon an encounter with Matt Hollywood down the street who’d shoved a flyer for their show in his hand. Who would’ve guessed a year later he’d be in that exact same position, promoting a Brian Jonestown Massacre album he’d actually worked on. The world’s cyclical like that.

Matt can sense the edge of the city drop off, the heights of skyscrapers beginning their descent into suburbia. Traffic congestion begins to break off and spill down the thin streets branching out over the suburbs. Matt makes his own descent to the ground. The noise of the city, fuming freight trucks and honking taxis and the screech of brakes from the subway fold into a hurricane, a localised point. Now it’s just background noise to Matt’s journey.

The Nelson’s live on the exact opposite side of the city to him so it takes a good couple of hours to get from the Orphanage to Foggy’s. It would probably take longer with public transport when it comes down to it. He would have to catch a handful of buses, wait for each one’s arrival and departure, hoping beyond hope that one late arrival would not overlap with another route’s departure. So he doesn’t regret taking a creative way to get to Foggy’s house.
He’s on the last stretch now, walking down the streets of the outer suburbs. His leg muscles whine and he flicks out his stick, taps his way down the pavement. He doesn’t usually need it but he’s worn himself out pretty well this morning, and sometimes he’s lazy. Two intersections left to cross, take a right down the row of houses. He runs his spare hand across the fencing of the suburban houses until the pickets drop away. Foggy’s house is 70’s fluffy architecture, simple minimalist style, no embellishments that he knows of anyway. A two bedroom smack in the centre of a plot surrounded by overgrowth. Foggy tells him this kind of set up would never be allowed normally, for the sake of street’s presentation, but the neighbourhood kind of gives them a pass because Edward Nelson’s a famous musician.

A garage extension sits adjacent to the small house. It was probably installed in this decade, the construction still smells new to him. A long driveway stretches out to the road, dicing through the overgrowth. Matt steps onto the driveway but even before then he could feel the slight bass vibrations ripple through the cement. Now, walking up the driveway, the vibrations tickle his boots, the unkempt grass quivering with the evening breeze. Foggy has been taking to playing the bass low strung, hard and heavy like it’s not even a bass at all. The closer Matt gets to the garage door the more he feels the anger, the aggression. He tentatively feels for the handle and lifts the garage door high enough to slip under, then shoves it down behind him.

Foggy jolts behind him, twanging a misplaced note.

“Hey,” Matt says softly.

“Hey,” Foggy replies, his voice cracking.

Matt listens to the click as Foggy unplugs the bass, shivering at the sound of the zip line exit, a quick loop out from electronic to acoustic. He taps his way to the long couch and when he feels the fraying fabric beneath his fingers he spins, collapsing on the worn out cushions. He folds back his stick and stretches out his legs across the cement floor, completely splayed out.

“Dude you look like you’ve just run a marathon,” Foggy says as he puts away his bass.

Matt can hear the shuffle and coil of cords and he tries to catch his breath. Cold sweat drips from his forehead and he wipes it off with the back of his hand, The sweat coats his hot skin, a stagnant sheen. Once Foggy’s done packing away his bass he shuffles over to the couch, taking a seat beside his friend.

“Did you have a hard time with the buses? You should’ve called,” Foggy says, concerned.

Matt winces. He probably should’ve taken it easy getting here. He doesn’t like it when people worry about him. “I used my phone privilege up … made too many international calls … to get my guitar back.”

Foggy clicks his tongue, “such a rebel. Still, next weekend I’ll get Dad to drive you.”

“Who’s to say I want to hang out with you next weekend huh?”

“Got something better to do?” Foggy snorts.

“No,” Matt admits, laughing.

“Hey, I’m not that bad am I?”

Matt grins, shaking his head. He draws his feet up and sits straight, folding his hands between his thighs. He’s never been to a movie night before, let alone been invited to one. He’s not sure what
he’s meant to do.

“Hey, did you want to uh, use our shower? You look hot, I mean, a bit red in the face you know,” Foggy stammers.

Matt lowers his head, listening to Foggy’s quavering voice, his shivering heart. Honestly he appreciates the offer because the cold sweat pearling on his skin is making him feel grimy, but he doesn’t really like going inside the house much. Not because the Nelson’s aren’t utterly welcoming but because it’s unhealthy for him. He can smell the asbestos from here in the garage and getting any closer to those fluffy walls makes him feel sick. He’d put up with one day in Ed’s studio which was only survivable because the walls were insulated with modern sound blocking materials. But he definitely didn’t have the heart to tell the Nelson’s that their house made him ill.

“I’ll just splash some water on my face. There’s… a sink in here right? I think I’ve heard you use it before.”

Foggy’s voice is light, laced with tension, “yeah, yeah it’s over here.”

He gets up and Matt feels for Foggy, finds his elbow and hooks a hand around his bicep. Foggy leads him around the back of the couch to the back corner of the garage. From previous visits he knows there’s an arrangement of appliances formulating a kitchenette. He’s heard signs of a sink, a kettle, a bar fridge, and a microwave. Foggy takes him to the counter. Matt feels Foggy’s hand over his as Foggy directs Matt’s palm to the tap. His friend leans back on the counter as Matt twists on the water, mixes it until its warm. He cups his hand beneath the stream of water and splashes some on his face, letting droplets dribble down his neck, underneath his shirt.

He tugs at the damp collar line and asks, “Is it alright if I take this off?”

He hears Foggy shrug, quickly followed by an explanation, “I just shrugged. Which means… I don’t care, I guess.”

Matt nods, then shrugs off his shirt. It peels off his skin and he folds it in two when it’s off.

“I’ll chuck it in the wash,” Foggy says as he lifts it from Matt’s hold.

Matt hears light breathes from Foggy as he leaves the garage for the main house. Matt leaves his hands on the cool metal of the sink, Foggy’s breath a ghost from history. He likes the sound of it. He was too young to understand sexual attraction when he was young, when he could see. Now, there are other ways for him to find himself attracted to others. Without sight he relies on sound and touch and charisma really helps in making him feel connected with someone. Foggy’s got that, he’s got a nice scratchy voice, and those quiet breathes and those hitches and gulps Foggy makes when he’s around Matt. And the fact that Matt could feel Foggy’s heartbeats through the plywood counter, feel the way it changed when Matt peeled his shirt off.

He runs his fingers over the counter, trying to grasp the remnants of the past, of the heartbeats drumming for him, but they’re history now, as still and costly as the cheap wood of the counter. He has to remind himself of his commitment to Catholicism. Yet, from having girlfriends, he knows what it’s like when someone’s into him.

He needs to back down.

Stop showing off.
Foggy’s gone for a good ten minutes. Matt spend the first few minutes running his fingers over the various objects in this corner of the room. Once he has the kitchenette mapped out he points his knuckles out to catch any edges on his way back to the couch. He takes a seat, sinking into the cushions. The material cladding the couch is old suede which in parts gathers into clumps, in others rubbed bare revealing the smooth cotton underneath. Matt slouches against the back and he feels a draft pull in behind his lower back from the garage door launching open. Chains and gears grate over untreated metal and the noise is reversed when the door is pulled shut.

“Matt, good to see ya buddy,” he hears Ed bellow, plastic rustling around his legs.

Matt stands up, listening to Ed move towards him. He’s embraced in a warm hug, plastic bags swinging through the air, the contents bumping against Matt’s waist. Ed pulls back and plonks the bags on the concrete floor.

Amidst rustling through the bags, Ed asks, “Where’s Foggy?”

Matt sits down again, fingers digging into the fabric of the couch, “He went to wash my shirt.”

Ed pauses, a momentary change in his heartbeat which quickly normalises, “It’s hot out huh. You make it here alright all on your own?”

Matt cringes, but it’s better people don’t know the truth. “I took a wrong turn at the last bus stop,” then says sheepishly, “Don’t tell Foggy.”

Ed laughs, “No shame in making mistakes.”

Matt smiles grimly, sitting back and folding his hands in his lap. Ed continues rifling through the plastic bags and just above the man-made thunderstorm of noise, Matt picks up on canvas shoes crunching grass. Moments later Foggy bursts into the garage from the side door, the fly screen banging against the hinges.

“Dad, you’re *late,*” he shouts, his voice echoing against the wooden walls.

Matt catches a whiff of weed about Foggy that wasn’t there before. An extra layer, he should say. Foggy always smells like weed.

Ed eases up to a standing position, his bones creaking in his back, “good to see you too, son.”

They embrace, then get on with business. Foggy sets up the TV, fiddling with cords and channels and adjusting volume, white noise sizzling and cords zipping and audio jacks popping. Ed pulls out item after item from his plastic bags, ripping open something containing chocolate, another nuts, something overpoweringly salty. Each opening of a bag exuding a quick burst of scent. And over all of this their banter. Ed accuses Foggy of being a bad host, leaving his friend alone, sans entertainment. Foggy accuses his Dad of buying too much, of taking too long, of making them miss the first half of *The Fugitive Kind.* And when Matt asks them if he can do anything, if he should’ve brought anything along, they’re as hospitable as can be, gracious and humble, calming his nerves.

Except when they stop fiddling with electronics and food and start to sit down for the movie marathon, Foggy refuses to sit next to Matt.

He’s fine with it, mostly, he just doesn’t get the reasoning behind forcing Ed to sit between them.
Technically he can still ‘watch’ the movies through Ed but he was actually looking forward to sharing the experience with Foggy. And he’s not so inclined to bother Ed with all the questions he has to do with what’s going on, who said that, and so on. Especially with the older movies it’s harder for him to distinguish who is talking. The noise comes out all flat and yet swollen at the same time, that sort of old timey bubble in the sound recording that disappeared with advancing filming technology. And without a friendly avenue to raise his questions to, without Foggy comfortably by his side, he finds he’s enjoying the movie less and less. Like he’s hearing it all as background noise, indistinguishable chatter, impossible to immerse himself in.

This detachment extends beyond the movie itself to feeling entirely removed from his friend due to the physical barrier of Ed between them. He’d like to listen to the way Foggy breathes, to the way his heart beats, to the way he taps his fingers or jiggles his thighs excitedly, or the way he squirms out of embarrassment or disgust, and the way he melts for romance. If it wasn’t for Ed between them, he could ‘watch’ the movie in this way through Foggy, rather than experiencing it all second hand, a moment’s too late. Instead he hears Foggy like the movie, a record of sound devoid of emotion, except for the emotional cues set by the tone of the soundtrack. Foggy’s wolf whistles and coos and horrified gasps tell him how he should react, but it’s better when he’s felt the anticipation in someone he likes the sound of, makes it seem real.

Foggy eats and eats and eats and candy bags rustle and popcorn crunches and the Nelson’s laugh in time and snort and scoff out of time. Matt finds himself becoming so distracted trying to read Foggy beyond Ed that he’s entirely given up trying to follow what’s going on in the movie. The soundtrack turns eerily quiet, forcing Matt’s attention. He can’t hear Foggy’s heart beat because it’s overpowered by Ed’s loud old heart but the sudden quiet, the sudden build of intensity makes Matt shiver.

He hears a sound like an ignition, like flame meeting gas, followed by a steady whooshing noise. The music gears into more upbeat rock and a shared gasp escapes the Nelsons. Matt wonders how many films he’s going to have to sit through before it’s appropriate to fall asleep. He could always put his glasses on and close his eyes. No one would be the wiser.

The broadcaster announces the next Brando film in the line-up before running a series of ads. Matt shivers again and hugs his waist, sinking further into the couch. He’s just got to be casual about fishing his glasses out of his jeans pocket, like they help him concentrate or some bullshit.

“Foggy go get your mate a sweater, just looking at him suffer there’s making me cold,” Ed barks. He gives Foggy a nudge and Matt feels the movement through the frame of the couch.

“Alright, alright,” Foggy complains, pushing off the couch and trotting out of the garage.

Within the brief moment Foggy passes him, Matt picks up on a slight quaver in his heart beat which is lost with the slam of the fly screen door.

Ed sighs, “Foggy’s a funny kid.”

Then silence, and Matt thinks maybe he should say something but Ed continues on, his first statement a prequel to a larger anecdote.

“He really likes having you as a friend, you know. You’ve been real good for him. Don’t know if he’s told you but he wasn’t big into playing until he saw your show last year.”

“Wow, I… had no idea,” Matt replies.

After the initial surprise and flattery wears off he bites his lip. This could become a problem. He
doesn’t want another hero worship thing going on like Hollywood had with Anton. He’ll have to be careful from now on.

Ed continues, “Guess I should be offended that I wasn’t enough of an influence on him to get that business going,” he laughs at himself, “I was too hard on him at the start. Expected too much of him.”

“Music has to find you,” Matt says quietly, thinking of the way Foggy plays. Does music find Foggy? Or does it find Foggy through Matt?

Ed pauses, contemplating, then his voice softens, “You’re exactly right kiddo. I was trying to force it out of him. It was only because I knew he could be good, he could be better than me even,” then adds, “hey, I saw that look. He will be better than me and I’ll be glad of it because he’s back on track. For a while there he was lost, I was real worried he was going to come home one day and tell me he wanted to be a banker or a bus driver or something. Not that those jobs ain’t important. This kid’s got creativity in his blood and it shouldn’t go to waste.”

He breathes out heavily, “basically I wanna say thanks to you Matt, for putting my son back on the right path.”

vi. white palms

Foggy doesn’t dare sit right next to Matt because Jesus, the kid’s what, sixteen, seventeen, and he has such a set of abs. He should be so fucking thankful Matt can’t see him staring.

His Dad makes him get Matt a sweater and he can’t decide if he’s glad the kid’s going to cover himself up or not. He’s never been so confused about his sexuality before in his life. It’s probably just admiration to be honest. Foggy gets his build straight from his Dad and no matter how much weed he tries to smoke, he can’t seem to lose the weight. He’s not bothered by it, not really, only seeing the way Matt’s built gets him thinking how he could look. Then again, the only thing he likes about mass production is the food that comes out of it. He can’t get enough of potato chips and salted caramel popcorn and chocolate and pretty much all snack foods, alright? So he could look like Matt or he could eat delicious food forever until he dies with rotten teeth. What does it matter when your best friend is blind?

Except it matters when his Dad says he’s gotta go to bed. Because that means that there’ll be nothing between them. Nothing to stop Matt from sidling up next to him, hooking his arm through Foggy’s like he does and whispering things in Foggy’s ear like he does, even when no one’s around. And just because this kind of behaviour isn’t exactly normal, he’s not going to be found pushing the guy away. There’s only one way he’s going to be able to get through this.

Foggy’s vision crumbles like it’s caught in a loop, spooled film rotating a perpetual water stain. He takes a hit and the small flame flickers in the air as he brings it away from the fuel. He breathes out after A Streetcar Named Desire’s credits start to roll and it burns as if he’s been holding it in since the opening.

“What’s next?” Matt drawls.

Foggy sees the words rise off the TV in front of him, dangling before him in big black letters. He takes another hit, a short one, the gurgling liquid sounds a million decibels louder than he expects.
It doesn’t startle him though, it should startle him. Instead the sound breaks up in front of his eyes, black lines and circles dicing smaller and smaller, like he can see the sound, see Matt’s words, physical subtitles. He wonders if the black blobs taste like liquorice.

Some time later, Matt asks, “you going to let me have some?”

Foggy clutches the bong and lighter in his shaking hands. His ass is sore from sitting on the concrete but he had no choice but to move to the floor. Matt lounges on the couch above him, legs outstretched, feet dangling off the arm from his knees. He’s holding a hand out towards Foggy but all he can do is stare. Foggy’s sweater hangs loose on Matt’s frame, the neck hole caught over one shoulder. Foggy leans his head back on the seat of the couch. He gazes up at Matt’s legs. His face is so close to the blue jeans that Foggy supposes he could be looking at the morning sky. Shades of blue and white threaded together, ripped sections forming shredded clouds.

Matt withdraws his hand from the air and instead reaches behind the couch to grab his guitar. A Gibson 335. Some shit movie starts to show after the marathon’s ended, some early morning nonsense. Matt sits up in the couch, props his feet on the arm of the couch forming an upside down V over Foggy’s head. He starts playing something, nothing Foggy’s ever heard before.

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Jesus, when you coming back,
Jesus never coming back,
Jesus won’t take me back,
Jesus never coming home
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“Jesus seems to steal your soul?” Foggy questions.

Matt laughs, keeps playing.

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He’ll never let me go
Jesus gonna make me pay
Never should have run away
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“I want to go home,” Matt sings.

“I is that true?” Foggy asks.

Matt swings his legs over Foggy and sits up straight, guitar in his lap, silent, “pardon?”

Foggy stares at the ceiling, the wooden beams golden in the light from the sunrise peering through the windows.

“This could be your home.”
Matt doesn’t say anything, doesn’t make a noise, doesn’t budge. Then, after a long minute, “you’re high.”

Foggy shrugs, “I mean it.”

He glances over at Matt, shoulders hunched over his guitar and there’s a flash of a frown on his face, a purse of his lips.

“The song, I was just… making things up.”

Foggy nods, tries to keep it on topic, “They kick you out when you’re eighteen right?”

Matt grimaces, “If I don’t get kicked out before then. Getting high is definitely going to help.”

“It’s just weed!” Foggy throws his arms up in the air, “completely harmless.”

“Tell that to my review officer.”

Foggy twists in his spot, stretching an arm across the couch to tap Matt on his thigh, “that’s what I’m saying Matt. If you move in with us, you wouldn’t have to deal with their rules and shit.”

“Maybe rules are in place for a reason,” Matt says quietly.

Foggy gets it. It’s Matt’s polite way of saying no. He makes a face and goes for the bong, lights it up again. They sit in silence for a while, aside from the crackling drivel coming from the TV. At one point Matt goes back to playing and Foggy lets Matt’s music wash over him. He hangs his head back on the couch again, looking up at all the cobwebs bunched around the beams. It would work, he imagines. If he cleaned up his room and moved some shit around he could probably fit another single bed in there. Or set one up in the garage. It would probably be better for Matt that way. He’d get his own room, sort of, and be able to come into the main house whenever he likes. There’d be no curfew for Matt, no ban against drugs, no rules against noise levels or who or how many friends you have over. He could help Matt have a somewhat normal life, is it that bad that he wants nice things for his friend?

“What’s your favourite?” Matt asks out of the blue.

His words seem hollow and it takes Foggy a couple of minutes to realize the question came from Matt and not the TV.

“Favourite what?”

Matt stops playing. “Favourite Brando movie.”

Foggy sets the bong on the floor again. “Easy, The Wild One.”

“Was… that one that we watched?”

Foggy gasps, “Yeah!”

Matt scratches the back of his neck, “I think I fell asleep during some of or… a lot of the movies.”

“Dude you missed out on the best one,” he gets to his feet, “I’ve got the video inside. You have to see it.”

The room tilts like he’s on a ship and he sways toward the screen door. He sees the grass blades through the tiny holes in the wire door, dipped in the morning sun. His body yearns for sleep but
his mind is still buzzing, still driving on the high road. He goes straight to the lounge, plucks the video out of his Dad’s collection and comes back to the garage. The door’s stuck open, caught on dew covered grass. He’s transfixed by the view of Matt draped across the couch, elegant yet messy, dishevelled hair and frumpy clothing and so much for the drugs calming Foggy down.

Foggy hadn’t made himself known, but somehow Matt knew he was there.

“Hey Foggy, what you said earlier, about staying?” Matt starts.

His heart beats in his throat, hot and suffocating and Matt had pretty much already said no, Foggy wishes he would just drop it.

“I’ll think about it.”

vii. love burns

Foggy munches on his hot dog and Matt hears the contents of it dripping right off the bun and onto Foggy’s hand. In between a mouthful, Foggy holds the hot dog toward Matt, “You want a bite?”

Matt shakes his head, his right hand clinging to Foggy’s left arm.

“You want to get me banned too?”

Foggy shrugs, “Greg doesn’t really mean it. I’m his best customer.”

Still, Foggy devours the remainder of the hot dog, wiping his saucy fingers on the back of his jeans before leading Matt into the record store. The bell over the door dings announcing their arrival. Matt anticipates a reaction from Greg but he only registers slight annoyance. Foggy’s right, he is Greg’s best customer. He practically empties his pockets at this place buying records every day after school. Matt finds it astounding that Foggy hasn’t run out of music he wants to buy.

The Rolling Stones play over the speakers, loud. It vibrates through the walls, disrupts the carpet. Foggy takes them over to a stack of records. It’s a different spot every time. Greg stocks mostly rock, a bit of alternative stuff, a bit of pop for the mainstream sales too. It’s a different spot every time because there’s no order in this place. If Foggy’s after a particular record, or just there to browse, there’s no point starting where he left off because a hurricane has been through the place fifty times before.

Foggy moves Matt’s hand off him and places it on a pile of records.

“Tell me if you find anything interesting,” Foggy instructs.

Matt holds the top record in his hands, the treated cardboard slippery in his fingers. Foggy rifles through record after record, easily scanning through the titles for a find. Matt runs his fingertips over the front, or the back, he’s not sure which it is yet. He locates the raised title under his thumb, front facing him then. The Verve. Matt puts the record down and listens to the music through the walls. Foggy says Greg likes to think of himself as an artist. The shop is tiled with the square cardboard cases of records, thousands of covers held against the wall with flimsy tape. Matt has to wonder how the bass from the speakers don’t knock them all off.

“I can smell the hot dog from here!” Greg barks from the counter.
Matt senses Foggy lifting his arms, “I got nothing on me!” his friend retorts.

Greg starts ragging on about something but to Foggy it would be inaudible over the loud music. Foggy’s not missing out on much, just Greg slandering his name. Fans rotate around the room, a weak attempt to keep the plastic from melting in the heat. It’s Spring but it’s early heat, the dust and musky cobwebs still thick over the fan blades. Matt can smell the sweat patches on Greg’s t-shirt, on Foggy’s too for that matter. The scent of burning paper wafts with the fans, the source behind the counter, accompanied with warming cardboard and of the bending of plastic. It does always smell bad in this place. The dirt and old food remnants coagulate on the well-trodden carpet. The slight hint of pot that matches the strain in Foggy’s pocket.

Greg flips up the counter and marches toward them. Matt nudges Foggy, noting Foggy’s heart begin to race as he instinctively wipes his hands on the back of his jeans.

Greg stabs his finger in the air as he grumbles, “I told you, no eating!”

Foggy holds up his hands and Matt can smell the sauce on his jeans and on his fingers. Greg’s got to be able to see it too.

“I’m not!”

Greg clenches his fist, his fingernails digging into his skin. “You’re a loyal customer Franklin but if you come in again with food in your gob I’ll ban you and your Pa, alright?”

Foggy nods vigorously, “I get it dude, but I’m telling you I’m not eating.”

Greg’s voice goes shrill, “but you have! I can smell it!” he pauses, then softens, “just wash your hands Franklin. Or get a fucking napkin, Jesus.”

“Yes, captain!”

Greg scowls, then marches back to the counter, fists clenched all the while. The counter bangs shut and the air in the cushion of Greg’s little stool puffs out as he plonks himself back down.

“Told ya it’d be all good.” Foggy whispers to Matt.

“You’re going to give him an aneurysm one day Foggy,” Matt tells him.

“I’m keeping him young!” Foggy laughs.

Matt shakes his head. He pushes the top record aside and runs his hands over the raised print on the records underneath, reading the titles of each. Truthfully he doesn’t own many records. Doesn’t even have a record player, he just likes to have them. Plus they’re pretty easy to store under his mattress. He’s not meant to have many belongings. Just clothes in his trunk. The rec room is meant to have all the things a kid at an orphanage is meant to need. Books, toys, stuff like that. Except most of the stuff the orphanage sources is second hand and shoddy, which makes sharing a pretty big deal. Everyone’s going to want a go at the new toy which is why Matt has to keep them hidden.

In truth he’s not meant to even own the records. He’s not meant to have any other belongings except his clothes. His lost guitar was a donation from his old school. The orphanage was actually pretty happy when the nuns found out he’d lost it. Created an unfair advantage for the rest of the kids. Which is true, he guesses. Still, there’s not enough braille books in the abysmal library to keep him entertained. Of course he’s going to go out and find his entertainment. Still, there’s something comforting about sleeping on top of the music he likes, even if he can’t listen to them until he takes them to Foggy’s. Before he falls asleep, it’s like the microscopic fibres between the
cardboard slips and the shellac compound of the records is enough to emit sound, to make the music play as he sleeps. He can dream right? Although sleeping on top of them is probably not recommended. Without a board between the mattress and the records he’d probably snap them in two in his sleep. He’s pretty lucky so far, nothing’s cracked as far as he’s aware. And he hears the songs in his dreams well enough.

The lack of a record player is a pretty big deal though. The orphanage has a public player in the rec room but they’ve either always got child friendly type pop songs going on or religious gospels. That stuff’s alright but it’s none of the psychedelic shoe gazer stuff that he actually likes. And again, it’s not a good idea to acquire a personal player since it won’t last in an environment where sharing is more like stealing and destroying when what you’ve got is better than theirs. He guesses that’s what it’s like in the real world anyway. Exhibit A: his smashed rental guitar.

That would be one good thing about living with the Nelsons. Not the only thing, but one that Matt’s been thinking about. They’re big into music, and big into sharing, the proper way. They practically thrust records and clothes and food and free rides at him, generosity he’s still unsure about how to repay. Part of the reason why he’s still hesitant to agree to Foggy’s request to move in. It’s such a big ask, Matt doesn’t want to intrude. And on the downside he doesn’t want to live inside the house. The garage is fine, but he’s not sure on the details Foggy had in mind.

Still, the Nelsons have influenced him so much. Came into his life at the right time. He’s got The Call’s first album under his mattress too. He’s only heard part of it once in the main house. The knob turned up to maximum. Apparently the neighbours are used to it. Ed had let him listen to a few songs, then changed it to Nirvana. Ed had told Matt he could keep the record, reminded him too much of starting out raw.

“Back then, we were just staring out. We had a solid sound, sure, but we didn’t know what we were doing. The record companies at the time were looking to acquire, you know, it was a real business back then, not so much about talent. What they had to do was sift through all those kids who could play a chord and find the award winners,” Ed had told him before flicking the lighter on his billy, “We were over in London at the time trying to secure a record deal. They got us in a studio and really worked hard to mix what music we had, but in the end what was intended to be a compassionate album turn out to be baseline anger. It worked well for the commercial side of things but it wasn’t the sound we wanted. Not what we set out to make.”

Ed had sat back in his arm chair, kicking his feet up on the coffee table. By that point Matt was feeling dizzy from the asbestos and the way Ed breathed in another gust of drugs almost made him want to puke.

“It’s good,” Ed spluttered after swallowing his hit, “good music. Don’t regret making the thing. Just makes me uneasy thinking about it. Different time of my life. Some things never change though,” he laughed as he raised the billy, then added, “the drug lifestyle I mean.”

Matt had thought about taking Ed’s first record to the rec room and snapping it into the little record player, just so he could hear the rest of it. But he’d have to play it quiet and that’s not how you listen to that type of music. Not how you listen to any type of music.

One day he’ll listen to it in its completion.

“Foggy,” Matt begins, “I think we should make music together.”

He listens to Foggy hesitate.

“What, like a band?”
“Like a band,” Matt repeats, smiling warmly.

Foggy pauses again, his heart fast.

Quietly he says, “I thought you’d never ask,” then launches, “but we’re going to do this right. We’re not going to be one of those bands that releases EP after EP, we’re going to make an album as our first release.”

“Won’t be too hard.”

“Exactly!” Foggy cries excitedly, “we’ve already practically been writing songs.”

“More like one really long song,” Matt grins.

“Yeah we gotta refine them still, polish them up. Matt, we’re going to do this! Oh man, let’s get out of here as soon as I find my record.”

The bell above the door dings. The door whooshes open and shuts and Matt listens to the new customer saunter down the carpeted aisles. A sense of disquiet overcomes Foggy, a low grumble, gritted teeth in annoyance.

Foggy hunches close to Matt, whispers, “she just… she just walked right in with a slurpee – did you see – Greg just looked at her right in the eye and didn’t say a thing what the fuck!”

Matt focuses on the girl, hears her slurping on her drink as she flips through the collection of CDs.

Foggy clicks his tongue, “oh and straight for the CD section. Typical. Bet she has a discman.”

Matt observes Foggy scrutinising the girl and notices a quiver in his heartbeat, a flutter in his muscles, a tightening of tension.

“Fuck, she just fucking waved at us,” Foggy exclaims in a hushed whisper.

Foggy tugs Matt down to a crouching position, if hiding behind the stacks of records will make them invisible from a target who has already spotted them. Foggy shushes him except Matt can’t stop laughing.

“Dude what are you doing, you’re totally blowing our cover!”

“Why are we-” Matt strains to hold in his laughter, “-Why are we hiding?”

“I don’t know, why are you hiding?”

Matt shakes his head, grinning, “You made me!”

Foggy gets serious again, “No but listen. I keep seeing this girl everywhere. At school, at the mall…”

Matt listens to the clacking of thick plastic. She hums to the song over the speakers, happily out of tune.

“You go to school?”

Foggy nudges Matt playfully, “Sometimes I do. But every time I do, she’s there. And she looks at me funny.”
“Maybe she likes you?” Matt offers.

The girl moves away from the CDs, he can hear her bouncing across the carpet.

Foggy takes a sharp inhale of breath, whispering earnestly, “no dude. I think she’s stalking me. I see her all the time. I’m honestly worried for my life.”

“BOO!” Marci shouts as she makes a leap toward Foggy.

She lands beside Foggy, her feet stomping on the carpet. Foggy springs up in fright, banging his shoulder on the racks. The precariously arranged records topple onto the ground around him and Matt. Flustered, Foggy tries to catch his balance but ends up stepping on a bunch of records. Matt hears a God awful snap piercing above the music over the speakers, alerting Greg to the commotion. Matt gets to his feet as Greg bounds over the counter and dashes down the aisle, yelling at the top of his lungs. Somewhere in the foreground the girl starts giggling uncontrollably and Foggy starts freaking out and Matt just slips his hand around Foggy’s arm and tugs him the hell out of there.

The carpet beneath his feet changes abruptly to asphalt as he runs with Foggy out of the record shop. The air around him rushes passed him, a slip stream of passing noise caught up in the trappings of oxygen. Foggy quickly becomes a dead weight, unfit as Matt Hollywood.

He hears Foggy pant, “Stop, stop he’s not chasing us anymore.”

Matt comes to a halt and pats his hands out for a surface, a wall, a sign post, anything that’s going to support him. He finds cool glass, his clammy hands stick to it and he presses his weight against the windows of some store. He tosses up his throbbing feet, distributing the pressure evenly as the inflammation dies down. Foggy sits in a heap square in the middle of the pathway, panting heavily. Matt wonders how he looks, if Foggy’s hair is a mess, if his face is bright red, if his eyes are wide. He has some inclination from the way Foggy’s heart beats rapid, loud with his breathing, but it’s calming with the stillness. He listens to Foggy coming back to Earth, except the panicking doesn’t stop fluttering within him, anticipation of words that won’t come out.

Matt’s head pounds, his throat parched, and why is it that this brief run takes it all out of him? Is it because he’s not alone? He slips down the glass and joins Foggy on the pavement, hearing his jeans fraying over the rough surface. He reaches for Foggy, finds his knee, then his arm, then his hand, and holds onto it until Foggy finally stills his shaking body.

Matt had known she was approaching. He had thought it would be funny. It kind of was, looking back. But he couldn’t have calculated just how badly the situation could escalate to. Couldn’t have estimated just how fast Foggy’s heart raced, how fast their legs ran, how far Foggy had fallen for him. But with Foggy back to his senses he could read how Foggy fought to push Matt away, keep him at a distance. Foggy moves Matt’s hand to his upper arm, the acceptable position. Then he clutches his stomach.

“I regret eating that hot dog so much right now,” he groans.
times in front of less. And it’s not like he can see people judging him, it’s that fact that he can feel and hear them. And Foggy’s like an amplifier of it all. Foggy receives all this social information and his trepidation makes it doubly worse for Matt.

“I need some,” Matt states, clenching his jaw.

“Woah there kiddo, starting to sound like an addict,” Ed says, then adds, “Doesn’t look like your mate Mahoney’s gonna show up. Did you tell him where Josie’s was Foggy?”

Foggy sighs exasperatedly, “Yes, of course I did Dad. Nothing much I can do if he doesn’t want to rock up. We’re just going to have to play unplugged. Which is fine! Right Matt?”

Matt nods, but his jaws are clenched and he doesn’t feel them relax until Foggy pulls out the snap lock bag from his pocket.

“Just need something to calm our nerves,” Foggy explains.

Ed grumbles but Matt knows he’s going to be getting in on it in the end anyway. Foggy holds the bag between his thighs and licks his fingers. Matt can hear his fingers shaking. Foggy needs the drug as much as he does. His band mate rolls a bad one, all shovelled in wrong and flaky and flimsy. Foggy clicks the lighter but by the time the flame has lit the joint falls out of the roll.

Ed snatches it from Foggy’s hands and mends it. As he’s rolling it up again he asks about the music playing in the bar, “what’s this? It’s kind of psychedelic.”

“It’s Ride, Dad. You know this song,” Foggy answers. He takes the joint from his Dad and sucks on it hard, coughing afterwards, “you know, one of the many things I don’t like about pop music is you don’t get shit like this.”

Ed takes back the joint, puffs, then taps Matt on the shoulder, “that’s why it’s pop.”

Matt takes the smoke and listens to Foggy.

“Nah, I mean like eight minute tracks. They’re all two or three minutes, then it’s all over. You can’t contain a good song in that much time.”

“The Beatles did alright,” Matt chimes in.

Foggy reaches over the table to pluck the joint from Matt’s fingers, “psh. You know I’m right Matt.”

Ed leans back in his chair, the wood creaking under his weight, “oh yeah, you got any long songs?”

“Yeah we do actually,” Foggy replies defensively.

Matt quirks his eyebrow, “most of them are four minutes.”

Ed whistles, “one extra. Makes the difference! But honestly kiddo,” he claps Foggy on the back, “I’m chuffed to witness your first live show. You boys are going to smash it.”

Matt smiles wanly, “we really need to sort Mahoney out after this.”

Foggy hesitates but he doesn’t have time to reply. Matt hears a waitress bee lining her way toward them. She taps Foggy on the shoulder, a dull hollow noise, acrylic on cotton.

“We going to have a show tonight or what boys?” She drawls.
Foggy grips the table with both hands, “guess we’re up.”

He hears them screaming, the alarms ringing, the train dashing over the tracks. They scream and scream but it’s not Matt’s problem.

Being on stage is always better than he remembers it to be. Sounds better, feels better. The music is louder and he submerges himself in it, blocks out his ears with the choruses he and Foggy sing, together, apart. He feels Foggy’s presence on the stage. At first nervous, naturally, but soon Foggy melds with the music like Matt does. The way they play works together, fits like the right soundtrack to a movie. The balance is tipped when Mahoney decides to show up. For practice or a show, the feeling’s always different. Matt wishes he could change his opinion but the music’s telling him that it needs the drums. Not always, some songs sound fine unplugged but others, the more rockier tracks they’ve come up with, really work so much better with a beat to them. For now he’s just got to deal with Mahoney’s unreliability.

He’s no longer worried about a weird dynamic being developed between he and Foggy either. Certainly there’s a level of admiration, and some of that’s possibly romantic. But Matt doesn’t sense any of it in Foggy’s actions, or speech even. He’s friendly and far from flirtatious. It’s the parts Foggy thinks he’s hiding that Matt’s completely aware of. Still, Foggy hasn’t done anything and Matt doesn’t think he ever will, so it seems perfectly reasonable to continue with their friendship.

Musically he doesn’t think Foggy relies on him too much. Foggy has his own genius with the bass. Matt can’t play like that. Or he could but he’ll let Foggy have this one. Maybe he could play the drums instead because Foggy’s pretty good on guitar too, really good. They could be a two piece. Only problem is Matt really loves his Gibson. Or Ed’s Gibson. It’s basically his now anyway.

On stage and in the privacy of the garage, they try and make a collection of songs for an album. They make music out of their own lives, out of other people’s lives. And with each melody Foggy comes up with on the bass, it works. It works so well Matt thinks he could cry because Foggy is so perfectly in tune with him, working on the same wave length and he doesn’t even have to argue. There’s absolutely no need for disagreements. It’s nothing at all like Anton and Hollywood’s dynamic, or Anton and Matt’s for that matter. There’s no jealousy, there’s no imminent need to one-up the other. They’re content together, supportive, easy. He plays a riff and Foggy matches a layer, instantly. Doesn’t even have to ask. Foggy understands Matt’s language through the music.

So the contents of their album is coming along, worked out on stage or in the garage. Mahoney’s right on only one thing, they need to start recording. Matt wonders if the longer they put off recording, maybe Mahoney will give up on them. Then they could find a better drummer, make them a real rock band.
He hears them scream and shout and brawl and punch and kick and slam. He has no air coming out of his lungs, heart rate weak, limbs placid yet stone. They don’t stop but it’s not his problem. Could it be his problem?

Josie lets them play once a month, sometimes twice if the schedule’s quiet. It proved harder to shake Mahoney than Matt had thought. Kind of made it worse since Mahoney’s actually a friend of Foggy’s from school. It wasn’t that either of them thought he was a good fit for so long, Brett Mahoney just happened to be able to play the drums well enough. There wasn’t much of a climate for sourcing talented drummers. They kind of have to find you. Or sacrifice their other commitments for you, and most of them aren’t willing to part with their current band. Mahoney’s alright. He plays too fast between songs. Keeps defending himself saying he’s doing an intro/outro deal. Still, he’s the best they’ve got.

So when they’re not up on the stage or pissing around at school, they try and record some material. It’s kind of fucking hard because half the time Mahoney shows up high on fucking coke. That or he doesn’t bother to show up at all. Plus, Foggy gets super anxious and hesitant about using his Dad’s recording equipment. Matt understands. He doesn’t want to be known as his father’s son, riding on the coattails of Ed’s success. But all this equipment is already set up waiting for the taking and Foggy doesn’t want to touch it? It took Matt a lot of convincing to get him even in the room. He guesses that’s also part of the reason why Mahoney decides he can skip out on some of the arranged recording sessions. Some days they can’t even go in because Foggy feels so ill about it.

Ed’s dealing with it pretty well. Matt senses he feels a bit offended, in the fartherly disappointed way. Ed just wants to help and Foggy won’t take a bar of it. Except that they kind of have to make use of Ed’s studio. It’s not easy finding recording equipment cheap. You’ve got to know somebody, or have the bucks to spend. Their shows bring them a little but nothing to live off. And Matt’s nest egg is non-existent after he bought his Gibson. Using Ed’s studio really is their only choice to get themselves on plastic.

In the past few months they’ve been able to get a good selection of their songs on record. They really do sound a lot better with drums behind them. Mahoney comes to play for some of their shows. Not often enough to get a cut of the pay cheque, in Matt’s opinion. Foggy’s too lenient. And in the studio Mahoney can be pretty fucking grating on Matt’s nerves. Even while recording he thinks it’s an alright idea to play fast. He just didn’t seem to grasp the genre enough to know that playing a slightly slowed down version of metal doesn’t work. And Matt’s seriously considering switching as drummer by the end of it just to get Mahoney to fuck off. Mahoney’s no good at anything else except drums, and even then… In reality Matt’s not going to say shit to Mahoney’s face. Foggy brought this guy into their band, Foggy should deal with it. And no, he’s not exactly going to mask up and beat Mahoney up till he doesn’t want to be a part of their band anymore. Totally obvious. But also totally uncalled for. Mahoney doesn’t deserve that brutality. He’s just a jerk with drumsticks.
He hears her across the street every other night. She tries to stand up and he hits her down. She won’t even stand when he’s there. She won’t even move. But sometimes she tries and she pays for it. It’s her dismantled courage that ruins Matt.

Matt majorly regrets not cutting Mahoney off himself earlier. In a way Mahoney kind of had a point, he just went about it the wrong way. They had a solid demo. A good 14 tracks. A thirteen and a half minute song to top it off. And it sat in the garage for a month collecting dust.

When Matt worked with the Jonestown boys he mixed with Hollywood and sometimes Anton too. Picked up some tricks, knew his way around the tuners pretty well. Ed’s got a different set up so it takes him a while to grasp what knob does what and the positioning of them all. Mahoney keeps trying to do it for him but Matt just knows that if he lets Mahoney touch the raw material they’re going to end up with something Matt and Foggy will hate, like Ed’s first record. Matt can’t bear the thought of being embarrassed about his own music.

It takes Matt and Foggy a few months to get the mixing right. Then they’d transferred it all to one CD. They’d all decided that they’d make copies and post them off to labels but Foggy wouldn’t part with it. He wouldn’t have it in the main house but he wouldn’t have it in the garage without it being tucked away in the back corner cupboard of the kitchenette. It’s as if Foggy thought they’d all forget about it if he hid it. Like they’d all forget working for months on that slab of plastic.

It’s not like Matt was bitter about it. He’d gently ask Foggy if they could make a copy every so often.

“Not today,” Foggy would say.

When Mahoney asked Foggy was more vicious about it. Mahoney comes around less and less.

Matt was sympathetic. Foggy still felt ill about having help. Still felt doubtful of his own ability. But as days turned to weeks, Matt started to get impatient. And he wasn’t the only one. He only wishes he got a chance to listen to the demo all the way through, just once, before Mahoney had the bright idea to steal the thing. Matt and Foggy don’t even know Mahoney had taken it until Matt gets a phone call at the Orphanage from none other than Anton Newcombe.

He hasn’t heard Anton’s voice in about two years. It’s a wonder Anton remembers where Matt lives.

No formalities. Anton instantly states his purpose, “Heard you made a pretty good demo.”

Matt frowns. Maybe both he and Foggy have stalkers.

“Where’d you hear that?”

Anton doesn’t miss a beat. “Just got off the phone with Court.”
He says it like Matt should know what he’s talking about. It doesn’t make any sense to Matt that Courtney Taylor-Taylor would know about Matt’s demo too. He hasn’t talked to the guy since 1997. Matt regrets that passage of time. He really should have kept up with Courtney. He was always friendly to him on tour. Any time he spent with Courtney it was a carefree relief from the drama of the Jonestown boys. Matt’s not surprised at all that Courtney’s still in touch with Anton. He was practically in love with Anton. Anton would likely credit his influence to The Dandy Warhol’s success.

“Wish I’d done that,” Anton adds.

“Done what?” Matt asks.

“Got you to record with me then stole all the credit. I reckon they’d believe me over some idiot who can’t hold a guitar the right way up.”

Matt can’t help but laugh. “Did you forget you already stole Hollywood’s songs?”

Anton gets blasphemous and Matt painfully remembers what Anton’s like when he’s offended. There’s nothing to do but walk away.

So he hangs up.

As soon as he can Matt goes over to Foggy’s and checks the back cupboard. It’s definitely gone. And Mahoney seems to have fucked off somewhere else. He won’t pick up his landline, hasn’t been at school anymore either. Matt has to call Courtney to find out the story. Turns out Mahoney had taken the demo straight to Virgin and tried to pass it off as his solo work. Made a fool of himself trying to prove he could play what’s on the demo. Matt wished he could’ve heard that fiasco.

Only one good thing came out of that. The label actually dug their work. Courtney and the rest of the Dandy’s happened to be there at the time recording their own stuff and had heard the execs talking about it. Apparently Mahoney wouldn’t put names to Foggy and Matt’s contribution. Courtney had listened to the demo and recognised Matt’s playing.

Needless to say that Mahoney’s officially fired. They’re back to playing unplugged until they can find a new drummer. Matt bets Ed could recommend them a goof one if Foggy would let him ask. At least they’ve got a good set of songs to play live, and interest from a label. Still, Foggy’s hesitant about picking up the phone to call Virgin. He actually sounded relieved when he first heard the demo was lost. Like the weight of the world had been lifted from his shoulders. Matt’s only hope is to find a drummer they both like, and get back into recording again. Maybe Virgin will take them on if they have that at least. Then they don’t have to use Ed’s equipment.

The halls of the orphanage are dead quiet at night. The silence within the walls amplifies the noisy world. Matt lies awake in his bed, blankets pulled up underneath his chin. He tries to think about something, about anything but all he can think about is her crying every time it happens. He hears it every night and what he’s doing to her, it makes him sick.

“I’d like you to know that I’m very disappointed in you.”
Matt sits up in his bed suddenly, his bed creaking and he worries about waking any of the other kids up.

“You’re really not going to do anything are you?”

There’s only one person in the whole world who can sneak up on Matt Murdock.

“My father didn’t want me to be a fighter like him,” Matt says in a hush.

No one seems to stir, their heartbeats steady with their dreams.

“He didn’t want you to be a rock star either,” Stick retorts.

Matt hears Stick’s hands wrap around the metal formed the end of his bed frame. He’s worried Stick will want to fight him right then and there, wake all the kids up.

“He was never specific, but he liked Led Zeppelin,” Matt hisses.

Stick scoffs at him. He speaks loudly, “Your father made you study when you were a kid, all so you could drop out of school and pretend you’re a successful rock star? It’s a joke.”

Matt remains silent, nostrils flaring.

“You could be a doctor, or a lawyer. You’re a smart kid.”

Stick lets the words hang. Smart. Stick stands at the end of Matt’s bed but the distance between them seems immense. A dark abyss sucking the noise, the air, the life out of him. Everyone keeps trying to tell him what he should do, how he should do it, and they don’t bother to think to ask Matt what he wants.

“Do you want me to fight or go to college?!” Matt hears his voice getting louder and he bites his tongue, his ears hot.

“I didn’t train you so you could bum around doing drugs,” Stick spits.

“Why did you train me then?” Matt matches with equal hostility.

Stick evades the question, “You can do better than this Matt. I taught you how to help people, so help their hopeless souls.”

Stick tells Matt he’s done with their conversation by allowing Matt to hear his exit. Matt rips the blankets off him and swings his feet over the mattress. His feet hit the cold tiles. Even though he heard Stick leave, he’s still not entirely sure if he hadn’t back tracked his steps just to see if Matt listened to him. Although considering how much Stick already knows about Matt’s life, he probably doesn’t even have to be in the same room as Matt to know what he’s doing. Stick’s always going to be better than him in that respect. It just means Matt’s got to be on his toes, prove himself worthy to be left alone. Because in the end, Stick’s right. Matt’s got the skills to protect the people in this city, and he’s got the time to do so, so what’s stopping him? The push and the pull of submission and rebellion.

ix. screaming gun
Matt crouches in front of the TV, fiddling with the video case. Foggy thumbs through The Rolling Stone magazine, not paying much attention to the contents and instead looking at the photos, and occasionally Matt’s form above the pages of the magazine. Bits of ash fall on the shiny pages and he flicks them off, lets the ash settle on the cement floor. Matt finally pops the video case and feeds the tape into the player, holds the rewind button.

So far today, Matt hasn’t asked him about calling Virgin Records. It’s not that he’s not excited that they’re interested in their music, he just doesn’t like how much he’s already relied on his Dad. The studio, his Dad’s bass… He’s thinking of changing his name to further distance himself from Edward Nelson of The Call. And to be honest he’s relieved Mahoney’s left on his own. Foggy knew he had to go but he didn’t have the guts to cut the guy off, not when he has to sit in the same class as him at school. Not that he goes that much anymore anyway. If for some crazy reason he had to cut Matt out of his life it’d be heaps easier. Matt wouldn’t be able to see him. It would be a cinch to ignore him and move on.

In the meantime Foggy just wants to remember what it’s like to hang out with Matt. With Mahoney, he’d show up unannounced, or never come when invited. Foggy was always sitting on the edge of his seat, his skin crawling, anxious about whether or not the dick’s going to show up or not. If there’s one thing Foggy values, it’s punctuality. Guess that’s only natural when his Dad doesn’t know the meaning of the word. Someone’s got to make sure they get to where they need to be on time.

The demo might be lost but their songs are still real, and still coming new. Matt has this way with music, it just comes out of him like a rushing river and Foggy works to dam it, to bank the flow, stop it from flooding the streets, up onto doorsteps, inside houses. Maybe they want that part, being a band and all. But too often Matt gets stuck in the current and Foggy has to stop him from drowning. From drowning in the music because sometimes he doesn’t know how to stop. Part of it’s the drugs, part of it’s Matt’s own genius.

Matt has this idea of releasing a double disc set. It’s unheard of. It would be revolutionary. Something Anton Newcombe would’ve wanted to do but too nuts to actually get on with it. Ed doesn’t think it’s a good idea. His Dad is all about the formula. He and Matt want them to re-record the demo when they find a drummer again. Ed suggested laying down a digital drum track but neither he nor Matt liked the sound of that. So they decided they’d stick with the original plan and make copies. Send them out to the big labels just in case they can get a better deal than Virgin has to offer.

The thing is, Matt’s really not shaking the idea of a double release. He’s not slowing down. Not that Foggy’s doing much to slow him, they make good music together, what’s wrong with that? Still, Matt’s not getting along with Ed too well. Anton’s influence shining through when Matt’s ideas clash with Ed’s pragmatism. Even more of a reason not to get his Dad’s help. He really just wants to ‘make it’ on his own. He knows if his Dad helped with the music, helped with getting their names known, helped with introducing them to people in the industry, Foggy would always be second guessing his own talent. Even now in the early days he’s questioning whether or not he’s leeching off Matt.

Another reason he doesn’t want to call Virgin is that he’d heard through Matt’s conversation with Courtney Taylor-Taylor that the execs had wanted to know the name of the real ‘front man’. They hadn’t really decided, in fact there wasn’t one. There’s this unspoken understanding that they’d both write songs, both sing songs, because when it comes down to it that’s just how they work. One of them comes up with a song lyric or a riff or whatever, some fragment of a song and it comes together as they jam. Sometimes they don’t even sing, just make something entirely instrumental. No song was only Foggy’s or only Matt’s, they both worked to tweak what they had,
what they’d made together.

Matt would go overboard sometimes with output but it’s only because he has this need to expend them all at once. The only advice Foggy’s willing to seriously accept right now is that they shouldn’t burn out after their first release. Sure, they can make good music right at the start but they shouldn’t be trying to do too much right away. That’s how one hit wonders happen. One great album or worse, one great single, every aspect of it so refined and produced encapsulating everything that they know. And then that’s it. One year, sometimes two if they’re lucky, of press and shows and then they’ve burnt their own bridge of creativity. Ed won’t let that happen to them, and Foggy reckons there’s something in that. In a way music is a business. It becomes your career, your life. Why shouldn’t they try and extend that as much as possible? Keep making music til they’re on their deathbeds.

Foggy hears the beginnings of motorbikes revving and he slaps his magazine in his laps to screech, “I love this movie!”

Matt lies his back on the floor, crosses one leg over his knee. “I love that you love it.”

Foggy grins, then nudges Matt’s bent knee down, “I can’t see.”

“Sorry, I didn’t think you were actually watching.”

Foggy ignores him and goes back to flipping through his magazine. He smokes, and when Matt raises a hand asking for the smoke Foggy reluctantly passes it over. It’s a school day and Foggy thinks he should just give up on school altogether. He’s got about five assignments overdue and he doesn’t even know what they’re meant to be on. The only reason he goes sometimes is to hang out with old mates. It’s harder to keep up with them now that he’s not seeing them five days a week. Matt’s here mostly, still goes back to the Orphanage to sleep. Foggy’s probably asked him a million times now, Ed too despite their differences, that it’s fine to come and stay with them but he hasn’t said yes yet. Foggy thinks maybe it’s his Dad preventing Matt from saying yes. Ed can be stubborn when it comes to their band but it’s only because he cares, right? He wants the best for them. Still, Foggy’s finding it easy enough these days to get Ed out of the room, passing it off as teenaged rebellion. Grants him unsupervised band practice. Which also means Foggy can leer at Matt as much as he likes without his Dad hovering over his shoulder.

That makes him sound like a creep. He honestly tries to keep his voyeurism to a minimum. It’s kind of fucking hard some days. A couple of days ago Matt played with his loose t-shirt on, the neck hole gaping, showing off enough of the nape of his neck to make Foggy feel hot all over. Sometimes when they play an extended set together Matt ends up all sweaty and breathy and he has this tendency to wipe his lips with his sleeve. Foggy’s heart races from outrage, honestly, and his playing becomes heavier hoping the bass will shake him to his senses. He’s too chicken to make a move. And then there’s Matt’s faith. How willing is Matt to commit sin with a friend? Still, if Matt felt anything for him beyond humble companionship Foggy thinks he should probably be able to interpret it. Gets pretty confusing though when Matt holds on to him for guidance. Matt’s hands are always firm around his bicep and the day that changes to affectionate the day Foggy can stop pretending.

In the mean time he’s got a façade to maintain.

“You know I read somewhere that there’s this thing where if you put a super good looking person next to like average to ugly people, they actually look hotter just for being next to a hot person.”

Matt lifts his sunglasses off his face for emphasis, “is that really a thing?”
Foggy flips through the magazine as he speaks, “yeah, it’s definitely a thing. See,” he puts down the magazine in his lap, “it’s going to have to work because I need it to work. I’m the ugly duckling and you’re the… the swan? Is that it?”

Matt laughs, “don’t you think being in a band is going to make girls think we’re attractive anyway?”

*Girls.*

Girls and not people and not dudes.

Not Foggy.

Foggy picks up the magazine again, “yeah true. People in bands are cool by default.”

“So long as the music’s good.”

“We do make good music,” Foggy states.

“Lucky for us,” Matt pauses, “But it also depends if others like it too. We’ll see when we release something to the public….”

Foggy thinks Matt’s about to ask him so he starts to read some random article intensely.

Instead, Matt asks, “What are we gonna call it?”

“Call what?” Foggy frowns, trying to read the article at the same time as listening to what Matt’s saying.

“The demo.”

“I don’t know. Dad reckons we should self-title it like we did the first one.”

Matt pouts, “I still don’t think The Elements’ The Elements sounds good.”

“Well *you* try and think of another name. I hate figuring that shit out.”

“We could just title it from one of our songs…”

“*Or* we could do something ironic, like… Murdock and Nelson, Attorneys at Law.”

Matt laughs, “I thought you didn’t want to think of a name? Besides, Nelson and Murdock sounds better.”

“Psh, what’s the difference.”

Foggy stops on a page and the colour in his face drains, saturating into the pages of the magazine, “Oh dude no. Check this out,” he stabs the page at Matt, “The Elements. There’s already a band with our name!”

Matt sits up, “Seriously?”

“Yeah dude, there’s an interview with them right here… Oh, I’m reading the Rolling Stones. Anyway… it says they’re a jazz fusion band.” Foggy slouches in the couch, “Fuck.”

Matt lies back down on the floor, “at least we can keep ‘The Elements’ as our album title. No one’s
going to sue us for that.”

Their next show at Josie’s bar they play under The Elements anyway. They’ve been playing under that name for months now and any other name just doesn’t seem right.

“We’ll just have to prepare ourselves for a lawsuit,” Foggy says as he steps up onto the stage.

“Ed won’t be happy about that,” Matt jokes.

Dad would be in the right though. Dealing with a lawsuit straight off the bat is going to go one of two ways. It’ll give them a whole lot of press and either boost their sales or it’s going to ruin them. No record label will let them sign with a ruined reputation. All faith lost. That seems to be how it goes huh? Dad’s always right. Foggy sighs as he plugs in his Dad’s acoustic. He’s also right about needing to play at other venues. They play at Josie’s once a month, sometimes twice if she’s got an opening. Josie’s is an alright place to play. It’s a bit poky. Small stage, bad lighting. Very amateurishly set up but it must get Josie more business. The Elements already have a sort of following. Nothing exceptional, but people who recognise talent and are happy to drink to good music. Another reason not to change their name. Don’t want to confuse anyone. Apart from playing at Josie’s they haven’t been trying to book any shows themselves. If Foggy’s Dad was in charge he’d be booking shows left right and centre. Maybe it would be better that way. Would keep them busy at least. Foggy’s so bored some days he actually wishes he was back at school. There’s only so many times he can watch movie repeats on TV before he comes away feeling like his eyes are turning into cubes.

Foggy waits for Matt to attach his harmonica neck holder. He watches Matt struggle. He so badly wants to help, and then he sees the cuts and swelling on the back of Matt’s neck.

Foggy covers the mic with his hand and hoarsely whispers, “dude what happened to you.”

Matt frowns and pulls his collar up over his neck, wincing like his whole body aches.

“Nothing, it’s nothing,” Matt whispers back.

“It’s not nothing you’re fucking hurt dude. Did someone try and mess with you?”

Matt doesn’t reply for a long time, busying himself with adjusting the guitar strap and tuning the strings. Foggy reaches out for him but Matt flinches away.

“Just leave it Foggy, I’m fine,” Matt almost growls.

He doesn’t even do an intro before he starts playing, leaving Foggy to catch up.

Well you run from your reasons as you slip on your soul,

Now you’re keeping a hold of something you’ve never known

You’re tied in your mind, hangin’ lifeless inside, yeah
Foggy’s as tense as Matt’s shoulders but there’s no way he can find out what’s up with Matt until the end of their set. Rocky enough start. Foggy’s sure the audience can feel it. They play a bit faster than usual and about halfway through the song, Foggy notices an audience member glaring at him. The overhead lights flood over him so it’s pretty hard to identify anyone in the audience, all he can really see is platinum white hair shining in the shadows behind the stage lights. Foggy loses track of the song a bit staring back, wondering if it’s her, and then all of a sudden she dashes toward the stage.

For a split second Foggy thinks she’s about to start a one woman mosh but she doesn’t stop at the foot of the stage. She gets right up there with him, grabs a tambourine and starts playing along to their song. Foggy’s speechless. Matt cocks his head but keeps going. Maybe he thinks Foggy’s grown another pair of hands.

*Screaming Gun* comes to an end and Foggy nods pointedly at the girl to get off the stage. She answers in equal silence. A vicious glare as she slides into the stool by the drum set and picks up the sticks.

Foggy covers the mic again and quickly asks Matt, “you alright with this?”

Matt’s facing the floor so Foggy can’t read his facial expression but he thinks he sees a smile. That’s as much of an answer as he gets before Matt starts playing the next song, again without ensuring Foggy’s timed into it too.

If Matt thinks Foggy’s going to forget about Matt’s attitude during the show he’s 110% mistaken.

God, he’s starting to sound like his Dad.

She doesn’t leave for their whole set. Foggy’s pretty pissed about it too. She could’ve just asked instead of assuming it’s her rightful place. And Matt didn’t even protest! Or ask how Foggy felt about this sudden addition to their band. At least she drums alright. Better than anyone they’d ever auditioned. She listened to the way he and Matt played and matched her beat to the music instead of playing the style she knew. Ed says that’s a sign of a good drummer, a good musician, being able to adapt. And better, she seems to know Mahoney’s parts pretty well. Maybe she’s actually seen them play live before, but Foggy’s not sure how he could have missed that glare.

They finish off their last song and start to pack up but she sits there still, stamping on the bass drum every second like some kind of parade procession. When they leave the stage a couple of girls shuffle on after them. Both taking up guitars, plugging in, adjusting the mic. And the blonde stays on the drums. Josie’s waitress comes on the stage and introduces the band. The Chrysanthegirls.

The drummer winks at Foggy. He looks away. Out the window the rain slaughters the streets. Every so often a silvery spark bolts across the window, heavy rain. Her music isn’t really his thing but he’s forced to take it all in because Matt won’t make conversation and Ed’s wandered off to have a chat with an old mate. Probably sick of the one sided discussion Foggy keeps trying to have with Matt, preferred to leave his son in grating silence. No really, thanks for that.

Eventually their set comes to a conclusion and Foggy thinks it’s about time Matt says something to him, except Matt’s as impatient to move as he is. He scowls as Matt jumps off his chair and goes to meet the band. He fumes in his seat, watching as the girls drop what they’re doing to chat with him. The guy’s so handsome, Foggy wonders why Matt doesn’t have a string of girlfriends.
The girls huddle around Matt, laughing and chatting away and after a bit Matt takes the bottle blonde aside, hooks his hand around her arm. Foggy can’t look at them a second longer. He doesn’t want to be in this bar a second longer either. He pushes to his feet and scans the dark room for his Dad. The rest of The Chrysanthegirls go back to packing up with their drummer’s absence. One of them, a short one with long black hair pulled loosely into a ponytail, heads outside, leaving the lead to finish off. As she weaves her way between the tables, Foggy watches her fish out a packet of cigarettes out from her breast pocket. As she passes the bar Foggy spots his Dad sitting on a stool. He’s about to go over to him when he hears a scream coming from outside. Suddenly the girl bursts through Josie’s front door again, hand splayed on the glass.

She bellows across the whole bar, “Someone’s just smashed my car window!”

Josie quickly places her hand over the landline set, “You sure it’s yours Ashika?”

“Well not many folks around here drive a hot pink BMW do they?!” Ashika retorts hotly.

Some men jeer at her from the bar. Foggy glances over and sees his Dad coming over to him looking puzzled.

“Look, somebody needs to call the police! You can’t just go around smashing up people’s cars!”

Foggy spots Matt edging closer to the front of the bar.

“Shouldn’t’ve driven a flash car in this area, love,” Some gruff man says in a matter of fact voice.

One minute this girl Ashika’s standing in the doorway already dripping from the few minutes she was out in the rain. The next there’s this enormous rev from an engine, a horrible shriek of burning rubber over wet bitumen. And the following second, millisecond even, Matt’s a bullet as he tears through the bar, slips between the girl and the doorway without bowling her over somehow.

At this, Foggy lurches after him. He’s not as swift as Matt and accidentally shoves the girl out of the way. The girl slips on her wet shoes and collapses in the doorway. Foggy feels a pang of regret, but he moves on out of the cover of the porch. The rain stabs him relentlessly and he shouts at the top of his lungs.

“Matt! What the fuck are you doing?!”

Ed rushes over to help the girl up. Foggy hears them talk and his Dad apologising for him, but it’s dark and raining and cold and he feels like he’s shaking, like he’s going to faint. Both the car and Matt are evidently absent from the street, still, Foggy calls him back until his throat becomes sore. Finally Ed pulls him back inside. The warmth of the bar is chilling and his skin feels hot and cold and slimy and slippery and what the fuck is his stupid fucking blind friend doing running out in the rain for no fucking reason? He’s already hurt, and logically Matt could only get more hurt.

“I’m going after him.”
Chapter Summary

Matt's involved in a chase with his demons, and Foggy only has courage when he's drunk.

Chapter Notes

Phew! I've been writing this day and night this past month in order to get it out to you guys before Christmas! I hope you like it!

(This part hasn't been edited so I really hope it's all okay. If anyone is interested in beta reading please let me know! There's eight parts to go still!)

part ii

Self Titled Independent Demo

[1999-2001]
ix. at my door

Ed grips Foggy’s shoulder and says sternly, “You are not going out there in this weather son.”

Foggy makes an exasperated wail, “He shouldn’t have gone! I have to find him.”

His Dad’s hand on his shoulder feels heavy and Foggy is suddenly aware of the atmosphere in the bar. Half of it’s emptied. It’s late, but the rest who stayed are here for the show. It’s worse than being on stage. At least with a guitar in his hand he can distract the audience with a good song but a co-star of a reality drama? Sweat beads on his forehead, everyone’s watching him, judging him. Condemning him for not taking better care of his blind as a bat best mate.

The noise in the bar becomes flat and singular and his one tracked mind finds it difficult to decipher conversation. He sees his Dad engrossed in conversation with the Chrysanthegirls and it doesn’t look like he’s budging any time soon. Foggy collapses in a nearby chair, throwing his head in his hands. It’s like no one’s listening to him, like no one can hear him. A bad trip.

“How’s he going to get home?” Foggy cries.

He hears a similar echo of his words from the dripping wet girl called Ashika, “How are we going to get home?”

The lead envelopes Ashika in a hug and Foggy wishes so badly his Dad would do the same for
“This is your fault, Marci,” Ashika growls over the lead’s shoulders.

The lead nods in agreement, “I knew it was a bad idea from the start.”

The blonde, presumably Marci, perches on a stool opposite Foggy. She rolls her eyes, “You were the one who was so excited to use the CD player, Chrissie.” Marci gets a glare from Chrissie, and in response she sighs, pulls her hair tie out to let her hair, as white as her skin, fall about her shoulders. “What’s the point of having a gorgeous car if you’re not going to flaunt it?”

“Big B isn’t even here for you to show yourself off to,” Chrissie spits. Her voice then rises an octave, incensed, “What exactly were you planning on doing anyway? Were you going to pretend Ash’s car was yours? Pretend like you’re doing better off without him?”

Marci’s face goes bright red as if extracting the heat from Foggy himself. Just watching them fight is draining him.

“You’re as revolting as Brenden, Chrissie. And you know what?” Marci starts shouting, getting to her feet, “Since you already have his number, you fucking skank, I quit. You can have the drummer you always wanted.”

Marci kicks the stool she was sitting on and barges out the door and out into the rain. Ashika calls after her, tears streaming, but Chrissie holds her back.

Ed steps in, “hey there ladies, no need to blame each other for something you couldn’t have predicted.”

Chrissie glances at Ed, keeps her arms wrapped around Ashika.

“We need to call the police,” Chrissie says firmly.

Foggy speaks up, “Yeah, we need their help to find Matt!”

“Hun, you need to call ‘em when you’re home. No one’s gonna call the cops on Josie letting under aged kids play in my bar. We’re all going to get in more trouble than it’s worth.” Josie says loudly from the counter.

Ed nods. “We want you girls to get home safe, at least someone’s gonna tonight. We can give you ladies a lift in our truck.”

Foggy reels, glaring at his Dad.

We?!

“You will?” Ashika’s lips are positively quivering.

Ed gives his beard a good scratch, “It’d be a bit of a squeeze but it’ll do.”

Dad’s got all the windows cracked down just an inch because the beat up old thing doesn’t have
any air conditioning. The Nelsons call it the Big Squeeze for its orange colour and the hundreds of
dents all over the metal frame. Gets as rotten on the inside as a heated citrus too. In the rainy night
it’s hot and humid inside and they’re all dripping and soggy from the mere minutes they were out
in the rain trying to fit everything in the back.

It’s silent at first, save the sound of Foggy chewing his nails all the way down to the skin. He
knows he should stop, makes it harder for him to play the bass, makes him bleed. But he’s got to
keep his fingers busy with these two girls in the back who he doesn’t know too well and with his
Dad pretending like everything’s peachy.

Upon Foggy’s insistence they drive around the blocks surrounding Josie’s before heading up
toward Chrissie’s house. They two girls had agreed it would be best not to return to Ashika’s
without her car. No parent would be pleased about that, but Foggy could care less about some
stranger’s family when Matt is lost out in the storm. He can’t help but think about the worst
possible scenarios. And almost all of them end in the death of his best friend.

He glares out the window as if the harder he stares the more he’s going to be able to see through
the night. Strain hard enough and he’ll get night vision gifted to him. His Dad peels away from the
central blocks and starts following Chrissie’s directions. Behind him, the girls start to ramble on
about this or that. Ashika’s still a bit teary but Chrissie’s trying earnestly to cheer her up. The city
begins to descent and Foggy sees flashes of shadows under neon lights and street lamps, in the
reflections of car lights in the glass fronts of shops. He’s looking for the stick, for a hunch, for a
man on the ground.

Faintly he hears one of the girls mention Matt’s name and his focus changed to the backseat. He
glares out the window as he eavesdrops.

“Do you think Marci’s really going to quit?” Ashika asks softly.

“It wouldn’t be the first time. Marci does this sometimes. She’ll come around.” Chrissie hums.

“But isn’t it strange that she knows all Brett’s parts?”

“No, she taught him how to play in the first place.”

Ashika’s silent for a while, then questions Chrissie, “Didn’t you say that Matthew asked her to join
their band?”

The van suddenly feels very small, the seat belt tight over his chest. At first he thinks it’s a joke. A
stab about Marci’s earlier stint, thinking she was part of their band on stage.

Chrissie snaps, “She’s not really quitting. Marci claims she’s going to quit then comes back a
couple days later. It always happens like that, this time’s no different.”

Ashika withdraws, “I was just asking Chrissie… I mean, this time she has a backup. Maybe you
should call Brett tomorrow, just to be safe.”

Chrissie snorts, “I am not having a thing to do with that fucker ever again,” She then speaks louder,
“Ed, turn left up at these lights.”

Ashika huffs, “You better be right about Marci taking two days. We can’t be without a drummer at
the Gallery. Label reps are going to be there.”

Chrissie kicks her foot against the back of Foggy’s chair and he’s unsure if it’s intentional or not.
“I know, but trust me. Marci’s coming back. She’s just making a fuss. Hey driver, make a left up here and we’re done.”

They pull up at a stately looking house and Ed helps the girls unpack. Foggy should help but he can’t move. His legs are frozen solid and he can’t stop thinking about Matt and how he asked this girl they barely know to join their band without even consulting him. Could his best mate belittle him any more than he already has?

Foggy jumps when he hears someone tapping the glass of his window. He has a minor flash of fear, as if someone was about to smash through his window like they did Ashika’s car. But when he rolls it down it’s just Chrissie. Her hair is matted to her face, her eyelashes catching pearls of water.

“Dude I’m sorry for pulling that scene in front of you. Marci loves making drama as you might’ve already guessed.” She rubs her eyes with the balls of her palm then blinks rapidly, “Anyway, thanks for dropping us back. You really did us a solid. I’ll see you in a couple of days.”

“Huh?”

“At the Gallery. You’re going to open for us?”

“Since… since when?”

“Since tonight. Jesus, B’s right. You do smoke too much.”

“Are you… talking about Brett Mahoney?”

Chrissie scoffs and glares at him, “Fuck, you’re stupid too! Of course I’m talking about Brett fucking Mahoney. Look, I don’t want to be out here much longer. I’ll see you in a couple of days. Marci will show up, I’m sure of it. As for Matthew…”

Rain pummels Chrissie and she gives Foggy a wry smile before dashing up toward the house.

From the doorway of the house Ashika waves him and Ed away, and calls out, “I hope you find your friend!”

Foggy blinks rapidly as the house ripples away in the rain. He’s not so sure he wants to find Matt anymore. Not when everyone seems to know more about what’s going on than he does.

x. down here

He hears the ignition before anyone suspects anything. He feels a hand on his shoulder but he doesn’t bother to direct his third eye, doesn’t bother to see which of his four fathers gives him their blessing. He shoots out of the bar, feels the rain stab through his clothes, burn his flesh. The engine roars. A hot flame in the cold rainfall. The tires scorch the concrete, burning rubber, tearing down the wet street. Matt runs down the pathway, chasing after the trails.

The bad weather and cover of the night is enough reason for him not to bother with getting up high. Time savers. The car screeches on. Matt falls behind as he tries to run evenly through the rainfall,
careful not to slip. He’s not wearing the right clothes for this. A loose shirt keeps swinging like lame wings under his arms. He perseveres, hands battling for his shoulders, for the right to influence. Not to guide but to steer. Matt speeds before them, just out of reach, still out of reach of the thief. He can still smell the burnt petrol trailing down the streets, can still hear the engine up ahead. The driver weaves between back streets, gutters cracking, trash cans clashing. Soon the car comes to a stop but Matt’s still blocks away.

He needs to be closer. This far away, he can’t read any specific human signatures. Can’t single it out between the masses. It’s worse in the chaotic weather. He wishes he could run faster. He could be running faster. He could be somewhere else entirely, saving more people, helping in better ways. Everyone has to start somewhere. Matt keeps up his speed. He calculates that any increase will through him off, cause him to exert too much energy. His adrenalin is already running low, he has to keep going. See what he can do when he gets there.

It’s a commercial back street. Exhaust pipes and fans eject dirty air into the back corridor. The wind tapers between the various heights of shops, agitated by swinging signage. The rain relentless on roller doors. Lucky for him the car is still running. Before moving on, he clenched the hem of his shirt and tears a strip off, ties it around his head to cover his eyes. He shivers from the cold but the flame of the engine reignites his wire. He uses the wall for coverage, keeps close as he moves toward the humming vehicle. As he draws close the driver steps out, prompting Matt to freeze. The thief flicks out a mobile, extends the antenna. The rain dampens Matt’s ability to eavesdrop but he uses the distraction to break from the wall. To Matt, his own footsteps sound like someone throwing boulders into a lake. To the driver, he wouldn’t even be able to tell the difference. Just simple background noise, normal splashing from a storm. Matt is only a couple of feet away from the thief. He waits for the phone call to end. As the driver opens up the car door, Matt lays a punch in the side of the thief’s neck. He expels a gasp of air, a moan, clutching the back of his neck. Matt swings his foot to kick the back of the driver’s knees, takes out his footing.

The thief falls to the ground, scraping passed the car. Matt stomps on the small of the thief’s back, his jagged boots grinding the man in place.

“You’re not even going to fight back?” Matt mocks.

The thief squirms under Matt’s foot. There’s this hawking noise, a phlegmy spit.

“Are you a cop?!”

A shiver rockets through Matt’s spine. The draft of heavy rain pulling through the corridor.

“Worse,” Matt growls.

He digs his boot into the thief and uses the traction to pull the thief onto his back. And like those bullies, like the man across the street who beat her senseless, he lays into the criminal. Already wrecked knuckles connect with slimy jawbone, weather elbow to shallow stomach. He inflicts pain as punishment. Hears cries to desists, hears please, hears the blood come out between the thief’s teeth. But it feels easy. It’s too easy and his opponent won’t even try to defend himself. He just takes it. Accepts it. Takes it like he deserves it.

Matt pulls back, straightens, one foot still on the thief’s stomach.

God’s hand finds his right shoulder, his Dad’s on his left. But it’s Stick’s and Anton’s hands on his wrists, tightening the grip, forcing his fists to clench. Together they cut off his circulation, cause his fists to swell. Matt can see them in his mind, fat and red. Like an apple being pierced by an
The arrow, the swollen flesh pops. His flesh and ligaments fall from his fists with the gushing blood, the cried from the thief ring shrill in his ears. Matt flinches, clapping his hands to his ears and feel the heat on his lobes. The agony he inflicted on this man throbs through his bulbous fists.

The thief strings sentence after sentence, “Why are you doing this?! Who are you? What did I do to deserve this?”

Matt begins to doubt. But there’s no faith without doubt. The thief’s ignorance of his civil disobedience causes Matt’s teeth to grate.

“Don’t steal,” He breathes. A coarse noise over a sore throat.

He listens to the reply. Broken bones heaving beneath him, the ragged breathing, the muscles wrung out in the rain. Is this who he is? A man with two fists. Petty criminals cowering at his feet. He’d hurt the thief too much. He broke him. Hospitalised him. And for what? To teach him a lesson. A brutal lesson he’ll be paying his whole life for in hospital bills. Rehabilitation. What about his family, his friends, will they support him? Or abandon him? Humiliated by his dishonest thievery. That girl’s right. You can’t just go around stealing cars. But who’s he protecting? The wealthy with hot pink sports cars or the poor whose last resort is to steal. Matt shakes his head. He doesn’t know the fully story. And that’s his fault. He’d run from guidance. He’d ignored logic and reason in favour of the rush of a fight, in favour of questionably just punishment.

Matt lifts his foot, lets the man coil disjointedly like a broken spring. The rainfall lessens and the sounds of the city boil in its place. Off in the distance sirens whirr. There’s always more car accidents in the rain. The thief, the driver, the human. He writhes in a puddle of his own blood and rain water. He swears to Matt, he’ll never do it again. He swears it, over and over, pleas for Matt not to touch him, to leave him alone.

Matt reaches out to the car. He finds the smashed window, extends an arm through, careful not to hitch his shirt on the shattered glass. He plucks the phone off the seat with his sleeve.

He calls 911.

The rush of the fight still ripples through his skin, gets his hands to shake, his feet to tap. He remembers tossing his stick around in this alleyway before dashing off after the car. Recollecting his thoughts, he recalls the sound of his walking stick clanging against trash cans, bouncing along the cement floor. All he has to do is locate it. It’s not like he needs it right now but he’ll likely need it later when he runs out of energy.

He tries to be quiet, fumbling around gaping trash bags and metal tins and soggy cardboard boxes. Eventually he finds it, intact. He retracts it, hooks the strap around his wrist. Then Matt presses his back against the exterior brick wall of Josie’s. The small awning off the roof provides little cover from the rain, but the bricks’ composition translate a portion of the interior’s heat onto his back. He peels off his mask, folds the wet material and shoves it in his jeans pocket. An air vent puffs hot air out into the atmosphere a yard above his head. Through the spinning fans and exhaust fumes he listens to the activity within the bar.

It’s quiet inside. The police have come and gone, fibres of their standard issued leather boots
caught in the grooves of the wooden floorboards. He worries that they'll be looking for him when they should be looking for the car thief. He’d left an anonymous tip to get them going in the right direction. Hopefully it’s enough.

There’s no customers left inside the bar. Just Josie and her waitress cleaning up. He can’t grasp any conversation between them, and the words he does hear are inconsequential. He thinks about going in, evidence that he’s alright. But he hasn’t prepared an explanation yet. It’s going to have to be believable enough to quench Foggy’s storm. He did just leave him there. Practically deserted him, with no reasons why. He’s still not sure himself why. Unsure if he can justify his own violence when he knows Foggy wouldn’t have a bar of it. When he knows that Foggy would stop him at all costs, if he knew the truth.

Except if he’s not even going to own himself up to Josie, he’s not going to go near the Nelson’s. Not tonight. And he’s already missed the curfew for the Orphanage. He’s not exactly mentally ready to deal with the nuns at this point in the night. All he really feels like doing is having a smoke, a hot shower and having a good lie down.

And he’s got nowhere to do it.

He takes in the warmth of the bricks for a few minutes longer, taking a breather. For fighting an unequal match, Matt feels pretty wrecked. The skin on his fists are split twice over, his upper back is tight and knotted, his thighs weary and his feet throbbing in his wet boots. And his Fathers have their four hands wrapped around his vitals. His heart, his lungs, slowly strangling the life out of him from the inside out. He can’t face them yet. Can’t own up to his responsibility. It seems completely reasonable to him to put off showing his mug to his best friend.

Sirens blare off behind him. He hopes that means they’ve found what he left for them. But a perfectionist wants to be sure. He decides he’ll head over to the police station. Casually, at midnight, in the rain. Not suspicious at all. The station’s not far from Josie’s anyway. About a half hour’s walk. He’s totally up for it.

He’s about ten minutes in and the heat of the thrill cools off to the freezing stabs of the rain. He flicks out his stick for extra support but by this time he’s so dehydrated and exhausted that it does less help than it does good. He ends up wrapping his arms around himself, stumbling toward the direction of the police station. Thankfully he can distinctly hear the noise of the station. The city’s still loud through the night but the police station is louder, busy with work. Crime doesn’t sleep.

He wraps his arms around himself, his ripped shirt stretched out and saggy and he deeply regrets all life decisions which has lead up to this moment. He shouldn’t have run off. He thought he was trusting his gut, but he hadn’t seen the whole picture. Who knew if this was the guy’s first steal or not. Maybe it was part of something bigger. Matt could’ve found out who he was, got him another time.

He’d been too brash.

Matt shivers as the siren whirs, a spike prickling his spine. It’s as if God had approved of his remorse when he hears the police car pulling up beside him.

A policeman shouts out over the passenger seat, “Hey man! You need to get indoors!”

Matt stops and cocks his head toward the police car. It rumbles in park. Matt can taste the warmth. “Can you hear me?” The man turns off the ignition, “Can’t you tell it’s raining?”
Matt clears his voice, “I’m just heading to the station.”

“The sub? You missed it buddy, it’s back on twenty-fourth!”

Cringing, shoulders hunching, Matt states, “The police station, actually.”

Matt starts walking forward again and he hears the policeman scramble to start his car again. He drives up ahead of Matt and turns off the engine again.

“Sir! I can’t let you walk in this weather, get in!” He shouts back.

Matt hesitates, and the policeman insists, “I’m heading the same way as you sir, it’s no problem!”

Resignedly he flips out his stick, feels his way to the police car. He climbs in the front. He’s never been in a police car before. There was that one time Anton Newcombe was driving him and the BJM boys up to Boston. They’d driven by a parked cop car and they’d no doubt seen the amount of smoke coming out of the windows. They got booked. Well, Anton and his girlfriend did. Anton had tried to put the blame all on Hollywood but he wasn’t even high. It was around the time Anton only let people smoke if he thought they deserved it. And of course that meant that he and his girlfriend ended up being the only ones to get booked. Anton had tried to pin it all on his girlfriend. Lucky for Anton, she worshipped him like he wished everyone else would. Unlucky for her, she faced up to ten years in prison. Of course Anton made Hollywood bail him out and they continued on with the tour like it hadn’t happened. Anton wouldn’t have survived doing time. He knew it, Hollywood knew it. Matt suspects Hollywood actually wanted to bail Anton out. Thought he needed Anton around or he’d be nothing.

Matt hears a tightening in the policeman’s throat and for a moment he flushes hot red, thinking he should have climbed in the back seat. But a moment passes and with it, a passing car over taking them. The policeman’s completely at ease.

“What business you got at the station at this hour sir?” The policeman asks Matt as he pulls out onto the road.

“Don’t call me sir, I’m only…” He stops. In case he comes into trouble the first thing he has to lie about is his age, “I’m only 22.”

The policeman whistles, “Sorry mister, can’t tell in the dark. Just being polite with the titles.”

It’s still too formal for Matt’s tastes. He doesn’t want to be treated differently just because he’s visually impaired. He’s getting a bit frustrated because how hard is it for people to treat him like a normal human being? Foggy has no problem with it. Still, Matt supposes the officer’s just being friendly, so Matt bites his tongue.

The silence isn’t enough to deter the policeman, “Maybe I can help you with your business at the station?”

Matt hunches his shoulders. The noise of the police station encroaches slowly.

“Must be pretty important if it’s got you walking out without an umbrella.” The policeman jokes.

Finally Matt admits defeat, “I locked myself out.”
It may be a lie but it’s not far from the truth. He’s barred himself from returning to the Orphanage by not returning home before curfew. Come to think of it they’re probably not going to let him back in. Too many times he’s left without telling anyone where he’s going, or how long he’ll be out. The thing is, he doesn’t ever really know how long he’ll be out. That kind of mentality doesn’t sit right with the nuns. They have to have structure. And everyone must abide by it. There’s only so many times the nuns are going to forsake punishment for relief that he’s home safe.

“I got a tool box in the boot,” The policeman offers.

They should be there already. The police station spikes through the dense rainy atmosphere and Matt feels like the policeman is purposely driving slow just to get a story out of him.

“Oh, no, I’m not coming for that,” Matt puts on a sheepish voice, preparing for the descent into lies, “I heard a fight outside… my apartment. And I wanted to report it, but… the power went out. I didn’t want to disturb my neighbours,” He gives a wry smile, “I had no idea what time it was. I still don’t.”

Matt pauses, listening to the policeman. He seems to be accepting it. Not knowing the time is always a killer. Usually works with the nuns. He continues, “I still wanted to make sure the police were notified, maybe… you could save his … life.”

Matt chokes out the last word, his skin hot and clammy and he wraps his arms around himself. If he’s not careful he could throw up right on dashboard.

“So you decided to walk?” The policeman asks, incredulous.

Matt smiles wanly, relief filling him when he hears the wheels spinning slower, the noise of the station all around them. “It’s not that far.”

The policeman shakes his head as he turns the engine off. He gets out and dashes around the front to open the door for Matt. Matt holds onto the car door as he stands up but he misjudges the texture of the tiles beneath his soggy shoes, and slips. The policeman catches him.

“Woah there, sir. I mean, mister.”

Gripping onto the policeman, Matt still feels like he could barf. He just wants to sit down, not talk to anyone, and absorb his surroundings. Or, preferably, slip into deep sleep somewhere comfy and warm and sleep so long that when he wakes up, no one asks him questions. Except he’d like to refrain from being grumpy and instead retain his humbleness. It’s not that it’s easier that way, it’s honourable and selfless. Matt’s alone time will come when it comes.

He steadies himself by wrapping his hand around the policeman’s bicep. The policeman turns stiff when Matt touches his arm, rigid all over like he wishes Matt wasn’t making intimate contact.

Brusquely, the officer says, “The ground can be pretty slippery in the rain. I keep telling the captain that he’s got to get them roughed up. They can be a real hazard to anyone, even on a sunny day.”

The policeman starts to move toward the station with Matt by his side.

“I would like to commend your services to your captain. It’s a true kindness to help a rain battered man.”

“No need for that, I was just doing my job.”
“I don’t know if many policemen would take the time to do what you did.”

The policeman sounds chuffed, “Well, if you insist. But might I add that you were not only a blind man out in the rain, but lost out at night.”

“I wasn’t lost,” Matt says defensively, looking over the specifics of his ability.

“Mmhmm.”

The sliding doors reveal a gush of warmth emitted from heaters, from hardworking machinery and hardworking employees.

“Making a commendation seems unequivocally necessary. However… I’ll need your name, officer.”

Matt hears the policeman raise the heel of his palm to his forehead, “Forgot that you can’t read my badge. It’s Blake Tower. Alright then sir – er, Mister, I’ll drop you off at the front desk. You can make your report here.”

He feels the woman at the desk eyeing him. He can tell because three times now she has built up anticipation in her chest only to let her courage subside. At one point he suspects she might try to engage with him again but she ends up speaking to her colleague as another woman takes over her position. This new desk attendant doesn’t waste any time. She immediately addresses Matt, speaking loudly.

“You’ve been sitting for a while there sir, if you’re still feeling tired I could come around and take your report sitting next to you?”

He’d decided that actually going through with making the report wasn’t exactly the best idea. It only meant more lying. And Matt didn’t think he was up to building on the lie he’d told Officer Mahoney. He’d just wanted to sit down. That’s what he’d honestly told the woman at the desk. But he wasn’t just recuperating. He was listening to the workings of the station. As soon as Officer Mahoney parted with him, Matt kept his ears on him. Tracked him all the way up to his desk, listened to his plastic desk chair heave, to his boots kicking the plywood divider, to his slow tapping on the keyboard.

“No,” Matt shakes his head, “No need for that. I’m catching my breath, then I’ll come up.”

He’d had to wait a while before he could hear any words. Officer Mahoney wasn’t the only person talking about what Matt had left for the police. The longer he sat in silence, receiving all the noise data he could grasp, he began to piece together their side of the story. They’d responded pretty quickly. The ambulances got there in time too. He had to pieces together fragments of sentences but eventually his strings the full story together.

And as he sits on the row of plastic seats, his jeans damp and cold around his legs, his shirt crisp from the air conditioning, he starts to feel very small compared to the bigger discovery. The police talk about their investigation. That the car thief is their in on the bigger picture. That they’d been trying to negotiate with him for weeks. That if the thief hadn’t survived, it would have ruined the rest of their investigation. Matt had almost KO’d a piece to a larger story he had no idea about. He
could have done more damage than good.

Matt grips his stick, teeth clenching. He should leave it alone but he’s responsible for it. He has to finish what he started. His shoulders droop, he just needs a good night’s sleep. Somewhere warm and comfortable. Except that’s impossible.

He fishes out his sunglasses from his side pocket, slips them on. He’ll just have a quick rest here, then move on. Just a quick nap.

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Sometimes having heightened hearing can be the worst curse. As a kid Matt used to sleep like a log. His Dad would have to move his alarm clock right next to his ear to wake him up on the weekends. The worst of days Jack would get out the pots and pans and bash them together. That’s probably what turned him off drums, he constantly associated them with alarms, until the beat of the drum became as necessary as the call to wake.

He wakes before the desk attendant touches him. He straightens, pulls his mouth shut. The glasses are a good cover but his drooling mouth betrayed him. The attendant grips his shoulder firmly. She doesn’t shake him, just speaks clearly and evenly in his ear.

“I’m sorry sir, but you cannot sleep here. You need to make a report or leave, I’m afraid.”

Matt clears his throat and tries to speak as coherently as possible, “My apologies Ma’am, I must have nodded off there… I’ll recollect my thoughts, then I’ll be out of your way.”

He gives a warm smile and hears her begrudgingly grunt in acceptance. She returns to her seat behind the counter. The world comes to him in patches. It’s worse than being high because he doesn’t even feel too good. He hangs his head back, breathing deeply. There’s still talk going on in the back rooms, arguments about the investigation, scuffling of papers and quick footsteps. He hears it but it doesn’t fit together in his mind. Quick footsteps become the canter of a horse, the papers the leaves of trees in the wind. Or not even that. He wishes so badly to go back to sleep, let his mind rest and recuperate.

He takes hold of the arms of the chair and readies himself to stand up. His audio identifiers are getting all mixed up and he freezes deathly still when he thinks he picks up on someone all too familiar. He knows the heartbeat, he recognises the gait and even the air moving around the body makes him think, Foggy.

Foggy can’t have known he’s here. Unless he’s that desperate to know where Matt is that he’s coming to the police station in person. Who knows what time it is now? How long have the police let him sleep? It’s felt like days. Days and weeks since he beat a man to a bloody pulp. Months and years since he took on those bullies at school. And Foggy’s still searching for him. Still chasing him down, catching him by his ankles.

Matt hears Foggy come toward him, but he walks right passed. Goes up to the counter.

“I’d like to make a report for a stolen car.”

It’s not him. That’s not his voice. But Matt knows that voice. How could he confuse Foggy for Marci? When she’s done at the counter, she sits down opposite him. She definitely notices him. He
can sense it. She’s surprised, but she picks up a magazine, flips through it. She’s not reading it. Matt thinks about slipping into unconsciousness again.

She starts talking at no one in particular. There’s other around, citizens waiting for answers, waiting to make reports, waiting for files or whatever else. Matt can’t be sure at first if Marci is talking to him or talking at the room.

“You wouldn’t believe this. I was at this bar near Josie’s. It was disgusting and in the end I’m glad of what came of the whole thing but anyway, I was in this bar chilling the fuck out because the sub’s all shut down in this area – this fucking shit hole! Fuck maintenance, the tubes work fine!”

The desk attendant leans over her and informs Marci to keep her voice down.

“Alright, alright, Jesus,” Marci says defensively, “God, I’m all riled up. This night is fucking bullshit. Anyway, I’m trying to tell you this story. I was at this bar because Chrissie had the nerve to bring up Bobby the cocksucker. So I called up my mate Vlad and he came over in the rain even though it’s so awful out there. So we had a couple of drinks and I was really starting to calm down and then all of a sudden the place gets raided by cops,” she says pointedly at the desk attendant, “and Vlad just fled the place. Like, I get why but he didn’t have to fucking desert me. Shit.”

“Ma’am, can you please stop swearing!” The desk attendant says shrilly.

“Yes! Alright? I’m done now anyway,” Marci declares.

She then throws her magazine down on the floor and lurches to sit beside Matt. The joint chairs creak under the sudden movement. She sits with one leg crossed, huffing in silence for a couple of minutes. He’s expecting Marci to speak to him. She doesn’t. Needless to say that her speech had sobered him up a bit.

“I heard they caught who stole your friend’s car,” He says finally.

“She’s not really my friend,” Marci says quickly, “I don’t know Ashika.”

“She’s in your band isn’t she?”

Marci bumps against his shoulder, “That doesn’t mean anything though does it. I could say the same for you and Bradley.”

“Bradley?”

Marci dodges his question, “Ashika isn’t my friend. She’s too nice. I can’t be friends with nice people.”

Matt laughs, “Why’s that?”

“Because they make me do nice things!”

“Like reporting her car missing for her?”

“Just like that. It’s disgusting.”

She seems to be calmer now. Her voice is less stressed, her heart beats steady. She jumps to her feet for a moment to grab another magazine and sits back down again beside Matt.

“Hey, where’d you end up going? Franklin was freaked.”
Matt swallows. He should have expected Marci would ask him that but not so soon, not so abruptly. Not when he hadn’t thought of a good enough lie.

Marci clicks her tongue, “It’s alright you know. If you have anxiety or whatever. My cousin has it pretty bad when she’s high too. The drugs actually make it worse for her but that doesn’t stop her from taking E. When it doesn’t make her feel on top of the world she takes a combination and gives herself a sensory overload or whatever. She gets as bad as you did. She has to be alone or she screams and screams until you can’t hear anymore and you’re forced to leave. I wonder if you knew a sensory overload existed. Would make sense since you’re blind. Is that saying true that losing one sense makes the others stronger?”

Matt’s lips go thin. Sensory overload. It could be a good cover. It could be a great cover but it doesn’t feel quite right to use it. He’s still buzzed and he’s thinking about making a reply but it’s hard when the sounds he wants to make aren’t forming right, when the shape of them come out like they’re two dimensional instead of three.

“Oh it’s something else. Whatever, I don’t give a shit what’s going on with you guys. I just dig your music.”

Marci goes back to pretending to read her magazine, then after a few minutes of silence, she slaps it closed in her lap.

“Hey, I’m gonna call a taxi home. Where do you live? We could split the fare.”

Matt bites his lip. Finally, he says, “I can’t go home tonight.”

“Oh,” Marci draws out, “Home troubles. I get it. Hey there, you’re welcome to stay at mine.”

Matt holds his breath for a second. He listens to Marci’s signatures, but she seems to be completely truthful. No flicker of regret.

“You don’t mind?”

Matt hears Marci shake her head, then she scoops her arm around his and stands up with him.

“Whatsoever, like, I’ve been through some shit myself so I know how it can be.” She starts moving toward the front of the station, “Only, if you’re going to stay at mine you need to have a shower. No offense but you fucking reek.”

Matt grimaces, “I’m not going to argue with that.”

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Foggy looks out the window, the heat in the room making the window panes steamy and dreamy. The clouds are immense. A draining storm, wisps of a tornado subsiding into the air. If Matt was here he would describe the sky to him well enough that Matt could envision it. But Foggy hasn’t heard from Matt in a whole day and a half. He calls the Orphanage off the hook. They don’t have any more of an idea than he does. They told him that even if Matt does turn up, they won’t have him anymore. They’ve already arranged the papers to transfer him. All kids must be accounted for up until they’re eighteen. Kids can’t just disappear. They have duty of care.
The nuns are getting pretty pissed with him calling all the time. He doesn’t have many other options. He’s checked back with Josie’s as many times as he has the Orphanage and has come up with nothing. The police say he can’t file a missing persons report until two days have passed.

He’d even tried calling Anton Newcombe. The Orphanage keeps logs of made and received calls but the number Matt had last called Anton on has since been disconnected.

“Dude, why would I have any clue where Matt Murdock is? I haven’t talked to the guy in two years,” Matt Hollywood says when Foggy calls him.

He’s running out of ideas. He smokes too much. Doesn’t sleep enough. Then his Dad has to take a trip up to Brooklyn to see an old friend. His wife’s terminally ill. Ed wants Foggy to stay at his cousin Liam’s but Foggy won’t leave the house. Not when Matt could show up any second.

Dead or Alive.

Which means Liam’s had to come to him.

The house phone rings and Foggy’s itching to answer it but he can’t move from his seat. Liam sighs deeply and picks up the phone. They talk a bit and Foggy can tell it’s not Matt. Liam offers the phone to him and he stares at the cream plastic for a long while. Foggy thinks how crazy it is that telephones were invented. That sound travels along wires from across the country. How crazy it is that even if Matt is okay, he still hasn’t called to let Foggy know he’s alright.

Liam waves the phone in front of his face and Foggy snatches it away. He grunts into the receiver, “What?”

“I need to know if you’re coming tonight or not,” Chrissie states bluntly.

Foggy clicks his lighter in his spare hand, lets the chemical broil. He holds the flame up in front of his eyes, burning the figure of Liam’s back walking down the hall.

“I know other bands who would kill for your position. Marci will come. She always does. She’s nuts but she’s reliable.”

Foggy props the phone between his shoulder and cheek as he lights up the bong. He takes the hit like it’s his last one. Like it’s his first and last and he’s got to hold it in until it poisons his lungs. Makes him splutter.

“In the end we’re doing you a solid with getting you exposure like this. I need to know if you’re going to pull through.”

Foggy remains silent. He watches the smoke billow into the ceiling, join with the dark stains and cobwebs.

“Marci said Matthew is going to come.”

“He told Marci he’s going?”

“Yeah, it’s my understanding that you’re the one who’s holding everyone back.”
He really doesn’t want to go to the show. In the city. By himself. It’s a part he’s never been to before too. Sure, Hell’s Kitchen is only a small section of Manhattan, but he’s only a kid still, he hasn’t been to the flash clubs yet. Liam offered to drive him but Foggy refused. Liam has to man the house, cover all exits in case Matt decides to show up. And if he doesn’t decide to reveal himself, the first thing Foggy’s going to do in the morning is file a fucking missing person’s report. Two days too late.

Without a lift and with his Dad out of town, it means he has to carry both his and Matt’s equipment with him on the train. People look at him funny and he pretends he’s a multi-instrumentalist. He supposes he is anyway. The club isn’t hard to find. It’s one of the newest clubs on the street. Brighter signs and busier advertising grants it obnoxiously loud music to be played. At the doorstep of the club, the crowd pushes him in like he’s drift wood in a river. Foggy’s torn between being in two places at once, in the club and back home. But he can’t split himself in two, into fours, into millions to scour the city for his friend. Everyone’s telling him Matt’s going to be here tonight. Everyone’s certain of it from firsthand accounts.

On the stage, the lights are hot on his skin, but it’s Matt’s extended absence that makes him sweat more. He flinches every time Marci drums the bass. She slams her foot down on the pedal every second and Foggy starts to confuse it with his heartbeat, the sign of death.

“He’s not coming,” She shouts over the drum kit.

“He’s coming,” Foggy insists.

His Dad’s bass feels heavy. The audience’s eyes are on him, heavy lidded, bored.

“He’s not coming,” Marci sings.

Foggy ignores her. He has to believe that Matt’s going to be here. That he’s going to join him on stage any second.

“Admit it Foggybear, our blind friend is not coming,” She drops her drumsticks to the ground and stands up, “I’ll call the girls over.”

“Wait!”

He blinks through the stage lights. He could be seeing things. Or, he could be seeing Matt weaving through the crowd. Then he sees the light shine through Matt’s red sunglasses and he doesn’t know if he wants to kiss Matt or punch him the most. He calls out Matt’s name on the microphone and watches Matt freeze. He doesn’t come any closer. Instead he starts to turn away, fold back into the crowd. Foggy slings off his bass and leaps off the stage and into the crowd. He can see Matt’s hair amongst the other heads, moving away. The crowd clings to Foggy’s shoulders, to his thighs, squashes him.

He hears Chrissie speak over the mic now, apologises for him, or rather, blames it on him. Like it’s his fault that he can’t get his shit together enough to put on a good show. Foggy tries to wade through the crowd as The Chrysanthegirls start up but Matt seems to get further and further away and Foggy is stagnant in the mosh. He can’t help it. He starts crying.
Marci’s house was pristine. Stained with disinfectant, antiseptic. It was overpowering but it was better than the walls leaking asbestos. He could stand it. He felt like the bloodiest stain on a white bed sheet but Marci didn’t waste any time. She made him have a shower straight away. Beyond the sterile walls of the bathroom he could hear Marci opening her front door. The smell of weed clashed with the hospital interior of her home. Matt suspected it must be her dealer. He hung around a bit, helped Marci set up her hookah.

Her dealer had a thick Russian accent. The drugs on the dealer’s part altered Matt’s ability to decipher the man’s age. He suspected from the way he breathed and the way he talked about the past, that he was at least ten years older than himself. Maybe more.

“What is this good?” The dealer asked Marci after finishing off with the setup.

Marci spoke through a grin, “It’s always good. Now you have to go.”

Matt stepped out of the shower and listened to the dealer’s pleas to stay but Marci refused. By the time Matt came out of the bathroom she was alone in her bedroom. He walked in with his right hand knuckles skimming the walls. A towel wrapped around his waist, his dirty clothes in his arms. She took the clothes from him and put them straight in the wash, then order him to sit at the foot of her bed. Water dripped off his elbows, onto her bed. He held them between his lap. Marci sat down on the cushion by her hookah and took a drag, then took one look at Matt and began laughing hysterically.

“You’re still so disgusting!”

Matt flinched, wrapped his arms around his waist. Yeah, he can’t see, but he can smell dirt on him and he thought he’d done a decent job of washing himself. She darted into the bathroom, came back with a first aid kit. The bandages and antiseptic and other liquids slosh in their plastic bottles within the box. She told him she won’t talk to him until he’s clean. And that she’s not good with blood. His tired fingers were clumsy but he got the job done well enough. Helped that he held back from taking a hit before he was finished. Didn’t help that he was so tired that he stabbed himself with a needle a few times before he got the right angle to thread it through his own skin.

He got up to wash his hands in Marci’s ensuite, then came back to sit beside Marci around the hookah. He knew of Marci before Foggy got Mahoney to join their band, had heard her name spoken at school, had known that she was in a band herself. He did not know that she was dating Mahoney. He never talked about her. Never gave the impression at school that they were seeing each other. He supposed Marci reminded him of Joel Gion from BJM. Not only for the whimsical way in which she played the tambourine on stage but their personalities were quite similar. For only talking to Marci for a handful of hours, he already felt like they were good friends.

She had a way of speaking where she assumed Matt already knew the base information, leaving him to fill in the gaps himself. He guessed other people would find it annoying and confusing, but he actually liked it. It was a mystery to figure out, to follow what she was on about. It was like her mind worked on another level, another layer. He’d worked out one puzzle. Brenden, Bradley, Bobby, they were all pseudonyms for Brett. A hex for a bastard of an ex. He was too tired to piece together anything else. He still doesn’t understand why Marci was so nice to him. If not sympathy, he found no clear evidence of empathy, or of baseline attraction. Her motives to help him would remain a mystery until he was awake enough to process her information.

After sharing the drug with Marci he started to feel truly weightless. His mind thirsted for sleep and he laid down on the cushions, feeling as light as the ashes rising toward the ceiling.

“You’re not allowed to sleep until you’re clean,” Marci informed him.
Matt frowned and his brows felt so alive and heavy and he remembered he’d heard somewhere that it took more muscles to frown than it did to smile.

“I said you can’t sleep until you’re all cleaned up,” Marci repeated, more sternly this time.

Perplexed, Matt sat up, a swinging ship, gravity spun around him.

“I never imagined a stoner could also be a neat freak.”

Marci shrugged, “When it comes to cleanliness, the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree. Give me your hands.”

Matt frowned again and wondered about the deeper statistics behind muscle use in frowning versus smiling. Marci slid over to him, he let her take his hands in hers. She cleaned out his nails, dug out the dirt, scraped off dead skin. She was so close to him but the only racing heart he heard from her was when she saw his blood. There was no romantic under layer. Admittedly it rubbed him the wrong way. He’d been told he was handsome, should he find that face that she was apparently not remotely attracted to him offensive?

Afterward she rubbed cream over his hands. It smelt like 80% aloe vera, 10% lavender, and the rest a mixture of chemicals to keep it a creamy solid. His towel felt damp and cold and he swayed in his position as she fetched him something to wear. He thought she went into her parents’ room. They weren’t home. She told him they were on a conference tour in Europe. Something about it seemed off. Like she was lying but she believed it.

“They’re dentists. Completely nuts about flossing.”

“Bet they’re not happy about the drugs then,” Matt replied.

Marci shrugged, “They don’t mind as long as I keep getting straight A’s. You know how it goes.”

“And do you get straight A’s?”

Marci snorted, “Are you kidding? I’m going for ivy leagues. It would be a blessing for any other university to have me.”

Marci left the hookah for the morning and Matt stole all the pillows, made a bed for himself. Sleep came on easy but he didn’t sleep very well. He thought maybe it was a bad batch, or maybe even the best batch he’s ever had because he kept having vivid dreams. Dreams about alarms and sirens and he saw colour from his childhood, basic shapes like fire truck red and police car white and ocean blue as the sea sirens coax him in.

He woke up to her snoring up in her bed, sheets tight around her neck and maybe she was right. Maybe the drugs did make him worse because he’s still tired as hell and he felt ill and like he could kick and scream and throw a bloody tantrum. But it’s the good stuff that took longer to work, took a handful of hours for the effects to start to feel real. He felt itchy all over. Marci’s Dad’s polyester shirt trapped the hot air around him, the piling in his borrowed track suit pants tickled his legs.

He had no way to gauge the time. He couldn’t hear very well. The city seemed to be in a twisted state of flux, chaos staggering to stagnation, flickering back to chaos and he can’t decipher if it’s day or night. Only that he was sure Marci was asleep.

Except when he tried to slip out of her room unnoticed, she stirred.

“Will you come to the show tonight?” She drawled, sleep weighed on her tongue.
Matt paused at the doorway, “So long as you’ll be alright playing two back to back shows.”

Marci made a grunting noise and rolled her eyes, or at least he imagined she did. She seemed like that kind of person. And then she was asleep again, and he was free to wander.

He ran. Let the world drip like candle wax, reveal the wick to him. The innards, the skeleton that kept the city structured. He had to break it all down to see what he had. Build it up again as he remembered which part went where. He hadn’t had a dose like that before. Anton might’ve been a hippie but he wasn’t interested in experimental pharmaceuticals. Not when Matt was with him and the boys anyway. Anton had this one dealer who only dealt him weed and that’s all he ever had. Same as the Nelsons. He supposed getting busted with pot wasn’t going to earn them as much time as a harder drug would.

Matt had never been opposed to drugs, but he also never had the opportunity to try anything beyond the basic stash. Pot didn’t do anything to him except making him feel good. Sometimes not even that. So admittedly he was interested by Marci’s stronger strain. He’d slept not very well, but for a good handful of hours and he thought he was still feeling the effects of it. When he ran he felt like he was gliding, skating even. Maybe he was and he looked ridiculous but what did it matter when the city around him was shedding its skin, revealing something new to Matt that he’d never heard before, never felt or tasted or touched, dew strewn grass beneath his cheeks.

He slept in a park somewhere in Hell’s Kitchen. Time was arbitrary when he couldn’t hear the twitters of birds or feel the warmth of the sun on his skin, or hear the hoots of owls and the loud pop of each pair of street lights turning on, pair after pair. Then, after a long while of silence, he felt a beetle crawl across his forehead. A screeching bus in the distance, a snorting, scuffling, a scrambling of humans. Suddenly all noise became sharp and instant and he was forced to his feet, swept away like the cleansing of the city of homelessness.

The ferocity died down as he walked it off. Walked for hours like he walked with Matt Hollywood when they thought they could walk straight into San Fran. Walked straight out of Hollywood’s life like he was as poisonous as Anton. But the savagery of citizens showed themselves to Matt when he finally arrived at the Orphanage and heard a blankness between the mattress and the frame of his bed. Heard a presence in his sheets, an unrealized, unmet heart signature.

He’d just wanted to get a change of clothes.

He’d thought the nuns would never give up. He’d wanted them to give him a chance but he supposed he’d asked for one too many second chances. And in the end, one part of him was glad that some kid had taken his spot because it meant deferring the confrontation. Matt could do confrontation when it meant violence on the body as opposed to violence on the soul. That was the task for his four fathers, slowly shredding through the drug induced layers until they could grasp him, inflict on him his deserved punishment.

Technically that made him homeless. Not ideal. The blades of grass in the park way back called back to him but the sky wasn’t done with its storm while Foggy’s left in the dark. He couldn’t hide forever. He couldn’t let himself become Brett Mahoney and fall off the face of the Earth. He couldn’t let himself become Anton and alienate everyone around him with obvious lies and jealousy and greed.
Foggy deserved to know the truth.

He pushes himself between people, weaving his way up to the front of the club. Foggy and Marci are up on the stage. Matt can hear the shaky club air singing through his Gibson hanging on the rack. He has his heart set on telling Foggy everything. Telling him how he beat up those bullies who stole his acoustic way back. Telling him how he didn’t do anything for ages after that, until he couldn’t listen to her crying anymore. And telling him the reason why he ran out of Josie’s without a second’s consideration. Without giving Foggy a reason not to worry.

Except in the throng of the crowd at the club, he hears Foggy call his name over the microphone, and he breaks. Foggy’s voice quavers with fear, with worry, and Matt freezes. He can’t do it because of that fear and concern and when he thinks about it, Foggy would never let him keep up with what he’s doing. Would he? Foggy wouldn’t understand why Matt has to do it. Why it feels good to fight, to do good in a way that Matt’s able.

He immerses himself in the crowd, distinctly hearing Foggy cry out his name. Foggy gets so close but Matt pushes further, lets Foggy fall further, hears others stop him, hold him back. Matt gets to the back of the club, follows the sounds of flushing and liquids gurgling down drains. His knuckles touch cold tiles, dirty porcelain, he grips a sink and retches.

“Having a rough night out?” A lady asks him, brassy voice.

Matt clutches his stomach with one hand, the other keeping him steady against the sink. The components of Marci’s high quality weed still lifting off his lungs and skipping down his throat. He’d never been to the bar before. He had to rely on the helpfulness of strangers to get to the club. No police officer offered to drive him. No money for a bus or a taxi. It was better to walk. He thought that if he stopped, everything would catch up with him. The exhaustion, the pain over his body, the pain in his heart when he would have to face up to his best friend.

He coughs, “Something like that.”

He has to tell Foggy. He grips the sink harder, his knuckles probably as white as the porcelain.

“Better not stay away too long, you’re going to miss the show,” The lady drawls.

Matt licks his lips, “The Chrysanthegirls…”

He hasn’t only let Foggy down, he’s let the girls down too.

The lady hums in amusement as she saunters out of the bathroom. Shortly after her prompt exit he hears the atmosphere change beyond the swinging doors of the bathroom. One swing and it’s a normal night club, the next… crystals burn in glass, boil, fumigate. A wicked expulsion of smoke. People scream in fright before anger. The music ceases. He hears the tearing of flesh and it’s not isolated, it’s not a singular event. It multiples across the contents of the club, across the people clumped around the acidic fumes and expands outwards like a chemical fire.

Panicking, Matt darts back onto the dance floor, skirts the edges of the crowd as he skims for Foggy. It’s a slaughterhouse. People are sobbing and screaming and clawing and blood spills out on the ground, sloshes in the throngs with the sweat and the beer flooding the floor. He pinpoints Foggy, a bright beacon in his mind, mapped out by the ricochet of noise off walls, off people, off objects, slimy and slick and dying. And he forces his hearing through the cacophony, tries to focus on Foggy, see if he’s alright. But he’s not alright, he’s as worse off as the others. So Matt plunges himself into the crowd.
He’s guided by Foggy’s pain, by his fear, by the cries he makes when someone kicks him or claws him. Matt pushes aside people, dodges what he can dodge. Someone latches onto his ankles, a flicker of Jack Murdock begging him not to fight, of God telling him not to sin. He shakes them off, arms falling heavy on the dance floor. Foggy’s so close and Matt strains through the crowd, the closer he gets the thicker the shield and he hisses as he forces a clear path for himself.

Except when he finally gets to Foggy, his heart wild and breath like an animal’s, Foggy doesn’t greet him like a friend. He should have expected it. He should have expected the brunt force of the storm but he’d momentarily forgotten en route to save his friend. There’s a moment of recognition, of registering and anticipating the kind of movement, but he lets Foggy punch him across his cheek. He lets Foggy kick him in the shin and he stops others around them from hurting Foggy. He blocks a hit from the outer ring, takes a hit from Foggy. Deters a kick and lets Foggy kick. He’s sore inside and out and he can’t take much more because usually, in a fight, there’s a sense of satisfaction after each blow. But there’s none with Foggy, it’s brutal violence with no reward and shouldn’t Matt’s cries in pain be enough to signify the punishment is working?

The crowd starts to enclose around them, the gaps minimise and it’s becoming harder and harder for Matt to protect Foggy. The crowd won’t cease, a stamping stampede. And Foggy won’t stop. Matt thinks Foggy might slow down at least but he’s not and if Foggy really wants to fight him, they can take it outside. Matt gets behind Foggy, his friend doesn’t make it easy for him, and he locks Foggy’s arms behind his back. He takes him out of the club, extracting them both from the blood bath clogging every corner of the place. Foggy wrestles behind him, sweaty backs pressed against each other and why won’t Foggy calm down, why won’t he stop?

Out in the cool air of the street, Matt lets go. Cars rush down the street, tires screaming across the asphalt. Foggy punches Matt in the gut and he falls to the gritty pavement, gasping for air. Matt holds up his hands. Foggy won’t see reason.

“Foggy! This isn’t you!”
Matt blocks a punch aimed for his face.

“Please, stop,” Matt cries.
He blocks again, and again, and Foggy punching and kicking, it’s scary. Is this what he’s like when he’s unleashed?

“I’m sorry that I keep running.”
Another infliction, shielded.

“Listen to me, I want to explain…”

**Bleeding** for Foggy.

Matt’s crying salt and blood and he tries to tell Foggy what he did, why he did it. But Foggy won’t listen. It’s like his ears are blocked by the will to hurt Matt and this is what he’s done. He’s broken Foggy by not telling him anything.

Suddenly Foggy stops, his fist hovering before Matt, and he spits, “I hate you.”

Matt wants to say, *no you don’t.* Instincts. But he hears Foggy say the words and it’s the truth. All signs point to the truth, and what can he do but let himself be served what he deserves.

“I wish,” Foggy begins, spitting on the ground, “that I could go back to the life I had before I met
you.”

He shuts down.

His barriers disintegrate. But nothing comes his way. Life sparks back into him. He can hear Foggy fighting and he thinks for a second, maybe he’s truly become numb. That this is what it’s like to die, for his soul to be escaping from his body. But his fingertips start to tingle and he can hear his own heart and hear himself breathing. He focuses on Foggy, listens to him fight, and he realizes Foggy’s fighting someone else. Matt doesn’t recognise their presence. A stranger.

This stranger falls to the ground and as another person bolts out of the club, comes into contact, Foggy turns to fight the new opponent. Matt asks him to stop. Calls out Foggy’s name but there’s no recognition registered. Maybe this person who sounds like Foggy, isn’t even him. Maybe he’s still high and Foggy’s inside the club still, abandoned.

Matt clambers to his feet and shoves his way back into the club. It’s quieter now. Fights still occurring in pockets around the room, the floor heaving with tired and dying breaths. He scans for Foggy, traces of him up on stage. The air’s high strung, tight. He’d heard the air move through his Gibson before, and now he hears nothing from Foggy’s bass. Nothing good, anyway. It sounds like his acoustic way back, splintered across the wooden stage in the hall when those boys wanted something precious they could destroy. The beacon flickers on his radar indicating that his friend’s outside, despite the contrary evidence.

Matt refuses to believe that person is Foggy.

Foggy might truly hate Matt, but a pacifist wouldn’t inflict violence.

Except Foggy deserves to know. And if Foggy’s not going to hear it, Matt’s going to shout it at him a thousand times until he gets it.

Matt drags himself out of the club again, leaving the black sea behind him. Sirens whir around the block. Time seems to slow down. The militia start to cease, finally. Arms drooping to their sides, feet coming together, fists unclenching. It happens all at once and then he can hear Foggy crying, collapsed on the pavement. He’s about to rush over but someone else beats him to it.

Marci wraps her bloody arms around Foggy, nuzzles her forehead into his neck, only to be pushed away. Matt’s about to step in but he freezes against the wall when he hears what Foggy says.

“You’re that chick who’s stalking me!”

Marci recoils, holding her hands up. They drip with blood. “Foggy why the fuck did you take that drug? Everyone… wouldn’t stop fighting…”

Foggy pushes Marci further away, coiling into a ball, “Who the fuck are you? Why do you know my name? Where am I?”

“Stop fucking around!” Marci cries, “You’re scaring me!”

“Dad?” Foggy wails, “Where’s my Dad?”

“I don’t know! You told me he went to see a friend!” Marci says, latching onto Foggy’s arms to keep him still, “Foggy, don’t you remember who I am?”
Matt remains hidden along the side of the wall until he’s sure Foggy’s going to be safe. The police are charging down the streets but by the time they arrive at the scene, Marci has managed to take Foggy away. Matt slips off too, lets the cops do their jobs.

He trusts Marci will keep Foggy safe. He wonders how much Foggy can really remember. If he had forgotten meeting Marci properly, had he forgotten how Matt left him? Maybe it’s best if Foggy forgets about Matt altogether. Maybe he will pull a Bill Mahoney and disappear for a while. With no home, no friends, no family. Who could miss him?

He’s not walking to anywhere in particular. No place to go. It’s early morning but the city never sleeps. Bars are alive, unaware of the slaughterhouse in the background. They’ll all become aware of it the next day. Karaoke bars explode with tone deaf voices. The drugs have worn off now and Matt can distinctly hear the chatter of gossips at counters. People vomiting on the streets, off the balconies. Saturday night and the citizens want to run themselves dry, blind drunk. He’ll miss them. They’re reckless and stupid and kind and loving, but in the end, he’s going to find the same lot of people in another city.

Except he won’t find another Foggy.

A park seems like a nice place to sleep again. The grassy ground isn’t as comfortable as it was that first night. He wakes up to the sunlight hot on his crispy clothes and a police officer shooing him off the grounds. His back aches but he can’t sit still. He walks through the park, listens to people talk. Through the inconsequential exchanges, he picks up on some news. People are only just hearing about what happened at the bar. Theories fly around. Only ten dead. Many injured. Ten and more people he could have saved.

He walks faster. He can’t be in this city anymore. The noise of it makes him sick.

“You’ll reprimand a car thief but you won’t investigate violence inducing drugs? You need to get your priorities right, kid.”

Matt freezes on the path, breathing heaving. He’s exhausted. His body hurts all over, his clothes are clinging to his skin with old blood and sweat and he should have expected Stick would follow his every move. He also should have blocked Stick’s sweeping kick.

He falls to the ground, much to Stick’s amusement.

“There are some things… the police can’t do…” Stick begins as he fights Matt.

Matt’s clumsy, worse off than usual when he spars with his Master.

Stick continues speaking between blows, “…That you can do. That I taught you to do.”

His master spits out each word effortlessly, laying into Matt, “Come on boy, smart don’t come out of books or off the pages of your music sheets.”
Matt jumps to his feet, tries to fight back but he’s never, never in his life, won over Stick.

“Smart is making the right decision at the right time.”

“I need to time… to rest…” Matt heaves.

For that he receives a blow to his upper back, forcing him on his hands and knees on the pavement.

“While you rest, there are gangs all over the city participating in organised crime. Stealing cars is just the start of it. And while you messed that one up, you left the police to pick up the pieces of an investigation they will never understand without help.”

Matt pants on the ground, bends one knee, boot firmly pushing on the ground and this time he dodges Stick’s attack.

“Why don’t you deal with it if you’re so interested in it?” Matt spits.

Stick grabs Matt by the neck and slams him on the ground, “DON’T SPEAK TO ME LIKE THAT MATTHEW.”

Stick’s papery old skin is the strength of seven folds. He hisses at Matt, “Training you was a mistake.”

“Then kill me. I have nothing left.”

Stick snarls, “Your despair is disappointing,” He hisses and lets go of Matt’s neck, “If God has granted you a second chance, I’m certain you’ll use this second life to prove to me your worth.”

Matt gasps for air, rolling on his side. Weeds that creep through the cracks of the pavement tickle his cheeks.

“They’re waiting for you at the Orphanage.”

Foggy sits on the concrete stairs leading up to the large doors of the orphanage. He picks at the patches of grass growing out of the cracks in the concrete, rips off a clump of the blades and scrunches them up in his palm. He then throws it in the air. The clumped grass is weightless, causing it to float slowly to the ground. It then lays crumpled on the grey ground. Matt had told him that the Orphanage hadn’t been a great place. It sure looks alright. The building is beautiful. Layered brickwork in a gothic architectural style. The grounds are bland as fuck though. A concrete jungle, not a spot of grass to be seen except in the cracks. And here’s Foggy ripping all the colour out of the place.

He’d also thought Matt’s farewell would be a bit more … glamorous. More kids screaming their love for Matt out of wide windows like they do in the movies. There’s none of that. The kids don’t seem to even care. There’s not even a farewell cake. He knew Matt was unpopular but wouldn’t anyone care? Matt had been living there since his Dad died. That’s a good seven years, surely he’s made some kind of relationship at this place.

But he supposes not or else he would’ve heard about it. Matt’s pretty honest with him, mostly.
Foggy goes for another patch of grass but stops when he hears footsteps in the foyer behind him. He stands up, peers through the open doorway. At least something about this day is cinematic. He sees Matt coming toward him, the light from the back windows illuminating his outline. When he comes out into the daylight, Matt’s got this weird look on his face and it pretty much squashes Foggy’s excitement.

Matt taps his way to the steps and sits down on the top one.

“What’s going on?” Foggy asks, craning his neck to peer into the foyer.

Inside it’s too dark, contrasted by the sunlight. He can’t see a thing. He looks back at Matt. He still feels crooked about abandoning Matt that night. He didn’t mean to. Or maybe he did. He can’t remember. Still, Matt looks like a wreck.

“Ed’s just finishing off the paperwork,” Matt states.

Foggy watches his friend hold his palms stiff over his knees.

“Matt, are you feeling alright?”

Matt frowns, “Yeah, I’m fine.”

Foggy comes to sit next to Matt, bumps his shoulder against his friend’s, “I imagined this day would be a great day, you know? You don’t have to live in this shit hole anymore. No rules, no curfews. It’s going to be great.”

Foggy grins, hoping his excitement will rub off on his friend but Matt’s a statue.

Matt speaks so quietly Foggy almost misses it, thinks he mishears it, “Don’t you hate me?”

“What?”

Matt speaks louder, pressing up against the brick fencing of the staircase, “Why are you doing this?”

Foggy’s taken aback, “Because you’re my best mate! Come on, I’ve been dying for you to live with us for ages. I’m just so happy it’s finally happening. Aren’t you?”

“I am…” Matt says softly.

“You don’t sound so convinced!” Foggy kicks Matt’s foot playfully. He sees how Matt flinches and he quietens, “I’m really sorry Matt… for not being considerate. I don’t know why I would have done what I did… I don’t remember that night very well… I don’t even remember Marci joining the band. That’s okay though, she seems alright. Less stalkerish now that I know she was Mahoney’s ex.”

Matt seems to relax and he continues, “Oh! Matt! Marci told me,” He covers his mouth for a moment before he starts the story, “She told me that after Mahoney stole our demo, he told the studio that it was all him. And they wanted to do recording and he had to pretend that he actually was a multi-instrumentalist. And apparently Marci went with him and saw his bomb out of a performance. I wish I’d seen it. What kind of idiot puts themselves through that embarrassment?”

Matt laughs and there’s that smile.

“Anyway, Marci told me that you felt overwhelmed… If you’re ever feeling sick you should just
tell me. I’ll understand,” Foggy says earnestly.

Matt doesn’t have the space to reply because Ed comes out of the orphanage waving papers in the air, a big grin on his face, one Foggy wished he could see on Matt.

“Let’s go home kids!”

Matt won’t let go of Foggy’s arm, even when they’re buckled in the middle seats of his Dad’s van. Foggy takes it as Matt accepting what kind of apology Foggy was able to give him. Doesn’t help when he can’t remember too great. Matt sits in the middle so he can remain attached to Foggy, the half seat belt strapped over his lap. In the end it only took three years to convince Matt to move in with him. Only three. It made it easier since Matt was over eighteen now, long overdue the expiry date for kids at the Orphanage. Foggy likes to think that the age thing is the reason it took Matt so long to come around to the idea of moving out. Or else Matt didn’t want to leave the closure of home. But on every account Foggy had heard, the nuns weren’t very accepting of Matt’s interests. Musical or otherwise recreational… Still, three years is a long time to wait. It has finally happened though. Foggy can’t complain.

“I should never have trusted Liam,” Ed mutters from the front.

“Not this again Dad.”

“He should have gone with you. You could have died.”

“I feel like I would have died if Liam was with me.”

His Dad actually laughs.

“Good thing Marci had my back. And-” Foggy gives Matt’s forearm a slight squeeze, “-Probably a good thing you weren’t there in the end…”

Matt gives him a wan smile then hangs his head.

Foggy eyes his friend’s withdrawal but his Dad keeps going on about the drug induced murders and how lucky he, Marci and the girls were so lucky to escape alive.

“I could have told you Liam was useless but you wouldn’t listen Dad.”

Ed glances at Foggy through the rear view window, then focuses back on the road.

“It was all I could do at the time. Ben needed support. And I wasn’t going to send you to your Mother’s.”

“I don’t want to see her.”

“I know that son, but if Liam didn’t say yes, that was the next option.”

“You could have just left me home alone.”

Ed only laughs, and honestly it’s offensive.
His mother moved to Brooklyn when he was a kid to pursue a career in law. His Dad doesn’t talk about her much. She never keeps in touch. But sometimes Ed brings her up and it’s plain uncomfortable. Foggy doesn’t want to hear about her if she doesn’t want to keep in contact with her own son. Foggy doesn’t make a response to Ed and after a while of silence he thinks his Dad has finally dropped the topic.

He starts to relax again with Matt’s arm around his. His Dad drives them through the suburbs. People bustle about on the streets, neon signs flashing in the daylight, trying to beat the sun. He rests his head on the crook between the headrest and the window and he watches the silver city slip by.

The drive is long and Foggy’s waiting for the time the buildings start to slope downward, come closer to the ground, closer to reality. He feels Matt’s head drop to his shoulder and Foggy grins, staring out the window. The glass reflects a distorted vision of the clouds and after a while Matt’s head drops to his lap, prompting Foggy to catch his breath.

His lips go thin and he blinks, trying not to think about his friend’s breathy lips near his crotch. To distract himself he surveys the trail of shops and bars and cafes on the lower levels of apartment blocks. He swears he sees at least a hundred cafes. Next up on the popular shop list is hairdressers, then massage parlours. Then an assortment of random services. Laundromats, thrift shops. Supermarkets and pokey convenient stores.

They stop at light after light, Foggy swears his Dad is hitting the red ones on purpose. Matt’s sleepy head is a hot heat in his lap and he really has to stop thinking about it. But he can’t blame Matt for taking any opportunity to sleep. Marci told him he’d slept outside because he couldn’t find his way home. The Orphanage had just had enough of his unreliability, irresponsibility. It’s all working out in the end.

They stop at another set of lights and just as the bottom circle turns green, Foggy spots the best kind of distraction.

“Dad! Dad, did you see the size of that amp?”

Ed clears his throat after not talking for an hour, “Huh, what are you on about kid?”

Foggy turns around in his seat, waking Matt up. He jabs his finger against the window, “Back there! Didn’t you see it in the front of that shop? I need to check it out. Dad, please!”

Ed taps the breaks twice, “Alright. We got time to kill.”

Matt doesn’t let go of Foggy even when they step foot in the door and it kills Foggy to slip out of touch so he can get on the window display with his Dad. Matt hovers by the spot Foggy left him, then starts to travel down the aisles. He and Ed have a good look over the amp. It looked great from the street but it’s totally a dud up close. It’s always a hit and miss with places like these. Ed wanders off to have a look at the stacks of records and Foggy cranes his neck to spot Matt. He spots his friend slowly moving down the front, touching the various items in the shelving. Foggy makes the small jump off the ledge of the display window and trots down toward his friend, meeting him at the front desk.

The shop assistant sits on a tall stool behind the counter. He chews gum as he makes additions on a notepad. The shop assistant glances at Foggy and Matt briefly then returns to his math. On the wall behind him various guitars are hung by their straps on hooks. Above the guitars sits a large piano accordion on its own shelf, looking dusty and neglected. It looks like a good piece but Foggy shouldn’t be thinking about obtaining other instruments when he needs to replace his Dad’s bass.
Apparently he’d destroyed it himself in the club. His Dad was mad enough that he’d been injured on top of losing two days’ worth of memory. He isn’t ready to tell his Dad that his bass got wrecked up too. By his own hands. Maybe he’ll leave that out forever. As far as Edward Nelson knows, his bass is as safe and sound as Matt’s Gibson over at Marci’s apartment.

The thing with Ed’s bass is – or was – bottom line, was that it was Ed’s. Foggy has desperately wanted a bass of his own, and now that the sound of success from his Father is beaten into sawdust, he feels as if he can legitimately shop for one that will be his. As for telling his Dad about what happened to the original... well, he’s going to save that news for Foggy’s birthday. That way his Dad can’t be too mad, at least not during the first 24 hours.

Foggy takes his attention back to the guitars. They’re mostly modern productions. Cheap plastic versions of classic guitar builds. Yamaha labels. There’s a couple of blue plastics, an obligatory pink one, and a beat up Epiphone Rivoli bass that’s catching Foggy’s eye.

“Man, check out the merch up there!” Foggy whistles.

The shop assistant peers over at Foggy and Matt. He pulls his gum to one side of his mouth and says flatly, “Guitars are $1200.”

Matt’s face brightens. He presses his palms on the glass cabinet of the counter and pleads, “Guitars? Can I see one?”

The shop assistant tosses his gum to the opposite side of his mouth and drawls, “Which one? Colour matter?” and Foggy watches the guy scrutinize his friend’s sunglasses, “Guess not...”

The guy reaches for a blue plastic and Foggy stops him, “Nah, you don’t want the plastics Matt. Let’s have a look at the bass.”

Ed comes up beside them then with a stack of records under his arm. He gives Foggy’s shoulder a squeeze, “Trust my son to pick the classic from the fakes.”

The shop assistant goes to unhook the bass and says, “Oh don’t let the hot pink trick ya. The Yamahas aren’t fakes.”

“They’re no use if they’re not made of wood,” Ed replies bluntly.

The shop assistant shrugs, “Frankly I don’t know nothing about guitars,” he passes the bass over to Matt and continues, “Some fella dropped this off a few months ago. Haven’t been able to move it due to the damage and whatnot. Plastics sell better.”

Matt takes the bass and walks away from the counter, runs his fingertips over the body, tickles the heavy strings, fiddles with the tuning keys. After learning the shape of the thing, Matt runs his fingers over the details of the body. It’s reddish brown, scratched up wood. Up above the bridge and slipping over the edges of the upper F hole, there’s visible damage. Wear and tear of a well-loved bass. Foggy wonders why the previous owner ever gave it up.


He blushes and passes the bass to Foggy. Foggy slings the strap over his shoulder and shares a grin with his Dad. He then walks with it a bit, feels the weight of it. Then runs his own fingers over where Matt had been, feeling the gouges around the F holes, the small nicks around the bridge. He tunes it a bit, plays a few strings and it’s hollow but heavy and Foggy bites his lip when he sees a visible shiver in Matt as Foggy plays the strings the right way.
Suddenly Matt turns serious, “Wouldn’t you prefer a brand new one?”

Foggy shakes his head, plays a slow chord, “No, I like the bruises.”

Ed squeezes his shoulder again and says, “Bit of bruises gives it some character, eh?”

Foggy stills his hand over the strings, “The damage tells me it has a history worth continuing.”

Ed shakes his head, “Son, you are some lyricist,” he then walks back up the counter, catching the shop assistant’s attention, “How much you selling the old bass for?”

Foggy’s eyes go wide. He didn’t think it was going to be this easy.

“800 bucks,” The shop assistant states.

Matt comes up to the counter with Ed, “That’s uncalled for. Look at the thing, it’s got scratches all over. See the top side?” Matt gestures back at the dumbfounded Foggy, “Did the previous owner sandpaper the top coat off? It’s a wreck.”

The shop assistant shrugs, chewing gum as he speaks, “I’ll give it to ya for half.”

Foggy can’t stop grinning and he trots up to his Dad and his friend bargaining for him at the counter.

“Dad, please can we get it? I’ll pay you back!”

His Dad laughs as he takes out his wallet, “With what money son?”

“I’ll do house chores to make it up to you.”

Ed hands over his card, “I like the sound of that.” He pauses before handing the assistant the card, “Only, I feel rotten buying you this on the day we take Matt in. We’re gonna do something special for you tonight kid,” he addresses Matt, “Foggy’s gonna start his repayment by making us dinner, happy?”

Matt only grins, “I’m happy if Foggy’s happy.”

Foggy wakes up with the afternoon sun glinting through his broken blinds. It’s been a few weeks now but the bruises from the club are still etched into his skin. He turns his back to the light but groans as his weight presses against his right side. He flops on his stomach, leaves his bruises exposed to the soft sunlight. No position feels comfy enough when he’s awake enough to feel it. His stomach rumbles and he’s obliged to crawl out of bed.

He pulls on jeans and a jacket. It’s funny how the bruises looked worse as the days went on. Weeks in now they look better but he still gets annoying yet concerned comments on his body from his Dad if he doesn’t cover up. Although it doesn’t seem to stop his Dad from ragging on about Liam and responsibility and how the cops still haven’t figured out where the drug even came from yet. And Ed still asks him about the days Foggy’s forgotten, as if asking more questions is going to help him remember, or make up some memory based off what other people witnessed.
From what other people have said about him, he’s pretty glad he can’t remember how he felt. All he knows now is that what had happened to Matt was sort of his fault. His Dad won’t seem to believe it, so Foggy has to keep telling him what Marci and her friends back up. That Matt had felt sick and had ran out. And that when he came back, they’d all fucked off. That if only they’d stayed a minute longer they probably could have saved Matt from two nights of homelessness. Probably could have stopped Matt from being kicked out of the Orphanage. That part’s definitely Foggy’s fault. Being a bad influence and all.

Foggy trudges down the hall and scuffs into the kitchen. His Dad nods at him as he’s rolling a joint in his arm chair. There are bread crumbs in his Dad’s beard, the crusts laying gnawed out on a plate on the coffee table. Foggy’s just missed lunch. Which means he’s also missed band practice by a couple of hours. He’d woken up early and had set an alarm. Guess he’d slept right through it.

Ed licks the paper before saying good morning, “Sleep well?”

Foggy opens up the bread box and pulls out two slices, “Too much.”

“Pah, you need it kiddo.”

Foggy grabs out some spreads and starts making himself a sandwich on the counter, “You gonna let me have some of that Dad?”

“I’ll roll you another after your breakfast.”

He doesn’t think his Dad regrets adopting Matt. It’s just the way he keeps pressing him with questions that makes Foggy think maybe he’d been too brash. It had to be done though. Matt was going to be kicked out and Foggy wasn’t going to let his friend walk out on the streets. It makes Foggy want to cry when he thinks about Matt being homeless for those two nights. Lost in the city, in the rain, at night. It’s a miracle he didn’t catch pneumonia. It’s a miracle Matt didn’t die out there either. That’s why Foggy’s glad of the outcome of all this. Not only that Matt gets to live with him now, but that Matt didn’t end up going to the club with him. Matt would’ve been a goner in that mess.

Still, Ed keeps trying to tell Foggy how wrecked up he was. He’s tried putting himself in the position he supposedly was in and he can sort of understand how he could feel like that. Abandoned, clueless, or whatever. But in reality all Foggy can remember is being at home enjoying a good smoke then coming to on the sidewalk outside the club. Blood all over him and his body aching like he’d been thrown down a staircase a million times over. And if that wasn’t horrifying enough, he’d come to face to face with his stalker. Who, over the last two mind wiped days, had apparently befriended him. So aside from feeling like he’d gone on the worst trip ever, in the end, he’s honestly so thankful that Matt wasn’t there with him. He can’t stand the thought of what could’ve happened to Matt if he was there. If the bruises and cuts still braising Foggy’s body aren’t enough of an indication.

Foggy moves his sandwich to a plate and takes a seat in the arm chair beside his Dad’s.

“This kid we got,” Ed starts, nodding over at the direction of the garage, “Does he shower? I never seen him inside.”

“I think he showers at the gym,” Foggy explains between bites.

“Doesn’t the kid ever eat? Would be nice to have the kid sit at the dinner table with us every once in a while.”
“I’ll talk to him.”

Ed continues, “Makes me feel like I’m neglecting him or something. Like child services are gonna come knocking on my door accusing me of not feeding the kid.”

“He’s an adult now.”

Ed laughs mockingly, then continues on his ramble, “You know what I’ll do? I’ll plastic wrap up some dinner and leave it by the door to put my mind at ease. Make sure he’s getting a good intake that way.”

Matt would probably hate that but it’s best not to argue. Foggy finishes off his sandwich and slips his empty plate beneath his Dad’s. He looks expectantly at his Dad until he starts rolling a smoke. It’s warm inside. The sun low but bright enough to put out some heat. Foggy’s sweating in his jacket and jeans but he doesn’t want to change. His Dad will comment on him and he doesn’t feel like he has enough energy yet to defend himself. He just needs to have a bit of a smoke and then he’ll go and see if Matt’s in.

“You boys getting much practice going? You know you can still use the studio kiddo.”

“I know,” Foggy says flatly.

His Dad always brings this up too. Same as Matt and Marci. She hasn’t committed to their band yet since she’s got a good thing going with the Chrysanthegirls, and she’s graduating soon. But she turns up to practice when they ask her to and she’s on Matt’s side about pumping out another demo. He still feels ill about using his Dad’s studio. It’s better now that he has his own bass. He’s still got the Nelson name though.

“You’re not a rapper, or a DJ. You can’t go by only Foggy,” Marci had told him.

He’s thinking about changing his surname to Sharpe even though that makes him think of his Mom every time he hears it. It’s not like she’ll ever find out anyway. She hasn’t talked to him since she moved to Brooklyn to pursue her career. Still, he feels better about making music again when he’s not connected to Edward Nelson of The Call so much. Would be nice to record in a label’s studio rather than his Dad’s. He’s just got to make that call to Virgin to make it all happen.

Still, they do need practice. Marci needs to learn the rest of their songs still. They also need to decide which tracks are going to stay and go. And yet, even though Matt lives with the Nelsons now, Foggy feels like there’s no difference in time spent together. They practice as much as they did before Matt lived in his garage. Foggy had just assumed that the time it took for Matt to travel or do whatever Matt did in his spare time, could be spent with Foggy too. Of course he’s allowed to have a life outside of Foggy. It was just odd to him to find out that Matt’s apparently in this boxing club that Foggy’s never heard about before. And apparently has always been in it. Guess he’s never asked. Then again, he’s finding out all these other weird things about Matt that his Dad is totally right about. Like maybe he actually doesn’t eat. And how come he doesn’t shower at the Nelson’s? How come he doesn’t ever come inside the house? What are these weird habits of Matthew Murdock and how exactly are they sustainable?

Foggy doesn’t mind so much about all that. He’s not hung up about it like his Dad is. Ed just thinks there’s something fishy about the whole thing, Foggy supposes. Unsure about the decision he’s made to sign the guardianship papers. Part of his uncertainty has got to be because of the way Matt just turned up on the day Ed had gone to sign. Turned up at exactly the right time to make the signing official. Apparently Marci had given Matt the heads up. Marci seems to know a whole lot...
Anyway, Foggy was just hoping that living with Matt would mean he could see him more. Too bad the boxing classes get in the way of a lot of things. Sometimes they’re day classes, sometimes night, sometimes both. In between they still do their regular stuff. Jam when they can or just hang out. But Foggy feels like he sees Matt as much as he did before, maybe even less.

Ed hands him the rolled joint and a lighter. Ed’s own roll is used up and he makes Foggy share. He’s got a real thing about sharing these days. Foggy had to spill the beans about Ed’s bass sooner than he would have liked. His Dad hadn’t been too impressed, as expected, but at least he’s content that Foggy’s the opposite of the old bass. Intact. His Dad seems to also be happy that Foggy’s got a bass of his own. Keeps making jokes about borrowing Foggy’s bass whenever he wants like Foggy did his. It’s only happened once so far and as soon as his Dad let go of Foggy’s bass, Foggy had promised that with his pay check he’s going to buy his Dad a replacement.

The tobacco isn’t making him feel too great so he lets his Dad have the rest. He takes the plates over to the sink and then heads out down the hall to the back door. He’s kept Matt waiting long enough. Should be the motto of his life, keeping Matt Murdock waiting. He always knocks. And pauses, then knocks again. He doesn’t hear anything beyond the door to the garage so he pushes his way in. It’s dark as hell and cold and he wraps his arms around his waist as he squints through the darkness trying to find the cord to tug the light on. When he finds the long string, the orange light spews over the garage. Matt’s not here. He’s sorry for keeping Matt waiting. He’d been up late sleepless. He wishes Matt would leave a note or give him a call from the gym when he gets there. Emptiness makes him think the worst.

He’s going to go back inside the main house but he’s always so surprised by how clean and tidy Matt keeps the garage. Everything’s all neatly packed away. He supposes it has to be or Matt’ll be tripping all over the place. Although there isn’t much in terms of belongings in the first place. Marci had told him that the nuns had already donated all of Matt’s belongings by the time she’d called to let them know he was alright. She told Foggy she’d found Matt in the streets the same night as the slaughter. Untouched by it all. She’d been coming back from the Nelson’s and had run into Matt. Got him to her place. She told Foggy that her parents were surgeons, that she had a bunch of medical equipment and could patch Matt up herself.

Marci had called the Orphanage that morning but it was too late for Matt’s home to be saved. When she called that morning, the nuns had told Marci that even if Matt did return, that he’d be transferred unless he could find a home for himself. They’d already given his bed to some other kid who’d be sleeping there every single night. So maybe Foggy had forced his Dad to make the decision too quickly. Reflectively, they were both trying to get Matt to live with them for years. And what better night to make it happen than the threat of Matt being transferred interstate.

After his Dad had gotten through twenty questions of making sure Foggy was alright after the slaughter at the club, it made perfect sense at the time to ask his Dad about adopting Matt first thing. Sudden but urgent. His Dad had agreed. Of course he would have agreed. Except Ed still questions Foggy every so often if this turn out is really what he wanted.

And of course it’s what he wanted.

What he wants.

Matt living with him.

Even if it’s out of the garage.

He’s been wanting this for ages. Wanting to free Matt of his restrictions at the Orphanage. Let him be who he wants to be without rules and regulations. It’s unbelievable sometimes, knowing Matt’s
only a few yards away from him. He only hopes Matt’s as glad about it as he is.

He goes over to the couch and looks around the room. It’s tidy but it’s empty and he briefly wonders how Matt can live like this, until he remembers Matt doesn’t need the aesthetics of decoration. Or light even. But Matt likes music and he’ll have records floating around the place. For a moment again he feels sick, remembering how Matt had lost everything. During that early morning phone call, the nuns had also told Marci that the contraband hidden under the mattress had been confiscated. Foggy’s been working hard to help Matt rebuild his library so that it’s a bigger and better collection than before. Sure, Matt’s more than welcome to make use of the Nelson’s library, but there’s something about having your own collection. About the journey they’ll take to obtain them. And Foggy will be with him all the way.

xiv head up high

Water bursts over his sweaty skin in a series of relief. Marci’s body wash smells strongly of strawberries. It stings whenever the wash skims over a wound, and each time Matt feels a pang of guilt. He doesn’t have the heart to tell Foggy and Ed that he can’t stand the smell of their house. The pot’s alright. It’s the asbestos. The garage is bearable. Far enough away that he can sleep without feeling like he’s being slowly killed by lethal insulation. He can’t stand to be within the main house for more than an hour. Even then the fluffy walls irritate his nostrils. The Nelsons have done enough for him. He doesn’t want to tell them in case they get some kind of idea to move house. He couldn’t let them do that, not when the asbestos isn’t strong enough to affect them on any way that’s harmful. Only gets to Matt because he can smell it more distinctly.

He cranks the shower taps off and steps out, steam rippling off his hot skin.

“Ready?” Marci calls out from her bedroom.

Matt towels himself down then wraps the damp towel around his waist. He rubs his stubbly chin before replying, “Yeah.”

He hears the bed springs squeak as she jumps off the mattress, bee lining for the bathroom. She pushes the door open without hesitation and goes straight for the mirror. She flips it open and grabs the little bottle of foam cream and the razor.

He’s not fond of stubble. It’s sharp and spiky and he can hear the threads scratch over his jawline when he pulls on tight shirts for running. He can tell Foggy’s trying to grow a beard, a goatee at least, going from the way food sometimes lingers around Foggy’s mouth after he’s eaten. As he understands it, beards are mostly for aesthetics anyway. Even so, it’s a pain having to shave every morning. Probably why the Nelsons don’t bother.

“Stand still,” Marci instructs, placing one soft hand on his bare shoulder.

She squeezes out a portion of the cream on her fingers and dabs it on Matt’s face. He reads her. Full of concentration. She’s hard to work out sometimes. Hard to predict. That’s what makes Matt think she’s dangerous. Maybe he can trust her to keep his secret for now but her changeability might endanger his ruse. The cold blades of the razor touch Matt’s skin and he flinches, clenching his jaw. He grips onto the basin as Marci slices the small hairs off his face.
She goes to clean the razor and Matt asks, “Do you mind doing this?”

Marci comes back with clean blades and continues shaving, “It’s as fun as popping pimples. I’m not kidding, it’s very therapeutic. I should know, my parents are dermatologists.”

Matt knows she’s lying but it doesn’t sound like it. The discrepancies in her stories should show in her heartbeat but the words come up out of her lungs so effortlessly. Like she thinks it’s the truth that her parents are impossibly multi-skilled multi-career driven people.

She taps the collected cream and hairs off the razor and returns again, finishing off the job, “Don’t you like me shaving for you?”

Matt pauses, “It’s nice to have someone do something for me every once in a while.”

Marci grins, “Every once in a while. I suppose you can use my shower only every once in a while then.”

Marci pats Matt’s face dry and says, “That’s it! I’ll see you in a couple of weeks, or even a month. That’s what it is in my books!”

She laughs then leaves Matt to change. As he does so, he listens to her wriggle out of her clothes and collapse on her bed again. He comes out of her ensuite thinking she’ll clothe herself but she doesn’t. She only rolls onto her stomach and starts flipping through a magazine. Matt sits on the floor, leaning against her bed. For a few minutes he listens to Marci flip through her magazine impatiently, probably not taking much in. Beyond her apartment, most citizens are asleep.

“Can we put some music on?” Matt asks.

Marci sighs, “Let’s have some peace and quiet before Vlad comes around. He’s got new stuff for us.”

Matt’s heart drops to his stomach, his body hollow and lukewarm. He still hasn’t met Vladimir. Not as Matt Murdock anyway. The problem with his investigation was that he didn’t know many drug dealers. And the ones he did know were close to people in his life. The Nelsons grow their own weed behind the house so there was no need to accost them for information. And he tried to stay away from Vladimir as long as he could. He certainly never meant to hurt him.

“It’s…” Matt begins slowly, “Not a good idea to try new stuff… judging from what’s on the market now.”

Marci rolls onto her side, nudging an acrylic painted toenail against Matt’s shoulder, “Don’t worry, I trust Vlad. He’s only going to bring us the good stuff.”

He’s almost certain Vladimir won’t be carrying anything deviating from his signature cannabis strain. Vladimir doesn’t sell anything heavy. No pills or powders or even needles. He specialises in top quality roots, preferring his clients to inhale or ingest. Matt’s got a full case study on Vladimir Ranskahov. He’d had traced him from Marci’s apartment when all his other leads had fallen through. The last resort. Matt had followed him to his next client, to the next, to the next, and four days later he’d finally found Vladimir’s source. As with Anton Newcombe’s dealers, he’d tried patience. He’d worn a hoodie, hoped that the darkness was enough to cover his face. They hadn’t been forthcoming on a friendly level. The police had strewn undercover agents through the Hell’s Kitchen population, as if the dealers and growers weren’t paranoid enough as it was. Matt had been patient with them but they hadn’t been interested enough in his empty pockets. They were all tight lipped until threatened.
Anton’s dealers hadn’t known a thing. Wrong corner of Hell’s Kitchen to be asking those kinds of questions. Vladimir’s friends weren’t as resilient and Vladimir just happened to show up and the wrong place, wrong time. He already knew Vladimir didn’t know anything, it was his friends he was interested in, but going easy on Vladimir would have been telling. Fighting addicts was what he imagined it would feel like fighting zombies. Their movements were slow and easy to deter. Their limbs were lanky and weak and any focused hit would have its energy expended before impact. Their skin was paper thin, punctured easy, blood spilt. He’d hurt them all but he’d only done worst damage to those who lied.

In the bloody end it was the most fruitful encounter he’d had. He’d found out the drug’s been dubbed Accela. It accelerates chemicals in the brain, misplacing one’s perception of danger and safety. An experiment of provoking fight or flight. Vladimir’s people had told him the city had been wiped clean of it. People had actually wanted it, resulting in sporadic violent outburst across the city. Nothing as big and localised as the slaughter at the club, and not significant enough to rise above the normal havoc of Hell’s Kitchen. Lethal brawls, spousal murders, suicide pacts. Accela was exhausted from the city but it was possible some were holding onto it for a hot night. Other than that, the only news of its destruction was rumours in brief bursts in distant cities.

He’s afraid of giving up in case he gets a visit from Stick, but what can he do when the injustice falls beyond his city limits? He’s never left Hell’s Kitchen before. All he can do is face punishment when Stick decides to reveal himself. Any other father figure of is wouldn’t go beyond expressing disappointment. It’s nothing as tangible as being smacked to the ground.

Matt clears his throat, “Thanks for the offer but I’m not taking anything.”

Marci slaps her magazine on her thigh, “You’ll offend him!”

Standing up, Matt says, “I better get going.” He then grins, “I’ll see you in a year maybe.”

Marci sits up fast, “Matt don’t go. Vlad’s been dying to meet you, it’s been months! He’s been carrying around a gift for you every time he comes round because the dickhead wants to give it to you in person.”

Matt taps the end of the bedframe.

“Come on Matty, I told Vlad you’d be here tonight and he’s so excited – it’s disgusting – but you have to stay!”

“I… really should get back.”

“Matthew,” Marci whines, “Vlad feels like you’re avoiding him on purpose and I bet you are! He told me – no, stay still – he told me he won’t bring me anything more until he gets to meet you.”

“Why does he want to meet me?” Matt frowns.

Marci sighs exasperatedly, “Because I’ve told him so much about you. God, he just wants to have a good time with you! He’s been carrying around that fucking record for ages… Come on Matty, stay for me?”

There’s no way Vladimir could guess it was Matt who dealt him a black eye. He’s positive about that but he’s been avoiding facing up to what he did to the guy. Still, he’s interested to know what kind of record this otherwise stranger has for him.

“Alright, for you,” Matt resigns.
Marci jumps to the end of the bed and wraps an arm around Matt’s neck, presses her warm lips on his cheek. He feels her naked breast breath against his arm as she kisses him, then she flops back on top of the bed sheets. She picks up her magazine again, leaving Matt to sink to the carpet beside the bed. He listens to the activity beyond Marci’s apartment but there isn’t much going on. She won’t let him bring anything to her place except his guitar. That’s also part of the reason why he never stays very long. He gets bored easy and stays bored if Marci doesn’t feel like entertaining. He only ever goes every few days or so. When he’s not hanging out with Foggy, or out on the rooftops, or actually training at the gym, he’s at Marci’s apartment. Those sleepless moments in between.

It began because he stunk and he could smell it worse than Marci. He imagined the only way he could get himself into the Nelson’s shower was if he got hammered drunk or high as hell and he couldn’t do that every time he needed to wash up. He doesn’t ever do a very good job that way anyway. Not to mention that he’s sensitive about taking drugs after what happened a few months back. Marci doesn’t seem to mind his regular visits. She was the one to offer for him to come around anytime he wanted.

Every footstep he hears outside makes him anxious. He goes to grab his Gibson but flinches when Marci flops her magazine down on her bed to bark at him.

“I said no music!”

Matt wrinkles his nose, “I’m bored Marci.”

She huffs, “Fine. Play then.”

Matt sits down on the floor beside Marci’s bed again and props his guitar in his lap.

Waiting for you to say,

The words to make me stay,

Standing here alone.

I should have never shown,

I never should have dreamed,

The feelings that are free.

“Are you and Foggy fighting again?”

Matt stops, “No. We don’t fight.”

“Sure,” Marci scoffs.

Matt’s about to start from where he left off but he puts his guitar down when he hears footsteps down the hallway outside Marci’s front door. It sends a shiver down his spine and a short time afterwards, the doorbell sings through house. Marci leaps off her bed and dashes to the front door. Matt refines his hearing and focuses on their conversation.
“Now that’s how I like to be greeted!” Vladimir announces.

Marci grips Vladimir by his arm and yanks him inside her home, “Shut up you dog. God, what happened to your face?”

Vladimir’s explanation surprises Matt, “Bad trip.”

Marci doesn’t question it. Matt relaxes, relieved that they weren’t about to embark on a long conversation about how Vladimir and his crew got their asses kicked by some guy in a mask. He then hears them coming down the hall and he gets up, puts his Gibson on the stand. Vladimir marches straight for him and sticks out his hand.

“He’s blind, idiot,” Marci scowls from the doorway.

Matt makes a small smile then feigns trying to find Vladimir’s outstretched hand. It’s all part of the ruse.

Vladimir shakes it enthusiastically, “I have heard lots of you Matthew. I am very excited to meet you.”

“Please, call me Matt.”

“Okay Matt. I have gift for you.”

Matt frowns as he listens to Marci’s drug dealer pull out a record from his backpack. Vladimir doesn’t seem to recognise him. Helps that he’s not wearing a mask. Vladimir presents the record to Matt, then nudges it against Matt’s hands until he takes it.

“This for you. Marci tell me you in band together. My brother in this,” he taps the record in Matt’s hands, interrupting Matt’s reading of the title *Urban Hymns*. Vladimir continues, “*Bittersweet Symphony* sound familiar?”

“I’ve heard it.”

“You heard it!” Vladimir cries excitedly.

Marci saunters into the room and yanks open her dresser. She pulls out a night gown and slips the thin material over her body, “Calm down Vlad. Everyone’s heard that song,” then says to Matt, “I bet Vlad here has a whole stack of the same album to give out to all new customers just so he can boast about his brother drumming for The Verve.”

Matt can sense offense swelling in Vladimir so he says, “It’s fair to boast if your relative had a hand in creating one of the most celebrated songs in the last decade.”

Vladimir grins, “Such praise!”

Marci saunters over to them both, her silk nightie swinging around her thighs. She pats Matt’s shoulder as she said, “You’re a flirt Matt Murdock.”

She then kneels down cushions in the open space in her bedroom, pulling Vladimir down with her. She really doesn’t waste any time. Vladimir sets up a bong with Opium, for once deviating from pot. Matt doesn’t recall any of Vladimir’s friends mentioning Opium, and going from the remnants of cuttings and residue on Vladimir’s fingernails and clothes, he suspects Vladimir must be growing poppies himself.
As expected, Vladimir is offended that Matt won’t indulge in the drug, but when Marci explains what happened to their friend Foggy, Vladimir is more understanding, if not doubly offended at the suggestion that Vladimir’s selection might be contaminated. Matt stands by the open window while the other two light up. He’s planning on waiting until they’re out of it so he can slip out. Marci takes the first whiff of O and seemingly the effects are immediate. She sways then falls back on the floor, stretches out her arms. Vladimir peels the bong from her fingers and moments later, experiences a similar effect. Matt listens to Vladimir flop like his legs have liquefied. He spills out onto the carpet, sprawling like he’s fallen into a carpeted sea.

Marci seems to be working on another frequency. She shouts at Matt, asking him to put on the record. He obliges, clicking the LP and adjusting the actuator. The album starts off with The Verve’s hit single. Immediately a reverb begins in the form of Vladimir’s singing, and it doesn’t stop at the end of the single either. Vladimir knows the song songs on the album back to back and Matt wonders if some fan somewhere in the world will ever do that for his music. He holds the dust jacket of the record in his hand. It’s the first time the record has been taken out of the sleeve yet it smells like old dust. Marci might be right about Vladimir having a very selective collection.

The night moves on and even though he’s not on anything, his companion’s dreamy states cling to him. It’s like his version of passive smoking. Absorbing not what they feel but how they feel, how they move and sigh and writhe in response to the drug. He’s certain now, being in Vladimir’s company, that he has made no connection between Matt and the guy in the mask. Reassured, he allows himself defeat to exhaustion. And despite Vladimir’s tone deaf singing, he starts to accept the fact that he’ll have to rest, and in Marci’s warm bed is an opportunity he cannot forgo.

Matt marches up the grassy hill, careful not to slip on the night frost. Music from the house seeps into the soil, drums into the tired soles of his feet and he’s itching to immerse himself in the middle of all the noise. Marci’s invited him to a house party. He’s wondering if Foggy’s coming too since Matt’s come straight from the gym in the inner city. He’s been telling Foggy he’s joined a boxing club and it’s not a complete lie, that’s how he can make it work. Only, he’s there more often lately because he’s messing up badly. His leads are crumbling and he’s coming to the conclusion that he’s going to have to go to every club in the city just in case. The presence isn’t easy to track. It’s sporadic and sometimes faulty and Matt can’t be expected to keep up with every item of news that runs through the city. It just makes him feel worse that way. Knowing how many awful things are going on and he can’t even stop this one.

In the end it shouldn’t have come to this at all. Stick’s right. People’s lives were, and still are, in danger and he did nothing to stop the source of it the first chance he got. Left the police to ignore the vital evidence. If he’d just stuck around he could have been way ahead of the police by now but instead he’s left hanging on the mutterings he can obtain through eavesdropping in the waiting area of the police station. And not everything is discussed within the station. Communication occurs through paper he’s not privileged with access to, or is talked about in their cars roaring across the city. He’s trying to make a friendship with Officer Mahoney but it feels like he’s playing a fool’s game.

He has to persevere.

He comes up to the front door of the house. He’s about to knock when someone opens the door for him. The noise ventilates, previously dripping from the tall ceilings then gushing out with the
opening of the door. A woman welcomes him. She speaks out of the corner of her mouth, her lips twisted, numb. As he enters, she presses a couple of pills in his palm which he pockets.

The house is packed with bodies dancing and heaving to the music. It’s the Chrysanthegirl’s secret show. A part at a mansion off in the hills. Matt thumbs the pills in his pocket and moves toward the music, gravitational. He pushes his way within the crowd, analysing those around him. No signs of aggression or ultra-violence so far. He hears Marci up on the temporary stage, a fire roaring in a pit behind her. He doesn’t think she’s noticed him yet. And he can’t sense Foggy’s presence amongst the noise either. His heart drops. He’s actually hoping he could see Foggy here. Maybe he wasn’t invited.

Matt lets the bodies dance around him, absorbing the carefree energy of the crowd. It’s a bit of a relief actually. He can become so agitated sometimes when he’s alone with Foggy, only because he still doesn’t understand why Foggy’s letting him stay. Even after being told what happened, shouldn’t Foggy hate him? Or else distrust him. And yet Foggy doesn’t seem to. Seems to be happy to go on like normal. Like his friend doesn’t believe Matt’s capable of hurting a fly.

Marci, on the other hand, thinks she understands Matt. She doesn’t, but her novel loyalty works in his favour when she makes up believable lies about him. He’s half expecting her to turn around and presume an outrageous favour of him. She hasn’t asked yet. He wonders if she’s the type to never forget, or to hold an impossible grudge.

The Chrysanthegirl’s finish a song and start on a peppier, more upbeat song. He feels the mood in the crowd change, the waves of energy heighten. Their music isn’t something he’d usually like to listen to. It’s not bad music but it’s more pop and electronica than he would’ve liked. That’s part of the reason why he finds Marci so fascinating too. Having versatile skills in genres is rare, especially when it’s hard to discern of Marci isn’t simply playing a modified version of a genre to fit the other. Her skills show in that she’s believably eclectic.

“Matt!”

So Matt might not like their music but the crowd sure does. Labels are taking interest in The Chrysanthegirls too. Marci keeps telling matt that she has connections since they girls are booking, and fast. That maybe Virgin doesn’t have to be the one for The Elements, or whatever their new name will be. Foggy seems to be warming to the idea of not partnering with Virgin, even though they know the managers already like their music. It seems nuts to Matt that Foggy won’t get over Virgin having their demo still but it just means that they’ll have to record elsewhere so they don’t have a repeat.

“Matthew!”

Although he’s not sure if recording is going to happen anytime soon either since they might have to find another drummer. Again. With The Chrysanthegirls hitting it off in the music industry, Marci’s likely going to have to choose between which band she’s going to commit to. Selfishly he’s hoping she doesn’t choose the girls.

“Matt!!”

He jumps when he feels someone clap his shoulder and turn him around. For a split second he thinks it’s Foggy but he doesn’t sound right, doesn’t feel right.

“Man, I say your name again and again, are you deaf also?” Vladimir shouts over the music.

Vladimir forces his hand into Matt’s and shakes it vigorously. When he lets go, Matt wipes away
Vladimir’s sweat on his jeans.

“My apologies Vladimir, I was –”

“You on E?” Vladimir asks urgently.

“–Thinking. Pardon?”

“E. You got pills on entrance?”

Matt slips one hand into his pocket and thumbs the pills, “Yeah, I got them.”

Vladimir recoils, “You take local pills but not my saplings?”

“Relax,” Matt breathes, finding Vladimir’s forearm and giving him a reassuring squeeze, “I didn’t swallow them, see?”

He shows Vladimir the pills, then pockets them again when the movement of the crowd around him threatens to knock them out of his palm.


Matt’s least favourite song of The Chrysanthegirls comes on and he wishes to disperse out of the crowd, but as he starts to move, Vladimir holds him still.

“Loyalty must please you,” Vladimir says in Matt’s ear, “I hear this pill may be Accela. Ritchie Rich save for his birthday bash. That’s rumours friends tell me. I keep you safe Matthew Murdock.”

Vladimir then takes the lead, extracting Matt from the crowd. Matt trails behind him until the last dancer snaps back into place. Vladimir pulls him close to the wall. Matt presses one hand against it, the wooden panels sweating with the heat of the room. Vladimir lets go of him to pull out a baggie of weed and papers. He starts to roll a fat smoke for them both. Matt presses his back against the wall, absorbs the reverbs of the party. The music, the chatter, the sound of plastic or leather or cork shoes stamping on the marble tiles, creeping up the walls.

Clumsily Vladimir pokes the joint at Matt’s mouth. Matt closes his lips over the rolled paper and finds the lighter Vladimir offers him.

“No E for you, or O, or ABC,” Vladimir laughs.

“Cannabis?” Matt asks after he takes his first drag.

Vladimir takes the joint from him then and says, “Oh yes, C is allowed. Very much allowed, I know what you like Matt Murdock. You know what I like?”

Matt smirks, “What?”

“I like to see you play. Marci say she in your band, but I never hear your music. You have gig coming up I can see?”

Matt sighs and takes the joint from Vladimir, taking a deep breath before replying, “No, nothing booked.”

“You need to book,” Vladimir tuts, “Even if you play same songs over and over. You need to book or you die,” then adds, “Your band die.”
“You should be the one talking to Foggy. He needs your motivation.”

“He won’t book?”

“He’s fine with jamming and playing the odd show at Josie’s but we had… drama… with Mahoney which put him off the whole thing.”

“Hooyesos! Good riddance!” Vladimir spits, “I will kick his ass if he comes back!”

Matt feels the fury build in Vladimir, then dissolve as he smokes it away. It’s coming to the end of The Chrysanthegirl’s set. They save the best song for last. Halfway through the song, Vladimir taps Matt on the shoulder.

“You need to make your friend book. My brother never become famous if he not push himself. If friend won’t push, you push.”

Matt’s shaking his head and he’s about to explain Foggy’s fragility when he hears a disruption in the crowd. A spark of agitation, of aggression. He peels off the wall, seeks out the source. He hasn’t finalised the point yet but it’s coming from around the stage, maybe someone at the front of the mosh pit, where the drugs have finally kicked in. He hears screaming and not screaming to music but against horror. Matt dashes into the crowd, brushing off Vladimir trying to pull him back.

He sinks in, the ripples in the water a whirlpool at the front, rips parting the crowd. He wades between bodies, some unaware, others frightened. His mind works at a million miles an hour, calculating his route, his plan of action, his plan to deter reaction. In order to prevent another slaughter he’ll have to knock out those affected before they can do real damage, only he has no idea how many people have taken the drug. It could be only one person, or many, and they mightn’t have all taken the drug at the same time, meaning the timing of violence may vary across users. On top of that he has to make sure that everyone is safe, that includes anyone who’s taken the drug and is planning on leaving. The variables are insurmountable.

The music abruptly stops, cutting to the dull piercing calamity of noise the crowd exudes. Further in the crowd Matt isolates the spike in aggression to not in front of the stage as he had initially suspected, but on top of the stage. He scans and locates Marci, her heartbeat hammering, her breathing erratic. He gets closer without much difficulty as the crowd folds away from the stage, away from Marci stumbling forward. She throws her arms up, a spring in her ankles like she’s about to leap, to stage dive, but the crowd deflects from her, afraid. Then he smells burning. Not the burning of weed or paper or of the curve of glass, but of hair, and Matt shivers anticipating what’s going to come next.

Matt listens to Marci stumbling back across the stage. She grabs a half hollow bottle, alcohol sloshing within the glass and Matt’s running. He’s running towards her, pushing up on the stage.

“Marci!” Chrissie shouts away from the mic, “Put the beer down! You’re going to hurt yourself!”

Matt leaps and slaps the beer bottle out of Marci’s hand, pushing her to the ground. Fire flickers through the air, licks of it extinguishing due to lack of fuel. Matt tears off his jacket, holds Marci down with one knee and then smacks his jacket down on Marci’s still alight hair. The stifled air snuffs the flames but Marci struggles beneath him.

“You’re hurting me, Matt!”

Matt moves his smoky jacket to catch a travelling flame and growls, “Did you take it?”
Marci tries to push Matt’s knee off her stomach, “Take what? Get off me!”

“Accela, are you on it?”

Marci wriggles under Matt’s weight, opting to punch his thigh when Matt doesn’t budge, “I’m not on anything yet!”

Marci reaches out for another beer bottle but Chrissie slaps it away, “You drunk.”

Marci sags underneath Matt’s weight and cries, “I’m meant to be meeting Vlad after my show Matt, he’s waiting for me. Fuck Matt get off!”

No memory loss. He eases off, letting Marci sit up and drag her fingers through her burnt hair. The flames of the fireplace behind the stage roars steadily, licking out of the marble frame. It’s close to the drum set. Too close. And as someone clicks on the stereo, flooding the house with music again, he realizes what’s happened. Nothing more than an accident. Matt stands up, straightens. The party resumes as normal moments after Marci sits up, fire free. Of course he’d overreacted, jumped to conclusions. Of course he’d assumed this one spike in aggression was due to Accela.

That’s how badly he wants it. That he’d delude himself into thinking the scenario he had in his head could be real. That he could stop a mass murder, find the source of the drug and halt production all in one fell swoop. So unlikely and yet here he is. Passion and determination pulsing in his veins and yet he has no direction. No silver lining.

Matt steps off the stage and pushes his way outside, the cool night air wrapping around his neck and arms. He hugs himself warm. No silver lining. Except maybe he’s wrong about balancing the two lives he’s trying to have. Both seem to be stagnant without special attention, with his passion forced into division. Maybe if they put a record out, get to touring, get to moving out of Hell’s Kitchen… Stick mightn’t follow. Matt’s never been out of Hell’s Kitchen and it’s likely Stick hasn’t either. Beyond Stick’s boundaries he’ll be free.

He’ll have to funnel all his energy into music, which won’t be too bad. It’ll be like before. Matt trudges down the frosty hill and he’s starting to actually feel excited. Excited to transfer his energy and determination to solely music. Except Vladimir’s right. If your friend won’t push, you push. Foggy’s not going to like it but if Matt’s life is going to go anywhere at all he’ll need Foggy to move on.

**xv. whatever happened to my rock ‘n’ roll (punk song)**

Rain patters against the thick windows of the bus and Foggy adjusts the boxes on his lap, but whichever way he sits them, he can’t prevent one corner from digging into his thigh. He looks out the window, the city a blur, nothing to invest his thoughts in. On rainy days like these all Foggy feels like doing is sitting at home watching movies, having a good smoke and letting his brains melt. Who is he kidding? He’ll do that any day, except Matt won’t get off his back about making a move with recording al of a sudden. Ages of Matt being content of how things were, of understanding where Foggy was coming from when he said he didn’t feel good about recording.

For months and months it was like nothing had even changed between him and Foggy when Matt moved in. Foggy even felt like he saw Matt less. Then one day, Matt was full throttle. More determined than ever about their music. He’d quit the gym, was home most of the time and Foggy
couldn’t figure out if it was a blessing or plain annoying how Matt kept bringing up recording all the time. Scratch that, it was annoying. He had it bad enough with his Dad, he didn’t need to get it from his best friend too.

Foggy only sometimes thought Matt’s dedication was a blessing because it served as motivation for himself. After all, his apprehensiveness was frivolous. Virgin had their old tape, they liked their sound, and yet Foggy never felt good about it. That tape... cursed with bad omens, his Dad’s equipment and tarnished by a cowardly thief. It made him sick whenever he thought about it. Hence why he had hid it in the first place.

Still, he supposes that the real reason he’s apprehensive about moving on with music as a career is that he’s worried about what happens next. What if they walk into Virgin and has a similar experience as The Call’s first record? Foggy never wants to be embarrassed by his own music. He’s afraid that if Virgin signs them, they’ll want to alter their sound, over produce it all and change their whole image and vibe. Then again, he supposes that there’s no real reason for him to be worried about that because how will he know if Virgin’s going to mess them up or not if he doesn’t even give them a shot?

When it comes down to it, there shouldn’t be anything stopping him from wanting to record again. They’ve got a good drummer now. Foggy has his own bass. Greg’s even let them buy his old recording equipment for a quick buck. Foggy hadn’t even had the slightest inkling that Greg had tried it in the industry before. Guess if he never talked about it, must have meant Greg’s music was no good.

“How did you know Greggory had this junk?” Foggy asks Matt after clearing his voice.

Matt tilts his head slightly. It had taken Matt a lot of convincing and encouraging to get Foggy to come out today and neither of them were happy about the effort that it took.

“I asked him.”

“You could have just bought it from a real music store,” Then quickly adds, “Don’t tell Greg I said that.”

Matt laughs softly, then sighs as he slumps in the bus seat, “Greg was happy to help. Besides, the dollar shops up the price too much for the quality they have. We’re lucky Greg doesn’t need this anymore, and didn’t have the idea to pawn it all off already. He probably could have made more money that way.”

Foggy purses his lips, “I didn’t even know you were shopping around.”

Matt frowns. “If you don’t want to do this anymore Foggy just say it.”

He grits his teeth, glaring out the window. He doesn’t want this. He wants the band, of course. He loves their music and making music and he loves... but he doesn’t want conflict. That’s what ruins bands, ruins relationships. He’s already mad at Matt for making him get up in the morning and he knows he shouldn’t be angry. Matt’s doing this for his own good, yet he can’t shake it. What if everything implodes when they go on tour? High tension and jealousy and nowhere to run but dissolve, The Brian Jonestown Massacre style. In a way he knows it won’t happen. Matt’s as skilled as Anton Newcombe but he’s far from nuts. And if working in Ed’s studio wasn’t enough of an indication of how well he and Matt work together, then the way they make music together seamlessly should.

Foggy’s mainly worried that the addition of Marci would rock things too much. He’s certain as hell
that Matt’s not going to reciprocate his feelings but Matt and Marci seem pretty close… If they ever became… a thing… Foggy’s not sure how long he could turn a blind eye. And if not Marci, then maybe the fans might get to him. Matt’s a handsome dude, girls would be all over him if he’d let them. And honestly if Foggy had to witness that shit and pretend he’s okay with it, then… maybe he’s just going to have to get over it. Conflict in bands over girls or relationships has got to be the most common factor to bands breaking up. And when it comes down to it, he’s not sure if he could cut Matt out of his life. Even if something awful happens between them, it’d have to be pretty bad.

“I’m serious about this band. Marci’s serious about it – so long as we decide on a name before she dubs as Boysanbarry.”

“That’s the worst name. Worse than Chrysanthegirls.”

“At least someone’s actually called Chris. Foggy,” Matt sits up to grip Foggy’s arm, “You might have to change your name to Barry to make it work.”

Foggy should laugh but instead he sounds vindictive, “I’m already gonna change my name. Marci should change hers.”

Matt’s hand slips from his arm and Foggy watches Matt hunch in his seat again. Foggy immediately regrets being resentful, a string of jokes lining up under his tongue but he holds them back. He just needs to get home, out of the rain, and have a good smoke. That should calm him down. Hopefully.

“Greg should’ve given us some tarp to cover this junk. We’re gonna get soaked the second we get off this bus,” Foggy grumbles after a while.

“I told you to bring an umbrella,” Matt states from beside him.

Foggy glares at Matt, “What, can you smell a storm a mile away? It was sunny when we left this morning!”

Matt taps his stick standing between his thighs. “I have change, we’ll call Ed on a payphone.”

Foggy turns to glare at the black boxes piled up in front of his face, “We’ve got cash left over. We’ll call a taxi.”

“You know you don’t have to cut him off at every corner. He’s just trying to help.”

Foggy sighs, trying to quench the bitterness threatening to pour out of his mouth. “I know,” He admits finally, “I know he is. I just don’t want people to get the idea that my Dad helped me, us, get famous, or I’m going to forever doubt our credibility. How would you like it if we became famous because we’re that band with the blind guy who can play guitar real good?”

Matt shakes his head, laughing, “It’s unavoidable. People are going to think what they want to think.”

“Whatever,” Foggy replies, wrapping his arms around the boxes, “So long as we start out honestly, the truth’s always going to be there right from the start.”
“You know what I’ve been thinking?” Ed begins. He throws a couple of grapes in his mouth and chews them as he continues, “I should start charging you kids rent the moment the pay checks start rolling in.”

“Dad,” Foggy says sternly.

Ed pops a handful of grapes in his mouth, “I’m serious. You ain’t even kids anymore. You’re gonna have to start living in the real world and that means paying rent for the house you live in.”

They’re watching baseball because there’s nothing else on until half six when Ed wants to watch his soap. Foggy sits cross legged on his arm chair, a comic in his lap, and his Dad’s slumped in his chair, gut sitting higher than the arm of the chair.

“You know why I moved out when I was 16?”

“Because Grandma and Grandad were the most annoying people on Earth?”

Ed scoffs, “No, son. Because you can’t live with your parents forever. It’s tradition for any Nelson kid to move out when they’re 18, and I beat it by two years.”

“Guess I missed my window then.”

“You have six months left. But instead of moving out you’ve gone and got someone else in. That’s not how it’s meant to go.”

“Dad is this your way of telling me we need to find our own place?”

“Yes son. I’ve been looking forward to walking around naked again for eighteen long years.”

“Gross, Dad.”

Ed shrugs, “It’s Mother nature’s will.”

Foggy sighs, “I’ll look at real estate if you let me watch something of my choice before your soap starts.”

“It’s not a soap,” Ed snaps.

Foggy lifts an eyebrow, “Dad. It’s a soap. Now, do we have a deal?”

Ed purses his lips, “There’s always a catch isn’t there. Alright. You have... twenty five minutes for the show… And I’m giving you six month extension to move out. Got it?”

Foggy grins. February’s ages away. He puts his comic aside and wanders over to their VHS collection. He pulls out The Wild One and clacks it into the player. He’s conscious of time as he holds the rewind button, each second of rolling film cutting into watching time. Finally it’s all rewound and he hits play. He sits back in his chair, leans over to take some of Ed’s grapes and then tucks his feet in to watch the movie. Well, twenty minutes of it.

There’s the image of the road, one line dividing it in two. The short text blurb disappears. One minute of silence. All he can see is the slight movements in the shadows of the trees cast over the bitumen road.

“You gonna unmute it kiddo?” Ed questions.

Foggy nods and he scoots back in front of the tv, rewinds to the start again and makes sure the
volume’s nice and loud. He sits back and watches the same minute again, this time with sound. The motorbikes drive toward the camera in a thunderous herd, one screeches in front of the lens, then it cuts to Marlon Brando. Black aviator sunglasses, biker’s cap, and leather jacket. And man, the bikes. Foggy’s wanted to get his motorbike license ever since he saw this movie. Too bad his Dad won’t let him. Maybe if he moved out he could go for the test without Ed knowing. Show up in the driveway on an old Honda motorbike, the full get up.

After the credits roll, the biker gang pulls into the township. Brando gets off his bike and the camera pauses on his back, showing off the gang’s name. B.R.M.C. written in block letters above a picture of a skull and crossbones. Foggy’s watched this movie a thousand times. He knows every line, every joke, every sound of music before it even starts. So when his Dad tells him his 25min is up he has to stop at the dancing in the bar. He kneels in front of the TV, hanging on to the last bit of conversation.

“Hey somebody tell me what that means?” The lady’s going to say say, “B.R.M.C.? What does it mean?”

“Black Rebels Motorcycle Club.”

“Isn’t that cute? Hey Johnny, what are you rebelling against?”

Then Brando’s Johnny is going to drum the jukebox and say, “What’ve ya got?”

And then Ed’s going to say, “Foggy you better turn the channels back right now or…” and he nods his head side to side as the line rings true.

The video ejects and Foggy pops it back in the worn out case. He returns to his chair, picks up the comic again but the iconography of the gang’s leather jackets brands his mind.

Foggy spells it out, “Black Rebels Motorcycle Club. That’s a cool name.”

“Yeah, real cool name,” Ed agrees flatly, already absorbed in his soap.

“Cool enough for a band name?” Foggy asks, tossing away his comic.

“Sure,” Ed says but Foggy knows he’s not listening anymore.

Foggy pushes out of his arm chair and heads down the hall. He’s hoping Matt’s home. Since quitting the gym he usually is but there’s no way for Foggy to know unless he knocks on Matt’s door himself. Matt doesn’t seem to like coming in the main house for some reason. And he doesn’t like to talk about it much either. Foggy’s pushing through the back door, the screen door smacking back on the frame as he steps out on the long grass. Matt’s probably not home. The one time Foggy has something important to talk to him about, he’ll be out.

Turns out Matt’s not out, but it’s kind of worse.

He bursts into the garage and his guts drop right to his feet the moment he registers moaning. Moaning. Coming from Matt. This is what he fucking gets for not knocking. For a split second he kind of sees Matt’s head, like he’s sitting or kneeling in front of the couch. And on the couch sits Marci. As soon as Foggy enters the room, Matt strands straight up. Marci only turns her head. Givens him a look. They weren’t meant to have practice today were they?


Foggy’s speechless at first. He watches Matt sway a bit, grab onto the arm of the couch. Marci
simply yawns, then throws her hair back over her shoulders. What in the fuck did he just walk in on?

“Sorry… for interrupting…” Foggy says too loud, starts to back up, hand fumbling for the handle to the door.

It looks like Matt’s about to say something but Marci talks over him, “Oh stop acting like we were fucking Foggy! I was just giving him a massage!”

Foggy’s squints at Marci and he’s fumbling for the handle still when Matt speaks up.

“No, stay Foggy. You wanted to tell me something?”

Foggy finds the handle and grips the cold metal. He stares at Matt, his cheeks flushed red, his lips parted and Foggy hopes he’ll never forget the sound of Matt’s moaning… Maybe one day he’ll be the one making Matt moan instead of Marci.

Foggy glances at the ground as he speaks, “I ugh… it’s not important.”

Matt comes closer but stops when he hears Foggy move the handle down, the lock held back.

“I think it might be important,” Matt says softly.

“Spit it out Foggybear,” Marci barks.

He tucks a strand of hair behind his ear and says, “I had an idea for our name. Our band name. I’m sorry I should have knocked, I wasn’t thinking.”

Foggy lets go of the handle then to gesture at the door. The metal snaps back into a neutral position.

Matt smiles, “It’s fine. You really weren’t interrupting us at all. It sounds… weird, but Marci gives good massages.”

“Okay.”

Foggy relaxes a little. It sounds like the truth. At least they’re both fully clothed.

Marci turns to face Foggy, throwing her arms over the back of the couch. “So what have you thought of honey bear?”

“Well, I was just watching The Wild One–“

“Of course,” Marci says.

“–And I’ve always liked Brando’s gang name. B.R.M.C.”

Foggy steps closer to Matt. He looks up at Matt and sees this smile creep on his face. He can tell Matt’s thinking about it, agreeing with it.

“Well, is somebody gonna tell me what that means?” Marci asks from the couch.

Foggy laughs, “Black Rebels Motorcycle Club.”

Matt nods, “I like it… How about we drop the S on ‘rebels’? Trust me, it sounds better.”
Marci pouts, her arms stretching out over the back of the couch, “Black... Rebel Motorcycle Club. It’s alright. It’s no Boysenbarry …or BrosanFoggy. I just thought of that now. That’s much better than B.R.M.C. don’t you guys think?”

“No!” Foggy and Matt cry at the same time.

Foggy grins. He gives Matt’s shoulder a quick squeeze as he stands next to him. Marci then throws herself back on the cushions of the couch, hogging the space.

“Just in time Foggy. Just in time. Tomorrow we were going to go to sign as Abstract Dragon, ha!” She lets out a deep sigh, then adds, “You guys are really getting your shit together aren’t you?”

Foggy watches Matt lift Marci’s legs up and sit on the couch underneath them.

Matt asks, “Will you stay?”

At this, she leaps up and darts over to the drum kit. She slams her foot on the bass drum once, “I shall! I’m gonna to say goodbye to the girls,” Then drums twice, “And say goodbye to Ivy league schools,” then drums short solos in between each shout, “Goodbye Harvard! Goodbye Brown! Goodbye Yale! And Goodbye Columbia!!”

Matt rounds the couch and picks up his Gibson, starts playing to Marci’s drumming. Foggy laughs and goes to pick up his bass too, plugs in the amp. But the second he plugs it in there’s a spark of electricity. He yanks the cord out and drops it to the ground, a fizzling noise coming from the amp.

“Aw man,” Foggy sighs.

“We need new shit!” Marci shouts.

“We need new everything,” Matt says, slinging his guitar off his shoulder.

Foggy sets his bass on the rack and says, “Let’s do that. Let’s make music, sell records, make **money.**”

“But you can’t about that Foggy.”

“It’s about the art of music;” Marci says, dropping her drum sticks on the floor as she stands up.

“I know, but it could be, just a little… a smidge?”

Matt grins and Foggy’s locked into this film loop of Matt’s enchanting smile and he can’t fucking look away, so he forces himself to speak. “Hey, let’s eat out tonight. Celebrate our last night of freedom before we’re contractually obliged to put out records.”

Matt grins wider and before Foggy can melt into nothing, Marci says to him, “Sounds like you’re buying Foggy.”

It’s taking him hours to get himself out of bed. In his defence, the clouds cloaking the sky make it hard to tell what time of day it is. No way is he going to allow himself to get up before midday with his Dad out of town. Pretty convenient if you ask Foggy, considering the amount of preparation his
Dad has left him to do for the coming week. Foggy bites his lip. It’s unfair to think that. Ed’s friend needs him but could the timing be any worse? Foggy has three days to clean the house and prepare for the Nelson’s version of a festival. One long week of close contact with the extended family and he’s not getting any help making sure the house is presentable from the guy who’s expecting it all to be done by the time he comes home.

It’s a wonder Foggy’s putting it off considering the length of the list.

When he does finally get up, Foggy wanders into the kitchen and grabs out a bowl and spoon. Big families means they have to have big cooking equipment. Foggy swears he’s never seen a soup pot bigger than the one they have. It’s a staple across the Nelson family too. Perfect size for everyone, plus seconds. He spoons out enough to fill one bowl and chucks it in the microwave oven. While his breakfast, or lunch or whatever, is heating up he rolls a fat smoke. His Dad was pretty clear about making sure the drugs were out of the house by the time Christmas Eve comes around. He seemed pretty cut about missing out on smoking it all with Foggy and Matt but it’s probably the only good thing about his Dad going away for a few days. Means for once Ed’s not the one to hog all the pot.

The microwave dings and he takes it out, gives it a stir then heats it up for another round. He’d kind of been hoping the Nelson celebration was going to be held at some other relative’s house. That way he could try and opt out of it. The year of 1999, the year the millennium rolled over, Foggy had sat inside the family home in Montclair watching the fireworks go off on the TV. He’d been too afraid to smoke anything. Not only because the extended family disapproved of his and Ed’s lifestyle choices but because he was afraid that if the world was really about to end then he’d better be awake as hell.

He’d been sitting on the floor of the small living room, the Nelsons all squashed in like matchsticks and every time the camera did a close up on the fireworks exploding he’d get a shiver down his spine. He shouldn’t have felt empty, or alone, but he did. The Nelsons oo-ed and ah-ed around him and made a general fuss about the business on the screen and they were his family, they loved him and yet the most important person to Foggy was missing. Every loud crack of an explosion made Foggy think of Matt, wondering if he was okay, what he was doing, if he could hear the similar festivities back in Hell’s Kitchen.

The microwave dings again and Foggy eases the bowl out with an oven mitt around one hand. He takes the steaming bowl around to the lounge room, tucking his legs in as he sits on his arm chair. He takes the joint out from between his teeth and leaves it burning slowly on the coffee table as he eats.

The thing was, Matt didn’t seem to want to believe that he was part of the family. He’d point blank refused to come. Politely of course. And in a way Foggy didn’t blame him. A full week of festivities with the Nelson’s hadn’t ever sounded like the best idea in the world but it’s a family tradition. And it can be pretty fun if you’re drunk enough. The extended weren’t pleased to hear that the newest addition to the Nelson family wasn’t attending. The only answer Foggy had been able to get out of his friend was that Matt thought he’d feel out of place. No matter what Foggy did, he couldn’t change Matt’s opinion on that.

Foggy feels bad talking down on his family. It’s not like they’re bad people. Sure they can be extremely loud and obnoxious but they were prepared to welcome Matt with outstretched arms.

They’d made a bed for him next to Foggy’s, accommodating in their own way in that the selected bedroom was a bigger one than Foggy’s usual. Only it was wallpapered in pastel pink, a strip of
painted creepy dolls lining the top quarter of each wall. It seemed perfect, to his Dad, to slot Foggy and Matt in the room no guest wanted to be in since Matt couldn’t even see how unpleasant it was in there. In the end he’d had to vie for his usual room back. Suited him better. Matchbox size but cosy. No creepy red eyed dolls glaring down at him all week, and no empty bed beside him.

Still, it seems like some kind of purposeful manipulation of the system which decreed that Ed would host the Christmas week again. There’s meant to be a seven year gap and yet here they are again, three years later. Foggy can’t help but suspect it might be something to do with the debut album release date being early next year. It didn’t take long to re-record their demo. By that time Marci knew all their songs on it, plus the stuff that didn’t make it on the 14 track demo. They’d actually tried sending it to other labels but none had enough interest as Virgin. Reprise Records wouldn’t even take them because they were too similar to The Jesus and Mary Chain. So they’d stuck with Virgin. Foggy had been won over when Virgin allowed them to mix an album themselves. The agents liked their music, sure, but the technicians got pissed off trying to work with him and Matt. They kept trying to help Foggy and Matt make a sound but the sound they wanted couldn’t be described in the technician’s language.

In the end they had to cut the content down. Neither of them were happy about it. Only Ed and the label thought it was a good idea, enabling them to extend their career. They kept six tracks off the demo, added five that didn’t make it in the first place and have a release date for early February, 2001. Foggy thinks maybe if he hadn’t told Liam the release date then maybe the rest of the Nelson’s wouldn’t have known. It would be boasting fodder for the whole family to have a preview of it before the release. Honestly, Foggy doesn’t even think his Dad agreed to hosting at all. The Nelsons wanted it to happen, so it’s happening.

Foggy finishes his meal and washes up. His to-do list pulsates on the fridge behind him and when he’s done cleaning his bowl he can’t walk passed the fridge without seeing it in the corner of his eyes. He snatches it off, sighing as he skims over the list. He’s going to need a soundtrack to motivate himself. Shoving the list in his dressing gown pocket, he leaps over to the record player, opens up the cupboard and fishes out *Moby Grape* (1967). He clacks the record in and lets the music fill his ears. He spins around and is about to leap back into the kitchen to grab cleaning supplies when he jumps at seeing Matt standing in the living room.

“So sorry, I ugh, didn’t mean to scare you,” Matt says sheepishly.

Still startled, Foggy doesn’t say anything. Matt almost never comes into the main house in his own accord. Might have something to do with the blood red bruises around Matt’s right eye.

“Dude what happened to your eye?”

Matt half lifts a hand then drops it to his side, “Nothing I… met up with an old friend of sorts… he didn’t agree with me quitting the boxing club.”

“So he punched you in the face?!”

“No,” Matt grimaces, “He left me at the ugh… bar and I had a bit of difficulty getting home.”

Foggy steps closer to Matt, “Some friend he is! You should’ve called me, I could’ve picked you up.”

“Didn’t Ed take the truck?”

Foggy rolls his eyes, “I meant by bus, but whatever, if this ever happens again you need to call me, it makes me sick to death when you tell me shit like this.”
“Sorry,” Matt whispers, then, after a moment’s silence, Matt rubs the back of his neck and asks, “What’s this song, The Beatles?”

Foggy looks up at his friend, the bruise a hot juxtaposition against his pale skin. He has the ultimate urge to reach out and touch Matt’s face but he holds back.

“No… no it’s Moby Grape. Most underrated train wreck of a band.”

Matt laughs, “I see.”

“It’s funny you said The Beatles though. Paul McCartney actually stole a lot of their bass lines and style and never gave them credit for it!”

“Sounds about right.”

“Anyway,” Foggy starts, wrapping the cord of his dressing gown around his waist, “I was just about to get on with the housework.”

He brushes passed Matt, intent on going straight for the cleaning material under the sink but freezes when matt catches onto his elbow. Matt’s gripped him hard and he looks at Matt’s face, frowning and stern and Foggy’s breathless, out of words. He covers Matt’s hand with his to let him know it’s too tight, and Matt softens his clutch. There’s a long drawn out minute of silence between them and Foggy watches Matt’s lips quaver like he’s about to say something that’s been weighing on him. Instead, Matt abruptly lets go of Foggy, steps back.

Foggy rubs his elbow as he speaks, “I don’t know if Dad told you or not but we’re hosting the Christmas party this year. There’s no way you can miss out on it this time.”

The last part is meant to be a joke but it doesn’t sound like it. Maybe because he didn’t actually mean it as a joke. His wrath is as strong as the Nelson’s last year’s and likely this year too because Marci already told him that Matt isn’t going to be sticking around for the party. That’s probably why he’s in here in the first place. At least the guy’s got the common courtesy to let Foggy in on the fact.

“I wasn’t planning on it,” Matt says under his breath.

Foggy turns his back on Matt and crouches in front of the cupboard under the sink, “I thought you were going to stay at Marci’s again?”

He opens up the cupboard as Matt replies, “No, I never said that.”

Foggy’s shuffling through the junk, empty bottles bouncing around in the cupboard because apparently no one in this house knows how to throw out what’s used.

“Marci told me you were,” Foggy says over his shoulder, fire on his tongue.

Matt speaks up over the noise Foggy’s making, “She has the wrong idea. Foggy, I… want to help you.”

Foggy stands up to glare at his friend, “Oh yeah, and how exactly are you going to help Matt?”

Matt doesn’t ignite the fire and he replies calmly, “I can be surprisingly helpful. What’s on the list?”

But the fire’s already lit for Foggy. He snatches out the list from his pocket and reads it out, “Tidy
all rooms, wipe down all surfaces, vacuum, wash all dishes even the ones we never use, clean windows inside and out, bleach bathroom, wash all linen, set up beds, mow yard, prune the marijuana, set up rubbish buns, and last but not least, smoke all the weed.”

Matt raises an eyebrow, “I can definitely help with the last one, but wouldn’t it be better to save it?”

Foggy shoves the list back in his pocket and shakes his head, “My Aunt rifles through everything.”

No matter where Foggy’s tried to hide their stash, she’ll find it and throw it away. One time he was so sure she would never find their stash hidden on top of the rafters in the garage, but somehow she did. Flushed it all away. May as well put it to use if that’s the only way to stop her.

“All right. There’s still a lot to get done, let me help you.”

It might take longer with Matt making mistakes along the way, all of which Foggy’s going to have to fix up. The fire in his belly flickers but it would be good to have help, or at least someone to talk to. Plus, he’s looking forward to being with Matt without Marci hanging around too. Only, if Matt’s not staying at Marci’s like he did last year, hopefully that doesn’t mean she’ll be crashing their party.

Matt hadn’t been as difficult as Foggy had expected. Then again, looking back, he can’t remember doing much work himself. It was all kind of a blur. For all he knew, Matt was the one cleaning up after him rather than the other way around. Naturally they took regular smoke breaks to get through the stash. Between furiously gurgling weed they’d spent their time doing their best at checking off the items on Ed’s list before the Nelsons claimed their stakes in the Hell’s Kitchen abode.

Then on the morning of Christmas Eve, they’d awaited Ed’s arrival by seeing who could smoke the most. Foggy was listening out for the rumble of the van down the street but with every passing truck he only got more anxious and frustrated. His Dad told him he’d be back before the relatives arrive. He didn’t want to have the responsibility of entertaining them before Ed decided to show his face. So when Foggy spots Marci trudging up the driveway, it’s an understatement to say that Foggy’s been pissed off. She’s the last person he wants to see.

She shuffles up the white driveway, her black fur coat spiking against the soft snow. Foggy watches her from the living room window, squints as she walks into the garage and walks straight back out again. She then trudges up to the house and, again, doesn’t bother knocking. Matt sways as he stands up to greet her. She throws her arms around him and Foggy can’t stand to look. He glares out the window and tries earnestly to melt the snow outside with his gaze alone.

“Matty, what happened to your eye?” Marci queries.

Foggy’s determined on obtaining laser vision but he uses the reflection in the glass to watch what’s happening. Marci’s close to Matt, touching his face, and it’s hard to tell in the window pane but he thinks Matt might have his hands on her waist.

“It’s nothing,” Foggy watches him step back, goes to sit on the couch, “I was careless.”

Marci shrugs out of her coat and the black movement in the corner of his eye makes him turn to
her, watching in disgust as she takes a seat on Ed’s armchair. She goes for the bong immediately, taking a quick hit before sprawling in the chair.

“Rough day?” Matt asks with a small frown on his brow.

“It will be Matty,” She sighs deeply, “I have to pick the ‘rents up from the airport.”

Matt sounds surprised, “They’re returning?”

“Yeah they’ve been doing conferences tours in Europe, remember? Missed my graduation and everything.” She reaches for the bong again before Foggy can have another go and holds onto the glass as she continues, “I don’t even want them to come back. Do you think if I never went to get them, they’d never come home?”

“They wouldn’t have forgotten their address,” Matt replies.

“Why wouldn’t they have? They’ve been overseas for three god damn years. I forget what they look like! What if Mom has short hair now, or if Dad has a beard, or if they changed their hair colour I’d be completely lost. I could take home the wrong parents.”

“Three years…” Matt says, “That’s a long time to be away from your parents.”

“Says the orphan, ha!” Marci retorts, “Sorry, that was cruel. But speaking of, where’d Ed at? I wanna talk to him about borrowing the van for the rent’s luggage and all the presents they’ve neglected to give me over the years.”

“Dad took the van,” Foggy says bluntly.

Marci sits up, “Took it where? The shops? Transylvania?”


“What, why? On Christmas Eve? What kind of parent does that? Apart from my own, obviously,” She sinks further in Ed’s arm chair and sighs, “I’ll have to catch a taxi. This is the worst. If Ma and Pa come back I won’t be able to walk around the house naked anymore.”

She pouts and Foggy glances between her and Matt, catches a small smile from Matt.

She adds, “I’ll have to lie about Columbia too.”

“Columbia?” Matt asks.

Marci waves a hand in front of her face, “I know I said I would forget about college but I worked so hard Matt! I had to apply or I’d felt like my hard work was all for nothing.”

“Are you going to college then?” Foggy says.

Marci turns her head to one side and glares at Foggy, “Don’t sound too excited Foggybear, I’m not leaving yet. I’ve deferred. Don’t tell the ‘rents alright? I’m going to work something out, maybe pretend I’m moving on campus so they’ll get off my back about studying. Fake studying does not sound fun.”

“Shouldn’t be hard for you to think of something since you’re so good at lying,” Foggy states.

Marci narrows her eyes but before she can say anything, Matt interjects, “What he means is that there was some kind of misunderstanding about who I was going to spend Christmas with, and I
recall discussing with you about how I hadn’t decided yet.”

“And you told me Matt was staying with you.”

Marci shakes her head, “At the time, Foggy, that’s what I understood was happening. Same as last year. Look, I don’t have time for this,” She stands up, tugging on her coat, “You guys have distracted me for far too long. If Ed can’t lend me the van I’m going to have to catch a taxi and Lord knows how long it will take me to get to the airport on Christmas Eve.”

She sweeps around to Matt on the couch and drops a kiss on his cheek. Foggy can’t see it too well because of Marci’s large coat but he can hear the smack of her lips on skin and he really shouldn’t be angry about this. Matt can date whoever he wants. Just look at the guy, any girl would be overjoyed with him. He’d just rather they not shove it in his face. Besides, Marci rubs him the wrong way.

Before Marci leaves, she fishes out two small packages from large pockets lining the inside of her coat. She squats to tuck them in underneath the Christmas tree in the corner of the room, but sends Foggy a vindictive glare as she does so. She then makes her leave.

At the front door she calls out, “Kind of regret not wrapping up coal for you Foggy, you’ve never once been nice to me all year! Too bad Matt’s such a good influence on me!”

Marci kicks the door shut and Foggy burns her sooty back with his eyes as she trudges down the snowy driveway. He watches her until she disappears behind the fence, then tears his eyes away from her shadow. He gets up to brush off Ed’s chair, sweeping away the remnants of Marci, tiny sharp icicles and loose fur.

“Matt, are you…” He begins, still tidying up his Dad’s favoured chair, “You would tell me if you were dating someone, right?”

Matt doesn’t miss a beat, “Of course.”

Foggy furrows his brows. He remains silent, cuing Matt in for revealing that he’s dating Marci but it never comes. He sits back down again, crosses his legs. It would make sense really, if they were dating. They seem to spend a lot of time together. And on one hand Foggy wants to be mad at Matt for lying to him, and yet on the other, when has Matt ever lied to him? He’s the most honest person Foggy knows.

Suddenly Matt sits up, starts straightening his jacket and smoothing out the creases in his pants.

“Did we finish all the pot?” He asks, voice tight.

“Well,” Foggy starts, glancing over at the empty bong on the coffee table, “Marci had the last of it, so yeah. It’s all gone,” He eyes Matt’s abrupt nervousness and adds, “Why? You having withdrawals already?”

Matt’s lips go thin and he says, “No, I –“

Matt stops mid-sentence and barely a second later, a rumbling departs from the street. Foggy stands up to peer out the window and sees an enormous caravan trundle up the driveway. It’s just after lunch and Ed wasn’t the first to arrive, and he definitely isn’t the second either, much to Foggy’s dismay. The driver parks the caravan underneath the willow tree in the yard, forcing the branches to form an umbrella over the vehicle. Foggy’s Great Aunt then leaps down from the stairwell and marches toward the main house. Behind her streams a line of Nelson relatives and as soon as the front door’s open, he’s forced into the arms every single one of them.
He greets them with damp eyes and slurred speech as they all pile into the house. His Great Aunt wastes no time to scour the house for pharmaceuticals. Foggy’s confident that the only thing she’s going to be able to find is aspirin, so he doesn’t put up an inch of a fight.

Of course they’d all been excited to meet Matt. They’d asked him about his eye and to save going through the story a million times, he’d relayed what he told Marci. That he hadn’t been careful. But he doesn’t let them dwell on him and pushes on about their relation to Foggy, and how their trip was and what they want to get out of their week’s stay. Foggy helps his never ending line of relatives arrange their luggage and beds in the garage and all the while he’s paying more attention to the words that are coming out of Matt’s mouth than the instructions and bickering from his family. Except the moment he thinks he can leave a cousin alone and go and see what Matt’s up to, another group arrives and the business repeats.

The business occurs in the traditional pattern. The older folk get to cooking the various meals in preparation for the coming week, leaving the younger relatives to prance around the house with tinsel draped around their shoulders and baubles hanging off their ears and fingers. As the afternoon wears on the house is swamped with three things. Nelsons, the smell of good food, and glitter. And his Dad still hasn’t arrived.

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**xvi. awake**

Matt leans against the trunk of the willow tree, fishes out the cigarette he’d received from Foggy’s Uncle Roy. Roy had commented on him guzzling beer like it was 1999 and had slipped him a cigarette. Matt had taken it for an excuse to go outside. He’d tried distracting his senses with deep conversation with Foggy’s relatives but the asbestos was always flickering in the background, making him want to vomit. He’d only been drinking so much because he supposed getting hammered drunk was the only way he was going to be able to get through being inside the main house for so long. And maybe he’d been a little excessive because he’d remembered this night was only the first night of seven.

He clicks the lighter and burns his cigarette. He wonders if he keeps smoking all his life he’ll be able to pinpoint exactly where the lung cancer starts to form before doctors can even find it on x-rays. The snowfall is light and Matt can barely hear the snow settle on old friends within the dome of the willow tree branches. The noise from the house resonates across the blank yard, amplifying the sounds. Matt can hear Foggy inside still. He wonders if Foggy’s noticed he’s gone.

Ed had arrived later than expected. With Ed’s absence, Foggy assumed responsibility of keeping his relatives out of Ed’s bedroom and studio. Matt had tried to help Foggy out as much as he could, help calm his nerves. The weather mightn’t have been bad in Manhattan, but there could be a snowstorm in Pennsylvania for all they knew. Foggy had herded the adults into the kitchen and Matt had played various games with the kids. Every so often Matt could sense a quiet in Foggy’s throat, a swell in his heart. The kitchen was too full and busy for Matt to be sure, love is not an easy emotion to read.

Finally Ed had arrived late into the night but that didn’t stop the Nelsons from demanding music. Foggy had fought the family off for so long, Matt shared the disappointment with how easily Ed caved. Matt guessed Ed’s resolve had collapsed from the drive, or the time, or from his emotional visit with his friend. His wife on her deathbed on Christmas Eve.

The Nelsons all pile into the studio, fighting for the front row seat. Ed had exhaustion lathering his
throat and fingers so Matt and Foggy play acoustic. They decided on the first two songs before they started, and after that, Matt played whatever came to him and Foggy filled in the gaps. Matt had actually liked playing super out of it. He’ll never forget their songs but the alcohol made everything liquefy. The music sounded different in that sound proof room, broken by the spillage of Nelsons out the door. Even though the music was unplugged it sounded like a hollow echo, and as they went through a handful of their songs, all Matt could hear was their guitars, their voices and their breathing between each lyric.

At the end of their impromptu secret show, the Nelsons had launched in on them like starved lions. They chattered and buzzed and with their music fading into the night, pushed away by a record in the stereo, he had started to feel overwhelmed. It wasn’t easy to get out either. He’d had to slowly speed date his way through the crowd until he was close enough to the back door to slip out. The first breath of icy night air a relief to his senses.

The cold numbs his bruises. People can only see the tip of the iceberg, the likely deep purple bruise across his right eye. Underneath his clothes, Stick dealt more damage than was necessary. Or maybe it was necessary for Stick. He’d found Matt taking his usual route from Marci’s to Foggy’s. Caught him up on a dirty rooftop. Even aware and clean, Matt had still lost. Proof for Stick’s regret. The final motivation for his master to give up on the student.

Matt hadn’t got up for ages. Hadn’t wanted to get up until he’d his numb mind had time to reflect. He’d deduced he was no good at seeking the fight. At instigation. The only thing he was good at was letting things come for him. And maybe he shouldn’t be trying to fight off what’s coming, let violence steam roll towards him and he’ll see what he’s capable of doing. When it happens. Because in terms of what he wants out of life, of what life wants out of him, all he really strongly cares about anymore is music. And his friends. And if his music made the world a better place, well, that would be an added bonus, but that would only happen with dedication, without the split passion he’d been trying to achieve. He knew it after he’d failed to prevent accela from spreading across the city, but it hadn’t been concrete until he’d faced his omens. Stick reminded him of his deadly sins.

The tobacco breathes life into his lungs, contrary to popular belief. His mind is still slippery, washy, but being out in the cold with his cigarette, he starts to feel more awake. He becomes painfully aware of how exposed he is. Stick could pluck him at any second. Since Stick’s last encounter he’s been wondering if Stick stalks him. Notes his every move. Knows when to get him alone. Matt's got high hopes for Stick to leave him be, considering he never encountered Stick on the BJM tour. He's practically itching for February to come around so he can move the hell out of this kitchen, see if Stick’s got the guts to go beyond his boundaries.

Matt holds the cigarette between his teeth and listens. There’s a disruption by the back door of the house, the screen door clangs on the hinges. Padding of feet through the snow, a familiar cough. Foggy breaks away the snow laden branches as he enters the leafy igloo, snow dropping around his feet, ice hitting ice.

“There you are, almost thought you’d left,” Foggy says as he comes to stands before Matt, “You feeling alright?”

Foggy smells of cinnamon and sugar and beer and Matt can hear Foggy’s heart beat so strong, so swollen like it did earlier inside the house.

“I’m fine, just needed some air.”

Foggy steps closer and there’s hesitation in his throat. Matt hears Foggy swallow it hard and maybe it’s the alcohol, maybe it’s because the universe knows Matt’s turning a new leaf because Foggy
reaches out to him and gently touches his bruise.

“It’s black,” Foggy murmurs.

Foggy’s touch is like a dull fire, like cold hands under hot water, and Matt can feel Foggy’s warm breath on his face. Foggy grazes his fingertips over Matt’s right temple, brings them across Matt’s brow, then drops away. Matt catches Foggy’s hand and holds it.

“Foggy, can I touch your face?”

“W-why?”

“I uh, want to know what you look like.”

Foggy pauses, heart in his throat, and he says, “Alright.”

Matt pushes off the tree trunk and takes hold of Foggy’s arm to steady him, then reaches his other hand up Foggy’s forearm, his shoulder, and starts at his neck. He’s always wondered what Foggy looks like. He has the understanding that Foggy isn’t handsome, but he’s not ugly either, whatever that means. He finds long hair, moves it aside to brush his fingers beneath Foggy’s ear. He hears Foggy’s heart beat through the thin skin.

From Foggy’s earlobe he traces across Foggy’s cheekbone, bumps against Foggy’s nose, round and stone cold. He thumbs up the bridge of Foggy’s nose, skates out over Foggy’s brow like his friend touched him earlier. Then slides down Foggy’s temple. But he doesn’t pull away then, because if he’s to stop fighting it all off he needs to give up to Foggy, let him come to him if that’s what’s meant to be. He drags his fingers down Foggy’s jaw line and touches Foggy’s lips which part under his touch. Matt feels Foggy’s damp breath on his fingertips and the rush of blood elsewhere and why stop when Matt’s already a sinner?
B.R.M.C.

Chapter Summary

The start of their professional music career looks dark when it looks like Marci has extracted herself from Hell's Kitchen entirely. Foggy should probably care more but it grants him the capacity to be selfish with Matt whenever she's gone.

This chapter was beta read by wtchcool <3

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the slow update on this one. December/January was such an intense time. I've made some minor changes to the previous parts, including chronologically numbering each chapter and altering the character of Billy back to Brett Mahoney. Hope that isn't too confusing now.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

part iii

B.R.M.C.

[2001-2002]
xvii. as sure as the sun

It's New Year's Eve and most of Foggy's relatives have passed out before midnight. His Dad passed out long before the sun even set, exhausted from the longest week of entertaining. Only a few of his relatives have persevered to stay awake. Those who had grip the couch in front of the TV for prime ball dropping viewing. Their eyes look red and dry, but wide, glued to the glow of the screen. It's minutes away from midnight and Foggy tugs Matt out of the living room, away from the sea of snoring Nelsons, and into his bedroom.

He kneels in front of the window, dry carpet crumpling under his knees. Alcohol warms his belly and dances within his quivering fingertips when he connects his hand with Matt's, pulling Matt down beside him. Foggy can't stop grinning. He hasn't had the desire to smoke since he found Matt under the Willow tree. A perpetual high since Matt began to let him close.

Foggy had kept his eyes shut when Matt touched his face but when Matt's rough fingertips stopped around his lips, Foggy had opened his eyes. He'd seen how Matt looked with his still eyes searching through his fingers, how his lips were parted, how thin skin cornered his wet lips. His family seemed to know just when to interrupt them. Liam had howled for them from the doorstep of the main house, jolting them out of their reverie. And even though they hadn't kissed, it was the closest Foggy had ever gotten to Matt. Disregarding the innocence of holding his arm while walking, Matt had always knocked back his advances should Foggy have the bravery to make one.

It's not as if Foggy ever made his moves blatantly obvious though. And he showed his affection for Matt very rarely. Maybe that was part of the problem - why nothing had happened between them for so long no matter how much Foggy pined for it to occur. Maybe he just needs to get hammered
more often. Let awkwardness and hesitation fade to bravery. Still, he'll never forget that moment under the snow laden tree, the branches forming a crystalised warm dome, Matt's fingers rough like the bark of the tree trunk. And admittedly he hasn't washed his face since, not wanting to let Matt's touch lift from his skin.

The ball must drop, flashing scattering across the distant skyline, sparking through the frosty night. One second of light, the next, a loud crackling bang booms out of the TV, echoing throughout the house. Matt jolts, moves his hand out of Foggy’s clutch and slips his arms around Foggy’s waist, pulling him in for a hug. The fireworks glitter across the night sky in the corner of Foggy’s eyes as he rests his chin on Matt’s shoulder, feels Matt’s breath over his neck, Matt’s heartbeat rapid.

“I can’t ever be alone.”

Foggy and Ed have both been eyeing the clocks since midday. Cousin Liam was the last to leave, clearing out no later than 8.33pm, January 1, 2001. As soon as the last relative leaves, the walls of the house breathe a sigh of relief, the residents collapsing to the floor. No pot to smoke leaves them with the spit ends of beer and wine and a fridge full of food to last a whole month. They can’t really complain except all any of them actually want to do, besides drink more or eat more or try to clean up the stinking mess of the place, is to smoke a good joint. Unfortunately not much is going to grow until the weather gets a bit warmer.

So they leave the cleaning up for the next day. The Nelsons have never been ones for immediate action. With Matt’s help, they actually get a lot more cleaning up done than normal. Contrary to popular belief, the helping hands of a blind guy are actually very effective. Ed declares an award for cleaning up the place in record time. Foggy gouges through the packed fridge for the desserts and serves out pudding and cakes and fudge to his family. His smaller family. They eat their mountainous desserts in big bowls, curled up in front of a good movie.

Foggy sits close to Matt, opting for the couch for closeness rather than his lonely armchair. He’s aware of his Dad sitting opposite him, and though Ed’s not looking he knows his Dad could see it if Foggy tried anything. Even anything as innocent as holding Matt’s hand. He’s received enough gay jokes from his cousins that he doesn’t want his quietly judging Dad to feel the need to be outspoken too. Another reason why Ed’s not invited to their U.S. tour. How different would it be without his Dad only a few yards away…

In reality he feels kind of bad for telling his Dad he couldn’t come. Foggy thinks Ed kind of expected to tag along, like Foggy tagged along on his Dad’s tours with Peter Gabriel. But the look on his Dad’s face… Foggy’s been riding on his Dad’s adventure almost his whole life. Doesn’t he deserve to have his own? He’d had to inform his Dad that Foggy didn’t want him coming or else they’d be embarking on B.R.M.C.’s first ever tour, chaperoned.

Foggy starts to feel the sound of the TV morph together with the surrounding noise, forming a bar of collective sounds too thick for him to pull apart. He guesses they haven’t even gotten through half the movie yet but lolling his head on his neck to glance at his Dad, he can see his Dad’s eyes are as droopy as his own. Foggy drops his head and why does his head have to be so damn heavy, huh? His legs and arms tingle, his back slumps in the couch, but something spikes through his oncoming slumber. Matt’s head drops onto his shoulder and normally Foggy would freak out, have to remain calm and collected but finally the Nelson family foreground noise is absent and he lets
the crackles of the television, the quiet breathes of other’s sleep bring on his own.

In between dreams he awakens with a sore side and a cold but burning lower back where his shirt has ridden up. Somehow he has ended up on the floor, he estimates from the carpet burns scattered across the skin on his back. Sleep begins to lift from him and he becomes more aware of his position, his overall situation. His head rests on a crocheted cushion, usually home to the corners of the couch. Underneath the cushion seems to be Matt’s shoulder, where Foggy lies between chest and arm. Matt hasn’t wrapped his arm around Foggy, but he can feel Matt’s sculpted tendon beneath him, as still as stone. And with his sleep lifting further he realises his own left leg and arm are hooked over Matt's legs and waist, causing him to flush.

He lifts his head momentarily to check his Father’s seat. Absent, filled only with shadows. He lowers his head and hopes he can still be veiled by the innocence of a chilly slumber. Foggy dares to curl his fingers around Matt’s form, soaking in the shape of Matt’s body. He listens to Matt’s even breathing, feels his friend’s chest rise and fall beneath his arm and he wishes this moment would last forever. Cuddles in the cold night.

But it’s as if some God, or Gods, have heard his sinful wish. Matt stirs, wedging one arm beneath Foggy’s, and lifts the weight off Matt’s body. Matt then tucks Foggy’s arm between them, same for Foggy’s fish hook leg. All sleep has lifted from him completely the moment Matt touches Foggy’s thigh. Even if it’s to push him away, Foggy savours the touch. It lingers on him, Matt’s form still metaphysically attached to him. Foggy bites his lip, thankful that he doesn’t have to worry about how dark it is when his friend can’t see the slight tenting in Foggy’s pants, even with the lights on.

Matt clears his throat before whispering, “You were uh, crushing me.”

Foggy starts at the explanation, instincts telling his mouth to form an apology. After murmuring a meek “Sorry,” Foggy tucks his feet in to his bent legs, edges away from Matt to give the guy some space. His hardening dick protests, bumping against the tight fabric of his pants but his mind knows nothing good will come of letting Matt feel Foggy’s passion in his side.

Matt yawns, “I’m so tired Foggy,” then sits up, pulling his left arm out from under Foggy and shaking it through the darkness, “But I can’t sleep.”

The things Foggy could do to help him sleep…

Then Matt starts to stand up and the blood heating around Foggy’s middle rockets up to his chest, gurgling in his throat.

“Where are you going?” Foggy whispers coarsely.

Matt clutches the arm of the couch, staggering from the swift speed of standing up. Foggy thinks he looks ghostly in the shadows.

“I need to sleep in a real bed,” Matt explains.

Foggy sits up too, dots spinning in his vision, the movement sparring with his equilibrium. Matt’s slinking away again and Foggy’s voice is wobbly when he calls out, “There’s my bed?”

He suggests it not because they packed away the spare mattress Matt had been using in his room, but because in a small glimmer of hope, Foggy wondered if Matt would be alright with sharing his single.

After a while, Matt admits, “I miss mine.”
Too close for comfort. Matt pushes off the couch, heads toward the hall. Hot blood circling around Foggy’s shoulders and throat coagulate, his friend almost lost in the shadows. Abandonment.

Then, a hoarse whisper, “Are you coming?”

Once the house is all put back together, clean and organised, Matt stops coming to the main house altogether. Back like how it was before. Back then, Foggy would go around to the garage occasionally, not wanting to invade Matt’s personal space no matter how much he wished he could come and go as he pleased like Marci seemed to. He guesses some wishes really do come true. Now, Matt asks for him. In fact, it’s almost a demand, the way Matt asks him to stay.

Foggy won’t ever forget what Matt said to him.

“I don’t want to be alone.”

Or maybe that wasn’t quite it, but either way, it means Matt wants to be with him. And if that isn’t a confession of love, he doesn’t know what to think of it. Matt asks him to stay with him almost all of the time now. They sleep in the fold out couch every night and yet Foggy still feels anxious that his Dad’s going to walk in on them at any moment. He takes some of Matt’s medicine. Matt doesn’t seem worried so long as Foggy’s with him. At the start Foggy would get up in the morning to get changed in his room, check up on his Dad too. But he couldn’t stand the look on Matt’s face when he’d walk back in. When Matt had realised he’d been gone.

Foggy stocks up Matt’s kitchenette with food he actually likes. Matt’s all fibres and fruit and vege and Foggy’s all snacks and candy and fruit loops for breakfast. The whole not showering regularly enough becomes an issue and Foggy solves it by waiting outside the bathroom when Matt not wants, but needs, to wash off. So they eat together, sleep together. In a strictly platonic sense. Matt allows minimal connection and Foggy painfully understands it. It’s a part of his battle with his faith, and a battle with his passion. Foggy doesn’t want to push him. He knows what it’s like to push Matt into doing something he’s uncertain about. All Matt needs is a pull, a gentle prise from his stubborn decision. Matt moving into the Nelson’s in the first place was all down to a gracious act. An opportunity for Foggy but a dead end situation for Matt. Matt could try to convince Foggy his entire life that Foggy and Ed had made the right move when Foggy knows Matt would have liked to have come to that conclusion himself. And conversely, Foggy’s more than content to wait until Matt’s ready to sign their contract too, signing over his Catholicism in favour of loving Foggy.

Every night the springs heave under their weight, sucking two bodies to the centre, the sweet spot. Foggy always has to force himself to face away from Matt or else fight the urge not to press in on Matt’s warmth. Sometimes when he’s smoked too much, or not enough, he can’t fight off the urge. He leans into Matt’s firm body and passes it off as the fault of deep sleep. But Matt always slinks away. Peels off, back turned.

So it’s hard to be selfless and forgiving when Foggy’s in love with his best friend. He guesses so long as there’s no one else, so long as Matt lets him be close at all, then he thinks he’ll be alright. Besides, he’s starting to warm to the idea of an electronic drummer since Marci’s performed a disappearing act. Takes out the mess of a third party confusing things. It means Foggy can be selfish with Matt’s attention.
In all honesty, Foggy doesn’t really care that Marci was gone. At the start it’s completely fine. It’s perfect even. Just him and Matt. No one else. The Nelson’s Christmas week passes and the first week of January begins. To Foggy, it seems normal not to hear from her. She probably has a lot of catching up to do with her parents. Second week in and that’s when things start to get bad. Matt becomes restless. He calls her. Foggy tries calling her. No answer. Foggy tries calling Chrissie too and all she’d said was that Marci would be back. That she does this. That Foggy should know, but he can’t remember being told that before.

Their February release date’s encroaching and still no sign of Marci. They’re meant to go in to the studio at Virgin Records for rehearsals in preparation for the tour which starts the day after their album’s release. Foggy calls Marci’s house again. Finally someone answers.

“Who is this? Stop calling!”

It isn’t Marci. Sounds like a guy, gruff and pissed. Foggy’s going to check with Chrissie to make sure he has the right number but Matt assures him it’s correct. That it has to be correct and Foggy gets a jealous twang in his stomach. They end up going to the rehearsals sans Marci. Their agent isn’t impressed when all Foggy and Matt can play are their acoustic songs, and Foggy and Matt aren’t impressed when their agent plays the backing track of Marci’s drumming. Feels robotic. Unnatural.

And if Foggy didn’t care about Marci’s absence before, he sure as hell did now that Virgin has pushed back the release date of their album a month. It’s meant to hit the shelves early February, their U.S. tour starting the very next day. Shows were already booked right through May to generate interest for the music festival season. But Virgin straight up cancels all their February shows, won’t support B.R.M.C. without a drummer.

Contractually, Foggy and Matt can’t alter their sound, especially not before their debut is even released. Garage rock revival is what Virgin signed the band up for, securing their own version of the Jesus and Mary Chain right there in the States. Listeners and critics are going to be expecting a certain sound and if Foggy keeps refusing electronic drums and Matt keeps refusing replacement auditions, then things aren’t going to turn out well. Virgin’s already threatened that they won’t even release, just leave their CDs locked up in a warehouse somewhere.

Foggy and Matt kind of have no choice. If they want their music to reach anyone’s ears, they’re going to have to do what the label wants. An agreement is made to wait for Marci’s return. Even if that means pushing back the release another month for an early April release, which only leaves them playing the waiting game. And Foggy hates the waiting game. It’s worse when Matt’s anxiety is somehow catching. Makes for sleepless nights and dreary days waiting on news from Marci: Brett Mahoney 2.0.

Foggy has some theories. Since no one knows where she is, she’s likely not staying with a friend,
or else her friend is very good at lying. She could very well have fled the country, pulling a Brett Mahoney. Or she’s dead. He really hopes she’s not dead. He’s never liked Marci that much but no one deserves to be forgotten in death, cast off as a runaway.

Foggy’s only thinking about these theories because they’re running out of ideas. They’ve called nearly everyone Foggy can think of by now. They filed a missing person’s report. They even tried going to her house. Matt had told Foggy he’d only been there once but he knew the exact way to get there. The place was a dump. Dirty and filled with squatters and junkies and Matt had made Foggy call Chrissie on the payphone down on the street to make sure he had the right address. It was right, but Matt didn’t seem happy about it.

The dial tone rings out almost completely and Foggy suspects Gloria Mahoney might be out. He’s about to hang up until just before the dial tone ends, it cuts to clattering.

“Hello?” Foggy repeats, “Hello?”

More muffling from the speaker and Foggy eyes Matt getting up from the couch to stand next to Foggy, leans on the wall, the cord coiling between them.

“Is this the Mahoney residence?” Foggy says.

“Yo, yo homie joe!”

Foggy rolls his eyes, catches a small quirk of a smile on Matt’s face, “So, you really are back in hell huh Mahoney?”

“Sure am, Franklin. You know, it’s real good to hear from ya. It’s been a wild ride since I last saw you boys…”

Foggy doesn’t quite understand how people can be so different. How one’s identity can drastically change from their person at school and their person outside of it. Not everyone’s like that. Matt’s the same always. Foggy hopes he’s the same always. No tricks. But Mahoney’s one of those people who morph and Foggy only realised it after shit went down with him. The trick was, at school Mahoney was alright. He was funny but stupid. Real fucking stupid. Looking back, Foggy had some good times with the kid but Mahoney was on some wrong stuff. Guess it’s true when they say drugs fuck you up, and more often than not, in a bad way.

Outside of school, Mahoney was hard to be around. Because of the drugs. Because of his natural personality too. He was a real mad drummer, but mad in the truest sense. After Mahoney cleared out with all of Marci’s drugs, The Elements’ first demo and the grand idea to launch a solo career with it in hand, Foggy never thought he’d bother contacting the guy again. He only worries that seeking Marci’s whereabouts would give Mahoney ideas about acting as a replacement. Replacing a replacement.

“…And then I’ve been back here. My Ma’s been a real good help to me. ‘Preciate all she’s done for me. Makes me feel real aware of what I did to you guys couple years back. I sure got whacked up.”

There’s a pause and Foggy says, “you sure did,” and his eyes flutter when Matt reaches up to hold onto his arm.

Mahoney speaks over him, “I’ve been meaning to call you Frank. I really have. I’m true sorry for the shit storm I whipped up back then. Been guilty about it ever since.”

“We’ve come a long way since then, Bill.”
Mahoney ignores Foggy’s stab and says, “Props man. Props. You know I’ve been paying my penance in my own way. Like I said, it’s karma, or whatever. An arm for an arm,” he laughs.

“You mean an eye for an eye?” Foggy corrects.

“Eye, arm. Same difference. Look, bet you called me for some reason other than me blabbering down your earhole. Now sir, unless you’re gonna offer me the prize winning lottery I’m seriously killing my time down here.”

“You should have said at the start if you were busy.”

“Dude come on, you’re an old mate! Let me help ya out.”

“Alright… old mate,” Foggy purses his lips, “I’m calling about Marci.”

There’s a hesitant pause on the other end, “…Been meaning to call her up too. I’m, uh, I’m telling you. Does she uh… does she know you’re calling – is she there?”

“No,” Foggy huffs, “Would you shut up and listen to what I have to say? I’m calling because I’m trying to find her. I thought she might be staying with you and your Ma?”

Mahoney sounds relieved, “Oh, she ain’t here as far as I know buddy. You tried Chrissie?”

“Do you think I’d be calling you if Chrissie knew anything?”

“Man, she’ll show up. She always does.”

Foggy clambered in on the bus, Matt trailing behind him and it’s packed even though it’s not even close to peak hour yet. The plan is to get to Columbia and find a place to practice, spread the word about their show that night and ask around a bit. Foggy only hopes somewhere in the plan he can sit down because it’s not looking likely that they’re going to be able to take a seat on the bus. Matt’s never been one for owning up to his disability for benefits either.

They’re only here because of Foggy. Virgin was prepared to cancel all their upcoming shows leading into The Waterboys tour but Foggy couldn’t let them call off everything. After a lot of reasoning and maybe just a bit of begging, Foggy convinces Virgin not to cancel the Columbia University show. For a number of reasons. The main being that it’s local. The venue has good acoustics, good enough for playing unplugged. And playing there is also their last source of hope. It’s a hopeful theory anyway. Marci had been accepted to study there. If they played there, maybe she’d show up.

But Foggy hadn’t fought with keeping this booking pencilled in only for Marci, not even for the band’s sake. He did it for Matt because his friend’s been a wreck. A numb, blazed out wreck and Foggy thinks if he could just get Matt up on the stage for a bit to play some music, hear how the crowd likes what they make, then maybe he’d come out of whatever stupor he’s in.

Of course, without Marci they have to take public transport to Columbia. Sure, Ed could’ve taken them, would have loved giving Foggy a driving lesson while they were at it but Foggy wouldn’t have it. And he sure is getting pretty tired of his Dad offering and offering for Foggy only to refuse.
He wishes his Dad would just… not ask. Just leave him to figure things out on his own, or else be supportive from the sidelines. Is that too much to ask? Virgin almost didn’t let him change his surname either. Thought Ed’s well-known name in the industry would help boost recognition and sales. That would only devalue any kind of identity and skill Foggy has tried to craft for himself.

Except without Marci and Ed, and with a blind best friend and the bassist with no driver’s license, they’re forced to rely on the subway and buses. At least they don’t have to carry around a drum kit. Or amps and such. Playing acoustic means less stuff to carry, but also less chance to play their heavier, hit single worthy songs. And Matt’s right really. The idea of an electronic drum entirely goes against his morals.

Passengers climb off and on around him and Matt, their guitars strapped onto their backs and yet still people bump the guitars like they aren’t fragile pieces of equipment. Let alone expensive. But Foggy doesn’t mind having to stand up really. Lets him see out the upper half of the frosty windows.

“I love it when the clouds are like this,” Foggy says into Matt’s ear.

“Like what?” Matt asks, turning his ear to Foggy’s mouth, “Can you describe it for me Foggy?”

He shivers. He loves the way Matt says his name. Breathy, like Matt’s tugged the word right out of the bottom of his lungs. And he’s made the conscious effort to say Foggy’s name like this every time, laborious but purposeful, thick with wanting.

“It looks like…” Foggy begins, eyes dancing over the bumps in Matt’s spine from his neck, trailing beneath the shadows cast by Matt’s collar. He looks away, viewing the sky as he describes, “It looks like a storm contained in one big cloud. It’s all wrapped up like cotton candy, but grey and dark blue like a rain cloud. And the other clouds around it… they’re coiling in, like they’re getting sucked into some kind of slow motion vortex. Slowly moving across the sky and getting bigger, meaner, but it’ll move away from the city before it’ll let itself cry.”

“It sounds amazing.”

Foggy squeezes Matt’s hand, “I wish you could see it.”

“I see it through you.”

The bus pulls up at Columbia and when they’re finally off the sweltering sauna of the bus, they walk up the great steps onto the university grounds. Students bustle around them, running to class after a late lunch or maybe even having just woken up. Foggy never quite liked the idea of continuing to study. Maybe in another life he’d be focused enough to study and keep on studying years and years after school, make something of himself career wise like his Mom. Instead, in this life, music is his career and he’s going to ensure its longevity as much as possible.

They find a shady tree to sit under, unzip their guitar cases and pull the instruments out. Though he kind of understood it, Foggy always thought it was odd how people looked at him funny when he had an instrument in his hand. Like he’s suddenly some kind of spectacle, some kind of art to ogle at, figure out. Sometimes it’s hard for him to get passed that part, the whole scared of a crowd situation. He’s just got to let the music take over him and smoking really helps with that. Except he hasn’t smoked anything in a while to allow himself to concentrate. Which means he has to also pay attention to the starers in case one of them’s Marci giving them the stink eye.

Not having drums doesn’t make things difficult really. Matt makes a point of keeping Gibsons for their sound, because they’re good plugged and unplugged, and their songs don’t sound better or
worse either way. Certainly makes the songs different because it’s a different kind of feel playing acoustic and not. Where acoustic makes the songs feel more sorrowful, the wires make the songs sound angrier. Both are just as passionate and that’s what Foggy loves about their music.

She cuts my skin and bruise my lips

She’s everything to me

She tears my clothes and burns my eyes

She’s all I want to see

She brings the cold and scars my soul

She’s heaven sent to me

Now she’s gone and love burns inside me

They key into the next song and continue to work on their set list for the night, fine tuning the selection and the order. They get a few ogglers. Most stop for half a song, less even, then move on with their business. Others take a seat with friends, enjoy the music. After Matt plays the last chord of Love Burns, some scrawny kid comes up to them and sits cross legged in front of Foggy.

“Hey, that was really good. Are you guys in a band or something?”

Foggy glances over at Matt, then back at the kid, “Yeah dude. We’re playing at the uni bar tonight. Make sure you tell your friends.”

“How much are the tickets?”

“Ten bucks,” Matt says.

The kid hums, “alright. I’ll tell my friends for that fair price.”

He then makes to get up but stops when Matt says, “hey, can I ask you something?”

“Shoot.”

“Have you seen a girl around, about average height, bottle blonde?”

“Dude you are seriously describing half of the ladies on campus. Can you be more specific?”

“Um…”

Foggy steps in, “I’ll take it from here buddy. If you notice one thing about her it’s that she’s got tits the size of melons.”

His grin falters when he sees Matt’s serious face.

“Oh I see,” the kid says, “You’re after her, huh?”
“She’s missing,” Matt says loudly.

“Missing,” the kid repeats, “Don’t know of anyone missing. What’s her name?”

“Marci,” Matt states and Foggy can’t shake this feeling like he’s said or done something wrong. Aren’t they both trying to find Marci?

“Oh man, I don’t know a Marci. I know a Macy and a Mimi. Hey Li,” the kid calls over his shoulder, “do you know a Marci?”

The friend shakes her head and the kid turns back to Foggy with the same response. He then gets to his feet, “Hey, I’ll see you tonight guys. Good luck with finding your chick.”

Foggy watches the kid walk away with his friends and then turns to Matt.

“How did you know she was a blonde?”

“How do I know I’m always wearing black?”

“Now that’s a question I seriously want answered,” Foggy replies.

Matt only laughs and lies back against the grass. Foggy joins him but even when all he can see is the vastness of the sky, he still feels as if eyes are on him. As if God is real and he’s watching Foggy’s every move. So he hoists his guitar on his lap and plays. It’s one of Matt’s songs and he’s playing it on purpose. To get Matt to sing, to snap out of his fever. It works. Music always works with Matt, and soon enough he has Matt singing through the chorus to the outro, leaving the clouds to be swallowed up in the sky before him.

“She’ll come back,” Foggy says after finishing the song.

Foggy watches Matt clench his fist momentarily before folding his hands beneath his head.

“She’s not here,” Matt says quietly.

“She could be. We have to try.”

“Trying doesn’t seem good enough.”

Foggy turns his head to face Matt, turning a blind eye to the Gods above, against the scrutiny of passing students and he reaches for Matt’s hand, gently removes it from underneath Matt’s dark hair and gives it a squeeze. No resistance.

“We’re trying our best. Isn’t that enough?”

xviii. in like the rose

The night bus never comes. And Foggy’s wrong about the rain. Matt can already smell it coming but he can’t say anything until he hears the first drop land on Foggy’s dry head of hair. The first idea that comes to his mind is to reach over and rub the spot with his thumb but he bites it back.

“I need a smoke,” he says, wrapping his arms around himself.
They stop under a small awning of a shop front, leaning their guitar cases against the glass door while Foggy rolls a blunt. Matt holds his jacket out to shield the papers from the rain and within the fence he’s made around his friend he hears Foggy’s heart beat loudly. He wipes his face against his shoulder, rain washing off the sweat from his skin. Why does he keep putting himself in these situations? He’s already too close. He let Foggy too far in, and if he doesn’t start pushing Foggy back again… fence him out instead of in… he’ll be trapped. Because Foggy wouldn’t understand. He didn’t understand, way back when he’d had no choice but to show Foggy who he was. What he could do. Even if Foggy was on something back then, he can’t risk Foggy taking it badly again. He just can’t risk losing Foggy’s trust. Even if it means lying to him.

It’s some kind of twisted logic but he’s reminded of how much it makes sense when he is up on the stage again. Playing in front of people, in front of their established fan base. Some of them even know the words from their earlier shows, back when they played under The Elements. And as much as it warms his heart, it can’t be all. It’s not enough. His heart needs to be filled with both blood and lust, of violence and the passion of music and being trapped in the garage for months on end made him forget that. Made him think he had no hope, no choice but to lock himself away from the world because so long as he’s with someone, so long as he’s not alone, Stick won’t come. It’s a tried and proven theory.

Foggy’s shivering fingers fumble with the lighter and Matt could help him, could wrap his hands around Foggy’s to hold him steady, get the flame to light up the blunt but he doesn’t, he shouldn’t. Foggy gets there in the end, takes a wobbly puff as Matt does up his jacket again. Matt then takes the blunt from Foggy when his friend presses the side against the top of his hand.

“IT’s good to be out again,” Foggy says as he waits for his turn again.

Matt nods, passes the blunt back. A hard wind cuts down the street, sweeping underneath their jackets, between the cuffs and the skin of their wrists. They haven’t been out at all since they realised Marci had gone. And it wasn’t only because Virgin cancelled the majority of their shows, it was because Matt felt rotten about the whole thing. He now knows how Foggy must have felt back when Matt had disappeared. Then again, Matt was only gone no longer than two days. Marci’s beat that with two months.

Foggy’s wrong though. They hadn’t tried their best. Matt’s best would have been scouring the city for her. Chasing up on leads. Contacting Vlad. He couldn’t do that with Foggy tailing him. He’d risked paying a visit to her home. That’s when he knew something was really up. Her house didn’t make any sense. It was so clean any time he’d ever been there. So clean. And when he’d gone with Foggy, it was... it was definitely the same house, but in a month’s passing it had turned into a crack den. A junkie haven. And Foggy was right about that place, it stunk.

But Matt couldn’t figure out why. Couldn’t get Foggy to come with him again and… He was afraid. So afraid of going out alone because he knows Stick’s tracking him. Stick would take him the second he’s alone, try and make him change when he’s already changing, in flux about bringing justice and being a musician. And yeah, he tells himself it’s gotta be balanced, it’s gotta be two equal lives but every day Matt finds that harder and harder to secure, let alone maintain.

“I’m looking forward to Spring,” Matt says, taking a drag, “I’m pretty sick of this weather. If it’s going to be cold and wet why can’t it be cold and snowing?”

Foggy rubs Matt’s forearms as he says, “you won’t be saying that when Spring actually comes around. The van’s got no air con.”

Matt smirks, gently shifting away from Foggy, “That’ll be fun.”
He then flinches at hearing sirens whir around the corner. A second of time lapses and he can identify the type of siren. Police. He quickly drops the joint to the ground and stamps on it, causing Foggy to gasp. Matt can tell the exact moment Foggy hears the siren too, a similar effect taking over him. Foggy’s back straightens and they both cling to the wall of the shop front. A shiver runs down Matt’s back, a flicker of fear. The wheels pick up and the police car drives faster and faster, and as it does so Matt becomes more and more relaxed. It speeds down the street, straight passed them, Matt calm and Foggy still stressed.

He can still hear the siren singing down the distant streets, hears Foggy’s chest rise and fall quickly, and he can hear Foggy’s hand reaching for his. He pulls away, shoving his hands in his jacket pockets. Matt’s movements must look so natural to Foggy, they have to.

“There is one thing we haven’t done, that we probably should have done earlier,” Matt says after a while of shivering under the small awning.

“What?” Foggy asks, voice shaking.

“We could file another missing person’s report,” Matt says, kicking off the wall. He pulls his hood over his head, listening to the rain patter over the finely woven fabric, “I know a guy who could help put our case under the spotlight.”

“What do you mean, you know a guy?” Foggy questions from the wall.

“I should say, a cop knows me.”

Foggy grimaces, “And how do you know this cop?”

Matt pauses, kicking his foot up on a pile of soggy cardboard boxes by the shop front to think carefully about how he’s going to word his answer, “You… wouldn’t remember. When I uh, got … lost… this cop found me.”

“I thought Marci found you?”

He shakes his head, “she delegated that job to a policeman, so technically she found me through him,” He smiles, “Clearly he’s good at finding people.”

Matt notices a quiver of hesitation in Foggy, of uncertainty, before he starts kidding around, “Can’t be too hard to spot a blind dude stumbling around.”

Matt shrugs, smiling, “I wouldn’t know.”

Foggy laughs and hoists his guitar strap over his shoulder, “It’s worth a shot. Come on, we’ve got to get to the subway. The rain doesn’t look like it’s going to let up anytime soon.”

The electronic drum track comes to an end in the cassette player, the polyester tape flicking the inside of the outer packaging with a quick gasp of air. Foggy leans his bass against the stand, then *plod, plod*, goes over to rewind the tape, *click, whoosh.*
The city is quiet beyond the walls of the garage. If Matt stands there long enough, zoning out ‘til his soul slinks out of his body, he can let his soul expand out of the walls, flesh and wood and metal and seep into the air. Hear the breaths of 1.6 million people squashed into 33.5 square miles. Lifting and heaving across highways and down streets and up into buildings, into homes. They say there are seven similar versions of you across the world, that you could find yourself, or your friend, or your father or anyone you know, you could find someone identical in any city across the globe, seven fold. He couldn’t see the similarities but he could feel them, hear their hearts, their way of talking, their way of carrying themselves. He could see their similarities in other ways and he could find another Marci, or another Foggy, or another Jack Murdock, alive and well. He could find the doppelgänger of the mayor, or his neighbour, or of a stranger on the street, and Foggy tells him he should find that comforting. To know there are people he knows all around him, whether he realizes it or not. And maybe he should because he loves the people in the city. Sure, they’re not always nice, because the world’s not always nice. Forgive him, but God doesn’t always deliver.

The people of this city… they deserve kindness and safety and the people of Hell’s Kitchen will always come first in his heart. When he finally goes on the national tour he’ll always be thinking of them, always missing the unique sounds of the city, the special smells and tastes that will be the same to Foggy in Philadelphia as they are in Manhattan. He didn’t have this feeling so much when he was with the BJM boys. He didn’t miss the city, didn’t have any connection with it and he worries about the differences. Back then he didn’t have to decide, he didn’t have to juggle anything except his guitar on his back. And back then Stick hadn’t followed him. All he can hope for is the freedom to make a choice on his own without being pulled or pushed or punched until he makes the decision others want him to make. And maybe then he could choose to ignore the kids on the streets of Hell’s Kitchen when he’s on the other side of the country.

The tape coils back to the start, the teeth of the spinners jarring to a stop and Foggy pushes off the cement floor, one hand on the cassette.

“Ready?”

The loop picks up again, playing back a digital version of Marci’s drum track. Foggy had tried to open up Virgin’s mind, thought he could show the agents how eclectic their proficiencies were, to illustrate how diverse they could play. The agents should’ve been impressed. Anton Newcombe would’ve been impressed, or at least he knows how to recognise promise. But the agents wanted a sound and they wanted nothing else, and if he and Foggy wouldn’t collaborate with their sound technicians… and take it a step further by changing their sound completely…

It didn’t exactly help that Marci’s still AWOL. Makes for a rocky start. So rocky that Virgin’s been down talking them to other big labels, making a bad name for them. To keep the peace they’ve agreed to the drum track. Gotta learn to work with it when anything they try and do doesn’t do them justice. Marci has two weeks before their scheduled April release. One week and they’re cut. Rescheduled and rescheduled and he guesses three time’s the charm.

With the city mostly asleep it’s easier for him to pick up on her coming. There’s jangles coming from the driveway, crunching cement and dusting dirt and he stops playing, frowns. It sounds like her voice, it smells like her too, faintly, beneath layers of perfume and chewed up mints stuck in her teeth and cheap alcohol in her hair, in her sweat. She barges in to the garage, the roller door swinging up, clattering, slamming back down with her exasperated grunt.

Foggy’s careless with his bass when he puts it down, exclaims, “Marci! Where the fuck...?!”

She’s found her way home but her heart betrays her identity. It beats too fast, like an illness. Like she shouldn’t be walking and breathing right now, like she should be having a heart attack but
she’s defying all odds. Present and well in the walls of the garage.

“You filed two missing persons on me??” she screams over Foggy’s words.

Her screams pierce Matt’s ears and he slams his palms over them, his guitar swinging on the strap, bumps his side. Her heart drums right through his chest, faster than the drumming track, louder too, like the heavy tester in sound check. The heartbeats vibrate his bones too, anchoring his soul in this room, in this reality where Marci has returned abruptly after a long period of absence. No phone call of forewarning, no courtesy. And yet she acts like no time has passed at all.

She drops her luggage all at once. Beyond his palms he hears items tumble out of her bags. Glass and plastic and fabric, thick and thin and tearing, smashing, already ruined. Outrage and frustration should bump back the overpowering sound of Marci’s heart. But he finds himself incapable of becoming mad at her like Foggy. Good cop bad cop. Someone’s gotta show her compassion when she’s climbed out of the devil’s throat.

Marci collapses on the couch, one arm swings through the air, a slashing sword, and she stabs it toward the cassette player.

“Is this my replacement then?” she spits.

Matt grits his teeth as he stoops down to switch off the playback, the drum competition coming to an endless conclusion.

“We had no choice,” Foggy informs her.

Matt can hear Foggy’s nails digging into his palms, the soft skin tearing with the anger roiling off him. And it seems like with every word that comes out of Foggy’s mouth, with every hiccup of vehemence out of his friend, he remembers how it was back on that night. When Foggy was so confused and angry, and yeah maybe it was partly the fault of the drugs but now… now he understands how Foggy felt. Not knowing where a friend is, not knowing how to find them, if they can be contacted somehow. And even though Foggy’s words are directed at Marci, they’re a punch to his body, a refraction of red light directed on his soul, hot like searing fire. He’d hurt Foggy and Foggy’d been hurt twice now. Once in memory and once out of mind and Matt can never let Foggy feel that way again, not when it’s Matt’s fault anyway.

“You had a choice not to file reports on me. God,” Marci cusses.

Foggy scoffs, ready to tear out his hair, “This is unbelievable.”

Matt imagines Foggy’s fist slamming into his chest, what did you think you were doing? A kick to his back, you can’t just disappear like that.

“You really shouldn’t have done that. I was coming back already. I’d booked my flight and everything but because you filed another stupid report on me, they were looking for me,” she spits the first half, then whines the second, “they took all my pills Matt, I’ve lost all my pills.”

Foggy reels, “You were hustling?”

“I wasn’t hustling, Franklin. God! I need those pills,” she throws her palms against her forehead, a dull slap against sweaty skin, “I don’t get customs! You can take prescription drugs out but you can’t bring them back in? I can’t afford to go through all that again. Matty, I need them.”

“For what?” Foggy spits, his arms folded.
Matt bows his head, hoists his guitar off his shoulders and leans against the back of the couch. There’s a pause, and Matt thinks she must give him a look because Foggy makes a disgruntled noise, an extraction of annoyance and an injection of a slam in Matt’s neck, wounding him.

“It’s Adderall, alright? God, I can feel it coming,” a retch, a whine, “I had to take them with me Matt but they wouldn’t let me. So I took as many as I could for the flight, shoved them all in my mints but I was high,” she laughs, “I ate them all and now I’m out. I’m out, I’m out!”

Matt takes a breath, a breather. Marci was like him, but worse, careless. Done in months what Matt had done in days, dealt more damage than good. But instead of shunning her, deriding her, he’d better help her. Help her and learn from her. How to lie, how to lie better. How to do what she did but harmlessly. Learn from her mistakes, from his mistakes, and how to be fearless like she presents herself. She does fear though, it’s hard to tell but beneath layers of her incredible bravery is fear and that’s where the sadness seeps through. Matt rounds the couch, takes a seat next to Marci, finds her hand.

Foggy clenches his teeth, “You still haven’t told us where you’ve been this whole time. You do realize we might be banned from all big record companies because of you right?”

“Don’t you care about my health Foggybear?”

Under his breath Foggy says, “I don’t,” then louder, “just saying it’d be nice to have some kind of fucking explanation about where you fucked off to.”

“Well you’re being a real jerk Franklin,” Marci huffs, giving Matt’s hand a squeeze, “I outright refuse to give you the souvenir I got you in Lyon which is really too bad because it’s better than any of the gifts I got in Paris-“

“Paris?!” Foggy exclaims.

“I must have thought pretty highly of you when I bought it, don’t know why I ever thought you were nice. You know what? Matt, you deserve two pressies,” She softly whispers to Matt, “that’s because you’re my favourite.”

Meanwhile, Foggy paces around the garage, “What the fuck? Paris?? And you didn’t think to even contact us? Or get your parents to or you know, send a fucking postcard or something, Jesus. Why were you there? We had no idea where you were! How could we have known you were in an entirely different country?!”

Marci bubbles in scornful laughter at the mention of her parents, “I wanted to go! God Foggy, does everything have to have a solid explanation? Don’t you ever do things on a whim? It was Christmas, I wanted a break, so I went to fucking France what’s the big deal? You sound like my stupid parents!”

Matt pats Marci’s hand soothingly, trying to calm her down. Her heart beats rapid and he’s sore all over, bruised from words and memories. Sitting down is a relief but she’s shivering now, a vibrating being, her soul a trapped rattle snake in a cage of brittle bones and hot flesh and he needs her to settle, for her own health, but there are some mysteries Matt can’t leave unsolved.

 “…We went to your house Marci… Your parents… they’re junkies, aren’t they?” Matt says softly.

Her hand turns to stone in his, “No, they’re…” A cough, a hard swallow, “they’re archaeologists,” She says distantly, then promptly throws up off the side of the couch.

“Oh, gross!” Foggy whines, stepping back.
“Foggy, go get something to clean this up!” Matt instructs.

He wraps his arms around Marci as she begins to cry, her heart racing so loud and fast he can barely hear Foggy’s breath, a sharp intake, a scowl. Her heart needs to slow down, she needs to calm down. He wipes her dirty hair off her face. The strands feel dry and like plastic, like brittle twigs. She sobs around his arms, into his shoulder and her heart still quickens, still fast. Foggy comes back with a towel and Matt takes it from him, wipes the vomit off her mouth.

“I’m so tired, I’m so tired Matty,” she sobs, “Can I stay here tonight?”

“No,” Foggy replies.

“Yes,” Matt says at the same time.

Foggy stays still for a very long time as Matt holds her, rubs small circles into her back as she cries out to normalcy. Foggy’s presence is a weight in his audial balance, a solid statue, a blockage, a barrier.

“I’ll stay with her tonight,” Matt says firmly.

Foggy starts breathing quickly, but he leaves wordlessly, without a word but with a punch to his gut. How could he have gone about his activities that way, so long ago. How could he not have seen how his actions could affect others? How could he want to do it again… how could he want it…

Marci slithers her arms around Matt’s neck, shivers into his chest, her heart fast but stilling, distilling.

“Please help me Matty,” she breathes, “I feel like I’m going to die.”

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Ed hugs Foggy like he’ll never see his son again. It’s only going to be four months but Matt supposes four months can seem like forever when you’re only waiting for the time to pass.

“Make sure you call the minute you get to your Aunt’s,” Ed tells his son as Foggy tries to peel away.

After they separate, Marci forces her way in for a hug. Matt receives a handshake. In the van, Foggy takes the passenger seat, navigator. Matt sits on the seat behind him, his back straight, hands folded in his lap. Marci pulls out of the driveway with a boost of a start, the frosty leaves crunching under hot tyres. Matt lets go of the back of Foggy’s seat long before Foggy lets go of the dashboard. Marci thinks she knows where she’s going but she’s not always right. She makes Foggy anxious the way she runs lights, takes corners, trails the back of a police car for twenty minutes.

“They can’t pull us over if we’re behind them.”

Jersey, Newark, Elizabeth. It’s meant to be a four hour drive but Marci drives like a street racer through the suburbs and the industry and who said highways were meant to make travel faster? Matt hears Foggy pull out a map from the glove box, listens to the way the warm paper folds out over Foggy’s lap. It crackles like the origins of embers. Foggy rustles through the rest of the
contents of the glove box, finds a pencil and stabs the blunt lead against the paper, tracing the route Ed marked out for them.

“We should be on the Baltimore-Washington parkway by now.”

“I know where I’m going,” Marci replies quickly.

Foggy cranes his neck around the side of his seat to ask him for support, “Matt?”

“I trust her,” he replies.

Marci huffs a small satisfied breath, and Matt doesn’t want to bother looking into Foggy’s reaction. Part of it’s inconsideration but he’d like to say most of his purposeful neglect is because he’s focusing a lot of energy on monitoring Marci. She’s not completely well but they couldn’t push back the launch of their album any further. Her first night back in the country felt endless to Matt. A shaky, sweaty night, like she was shivering in a sea of sadness. Matt had her in his arms the whole night, and night after night, and he could feel every part of her. Beyond her heart lifting her soul off the mattress, he could feel her anxiety, her stress, her fear leaking out into morning. Her headaches were his, her sore muscles were his, her urge to vomit was his. He kept her contained where possible, tried to minimise the amplification but it’s hard when her pain and longing seep in through his pores.

She was awful the following morning but she’d still put herself on the phone. No fuss. The receiver helped to disguise her anguish. With Virgin convinced, the launch was a go-ahead. Marci had two weeks to prepare. To rehearse, to recover. She hadn’t wanted to go home, refused any subtle or obvious encouragements from Foggy to leave. It meant Matt was never alone. Never alone with Foggy either. He could tell Foggy wasn’t happy about it. Matt told himself it was going to be for the best.

Launch day’s come around and they’re embarking on their tour, only certain hotel reservations could not be rescheduled. They still managed to secure opening for The Waterboys in D.C., a great start to their tour. But because of their unreliability, their booked hotels fell through. They’d have to find their own accommodation until booking became valid again. Too bad that they’re not big enough, or even reliable enough yet, to warrant the record company hiring them a tour bus complete with a driver too. Matt wouldn’t mind so much having Marci drive the van if she wasn’t so ill. Oh, and it would be nice to have air conditioning.

Eventually the roads force Marci up on the highway. Foggy cranks down his window, the sounds of the freight trucks and buses and cars passing by are like quick slaps of air through the small gap, slashes of helicopter blades, consistent.

“What would you guys do if we made a million bucks?” Foggy asks as he sticks his fingers out the window.

Marci whistles, “A million bucks. No way are we going to make that much.”

“Think positive Marci,” Foggy chides, wriggling his fingers against the slip stream, “What would you buy Matt?”

Matt pauses. A place of his own. Good quality clothes. Well fitted boots. And he would have enough left over to pay for his potential hospital bills.

“I don’t know, I don’t think I want anything,” Matt says.

Foggy draws his hand back and twists around in his seat, “Come on. Our label thinks we’re going
to make them money, so let’s have a bit of trust in them, hey?”

Matt looks over the inflection Foggy puts on the word trust and suggests, “Another guitar? Or two… I’d like to try a piano accordion one time.”

“You like the sound of those?!” Marci reels.

“New instruments. Now that’s… that’s practical.”

Marci cuts in, “I remembered what I want to buy.”

“You forgot?” Foggy questions.

Marci shoves Foggy’s shoulder, her hand slapping back onto the steering wheel, “I’m in the same boat as Matt. It’s not often I even entertain the idea of spending big bucks.”

“You guys have no imagination.”

“Let me finish Foggy. If we make a lot of money… I’m going to get plastic surgery.”

Foggy’s speechless for a minute, then after careful surveillance, he exclaims, “for what?!”

Marci pouts, “I’ve always hated my thin lips.”

Foggy seems to shake his head, “That’s no way to spend your money.”

“Fuck you, I’ll spend my money how I want.”

“And you always get what you want don’t you? Fucking off to Paris for months on end…”

Matt can distinctly hear Marci’s teeth grating against each other as she growls, “you don’t know what it was like.”

“Oh sure, I bet partying in Paris was so difficult.”

Matt anticipates it before Marci explodes. He leans forward in his seat and puts a comforting hand on Marci’s shoulder. She flinches at first, but a second later Matt can feel the tension dissolve.

“Can we have some music on?” Matt asks with a firm voice. He feels a bubble in Marci’s throat and rubs circles into her shoulder with his thumb. He speaks quietly, “Not here.”

Foggy sighs, slouching back in his chair, “Sure buddy, what d’ya wanna listen to?”

The bubble pops within Marci, settles.

“Let’s have some Bob Dylan.”

Foggy grumbles incoherently as he snatches up the tape bag, flips through the cases til he gets to the one he wants. He pops the case, a dull plastic click, feeds the tape into the player. The tape reels back, and as it flips through Matt can already hear the music, expecting the first note, the first lyric. Keeper of the peace, he hears a stray spark threaten to ignite in Marci.

“Leave it, Marci,” he says, firm, then sits back in his chair.

She doesn’t always listen. Maybe she’s tired of fighting. Or else aware of the lives she holds in jeopardy if she were to get into it with Foggy right there on the highway, 65 miles per hour.
Matt hopes for the latter.

xix. and i’m aching

Foggy had hoped that being on the road would mean no quiet judging from his Dad, but instead he’s getting it from his Aunt Faye. Not being able to secure a hotel near to the club that The Waterboys are playing at meant that of course his Dad had immediately called up a relative in D.C.. He supposes a couple more nights of home cooked meals couldn’t hurt. And he also supposes sleeping on a bed with Matt again might be alright. Naturally Aunt Faye’s going to offer Marci the spare bedroom, leaving the boys on the fold out couch. And that really doesn’t sound too bad to him.

Aunt Faye doesn’t always have people over to stay because she doesn’t exactly have the space. Her spare bedroom is actually a small office. A desk with an old computer sizzling in the heat from the skylight, Windows 95. Loosely bounded files and paper and manuals for the computer and the printer and manuals for how to read the manuals cloak the desk and spill out onto the carpet. A single bed in lieu of a double, sits squashed against the wall and one side of the desk. There’s never been much of decoration, only in terms of boxes of junk. More papers and more useless manuals and bills and mail and old newspapers all squashed into boxes, stacked and squeezed into the last remaining spaces in the room. So even if Foggy’s expected to take the glorified cupboard like usual, he’s going to play the chivalrous card and offer the bedroom to Marci. Let her have a bit of privacy and all that.

There’s a big fuss when they finally arrive. They were meant to arrive mid-morning but because their driver refused to listen to the navigator, they got lost trying to find the place. No matter how many times Foggy insisted Marci use the map, she wouldn’t listen. It wasn’t like Marci had ever been to his Aunt’s before so really, Foggy doesn’t even understand how they managed to arrive at their destination at all. Still, Faye’s frazzled when they do finally pull up in the back alley behind her apartment. It’s passed lunch and the meals she prepared for brunch have gone bad.

“If you had just called Franklin, we wouldn’t be in this mess!” she cries as she rifles through her cupboards for ingredients.

“There was literally no way Marci would have let me,” Foggy replies bluntly.

“You could have just asked me Foggybear,” Marci coos, slinging an arm over his shoulders.

Foggy shrugs her off.

Faye grabs a stool and stands on it as she hunts through the upper cupboards. She speaks into the shallow shelves, “You should invest in a cell phone now that you’re on the road. It was damned near impossible to get onto Ed when he was out and about.”

“No, no those things give you cancer,” Marci informs.

Faye holds the knobs of the cupboards, pulls back to gasp, “Gosh, do they?”

Marci nods, “I should know, my parents are radiologists…”

Foggy starts to zone out the moment Marci starts to roll into one of her parental anecdotes. Maybe one day it’ll be the truth, but how will Foggy be able to tell? At this point it seems to be a hit and
miss about the information that comes out of Marci’s mouth. Anything can sound real as much as anything can sound fabricated, and Foggy’s too tired of her voice to bother cross examining everything she’s ever said.

Foggy flinches when Marci pokes him in his side. “Foggy, you should listen when your Aunt asks you something.”

“Huh?”

“Thank you Marci. He’s got his head in his clouds as much as his Father has,” Faye clears her throat, “I’m going to restock my supplies.”

“Okay…” Foggy replies under an expectant glare from his Aunt.

“I’ll go with you,” Matt offers as he comes around the couch, his stick tapping the linoleum of the kitchen.

Foggy shakes his head, “Oh, you wanted… Yeah I’ll go with you to the shops Auntie Faye.”

“No, no, you’re clearly tired,” she refutes, “In fact, I’ll be happy to have this handsome gentleman hang off my arm.”

Aunt Faye coils her arm around Matt’s and pats his hand in hers. Matt blushes and Foggy guesses the tints of red in Matt’s cheeks are a reflection of his own.

“Are you sure you don’t want me to come with you?” Foggy calls, starting to step down the hallway after them.

Faye opens the front door, leading Matt out, “No, no, you’ve had a big drive Franklin. You and your friend have a nice rest while we’re out. When we’re back I’ll make you all something hearty before your performance tonight.”

Foggy hears the last gasps of conversation before Faye pulls the front door shut behind her. He then strides down the hall, slinking passed Marci and steps out onto the tiny balcony. He wipes off the dried up leaves and dirt before sitting down on the plastic deck chair, and quietly observes his Aunt and Matt wandering up the back alley. He catches snippets of conversation before they turn the corner toward the main street, a mixture of compliments and earnest questioning.

He stays out on the balcony for a while longer, watching Matt’s body fade into the distance. Even with the screen door left ajar he can hear the water in the pipes rumble behind the bricks, indicating Foggy’s free to leer while Marci showers. He thinks he can hear Matt laughing out in the distance. Foggy loves that side of Matt, the side of him that’s so interested in people and their lives and maybe it’s naïve to instantly trust whoever he meets, maybe it’s partly due to his disability, but to Foggy it illustrates Matt’s honesty, his willingness to like, to love.

Water rockets through the pipes at a steady rate. Foggy leaves his spot on the miniature balcony for a moment to pluck his tape player from his bag. Inside he can hear the shower. He wonders if Marci wastes this much water every time she showers. Back on the deck chair he catches the last glimpses of Matt and his Aunt fading into the distance until the corner hides them. Matt definitely has this way with women. He’s charming, honest, magnetic, and he doesn’t even have to try to be handsome. Foggy bets it makes it hard for parents not to employ favouritism. He wonders if his Mom would have considered Matt a second son if she was still living with Ed. He wonders if his Mom even knows he’s in a band… or dropped out of school. It’s probably better she doesn’t know. As for Ed, he’s too loyal to Foggy to let Matt waiver his favouritism. Plus, Matt has been far from
Ed’s favourite as of late.

The afternoon sun’s making Foggy’s skin sweat beneath his layers. He shrugs off his leather jacket, folding it in his lap. He plugs his headphones in and hits play on the tape player. He’s guessing right about now Aunt Faye’s running her mouth on tall stories about Foggy when he was a kid. He’s anticipating Matt returning with a sick grin on his face, some new shreds of info to use to make fun of Foggy. And he’s actually looking forward to it, somehow. He guesses it’s because even if Matt’s going to rag on him about some stupid shit he did as a twelve year old, it would at least mean Matt’s actually going to talk to him. Since Marci’s been back, he feels like he hasn’t been able to see Matt so much. Or not see so much as be with… Is it too telling to say he misses Matt?

He hits pause and puts the player on the tiled flooring of the balcony. He steps inside his Aunt’s apartment, the air hot and humid. Steam filters out from the bathroom door. Longest shower ever. He returns to the balcony and to his music, but before he can slip on his headphones, Marci kicks open the screen door, causing him to jump up against the railing.

“‘You’re out here still?’” Marci questions.

She grips the glass door with one pink flushed hand, the other holds a damp towel wrapped around her body.

“Well, are you done? I need to use the bathroom,” Foggy says as he starts to coil the headphones cord around his tape player.

“It’s a joke, honestly, how you follow Matt around like a puppy,” Marci spits.

Foggy frowns, “Huh?”

“You only wanted to go with Faye when Matt said he would go. How sad is that?” Marci smirks, lifting her chin.

“No, that’s not-”

Marci talks over him, “You think Matt loves you? He won’t ever love you Foggybear.”

Foggy’s mind is still trying to catch up with Marci’s giant leaps, trying to process what she’s saying, trying to invent a way to change the conversation.

“He told me he’s not gay you know. I asked him for you awhile back, because I could see you were living in denial about it. I was going to let you down nicely about it but the way you treat me, you deserve to be told this way.”

Foggy snaps, “I deserve it? I don’t deserve the way you treat me!” He squeezes the tape player in his hands, his fingers slipping on the buttons, “You’re always going off at me, swearing at me for no reason! It’s like you want to fight with me!”

Marci’s face goes redder than the steam caused her skin to flush and she presses her forearm against her side to keep her towel up as she stabs the air with her finger.

“I’m trying to tell you the truth because you won’t hear it.”

“This is the first time I’m hearing about it!!” Foggy says exasperatedly, “And for the record, I never asked you to question his sexuality!”
Marci grimaces, “You don’t have to shout! You’ve just gotta face the honest truth Foggybear. Matt’s not going to ever love you the way he loves me.”

Foggy goes silent at this and Marci only laughs, kicking the door shut as she forces an end to their conversation. He takes a seat again, but he holds the player in his hands, grips it until his fingers are as white as the plastic. It wouldn’t be true, what Marci said, but couldn’t it be true even with venom dripping from Marci’s teeth? Certainly the attention Matt pays to Marci signifies a valued relationship as poignant as Foggy and Matt’s in their first few years of knowing each other, as too in their two months of isolation. But Matt would tell him, wouldn’t he? He would tell Foggy, if they were dating. If they were… in love.

The thought makes him sick.

He doesn’t leave the balcony until it’s time to head out for their first show. At first he wondered if they thought he was asleep, but no one checked up on him so maybe they thought he was purposefully being rude. Missing out on dinner too. Then again, Marci probably told Faye and Matt that he was sulking. Sounds about right, and so what if he was? Things weren’t exactly going as he’d expected, and far from hoped. And the fact was, even though Marci’s going to be sharing the couch with Matt rather than having some privacy in Faye’s spare room, he had bigger problems. Like, how was he going to continue on this tour, right from the start, with that kind of atmosphere? He’s not wired to go day in and day out with his defence shields operating at 100% effectiveness. He just didn’t have it in him to fight back when it was better to let it go, let Marci walk all over him because that would at least mean he wouldn’t have to raise his voice too loud.

Still, the fact that no one had taken the time to check on him really bothered him. He wondered how specific Marci had been about explaining what Foggy was doing. Or if she had done any kind of explaining at all, let Aunt Faye and Matt invent their own explanations. After Marci had left him alone on the tiny balcony, Foggy had sat back in the deck chair, leant on two wobbly legs and spun the volume up full. The clouds shook with the instability of his seating, so he kicked one foot up against the spokes in the railing. The grip in his boots ground into the rusted metal and he was sure they were scraping slowly down, but he could not hear the effect over Primal Scream.

He didn’t even realize they were home until a spicy smell seemed to ooze from the bricks of the apartment. He’d turned the volume down, his hair fell over his face but he kept his face shielded as he listened to the commotion. He could hear muffled voices, laughter. And yet no one had come to get him.

When someone finally did wedge open the screen door, he’d been hoping it would be Matt. But it was Faye, a bowl of curry in her hand. He’d tried to refuse but she’d told him to take it with him, that Matt and Marci were packing up the van for the show already.

“Make sure you eat it all Foggy, I won’t let you leave a scrap of it in the van,” Marci orders Foggy.

Foggy rolls his eyes as he shovels Aunt Faye’s curry into his mouth. He wants to mumble a dry retort that burns in his throat hotter than the curry, but he’s testing out passivity. He’ll have to see how long that lasts. And so what if his continued silence comes off as rude, or makes people think
he’s sulking? Things aren’t exactly going how he’d expected, or even hoped. And the fact that Marci’s going to be sharing the couch with Matt, rather than accepting the privacy of the bed in Faye’s spare room, might contribute more poison to his problems than it should. But he supposes worrying about this and everything else is only going to make playing the show tonight harder.

The drive into the city is a slow crawl through the peak hour traffic. Marci tailgates every car, threatens to mount the curb if the traffic doesn’t let up. She drums the steering wheel, half out of impatience and the other half in time with Matt’s guitar playing. The time they have in the van is as much practice as they’re going to get today and Foggy’s hoping they’re ready. He’s hoping Marci’s ready too, after all, she only had two weeks to get back into the music again.

They get to the venue eventually but have to back track until they can find a parking lot. They have to haul their equipment to the bar and even though Marci’s voicing what Foggy’s thinking, her complaints get on his nerves. He wishes he could be as patient as Matt. By the time they get to the artist entry to the bar, Marci’s complaining about blisters and bruises and back problems and she doesn’t wait for security to check on her, and instead plummets down through the entrance into the shadows of the hall. The security guy chases after her and Matt catches Foggy’s arm before he can follow too.

“Are you alright, Foggy?”

Foggy’s eyes flutter shut as he takes a quiet breath, Matt’s strong hand around his forearm causing heat to swell around there, and elsewhere…

“I’m fine, why?” Foggy says breathily, flinching at his own reply.

Matt ever so slightly loosens his grip, “you’ve been pretty quiet today,” then detaches his hold, “Are you having second thoughts?”

Foggy blinks, looks up at Matt and he knows he should be looking at Matt’s eyes but it’s his lips that his eyes go straight for, “No, no,” he tries to laugh, “You make it sound like we’re getting married.”

“Well,” Matt smiles, “we have run away from home together, but I think it’ll be difficult to find a minister who will wed all three of us.”

Foggy grimaces, at a loss for what to say. He thinks he should explain himself, voice his facial expression, or at least fake a laugh but before he can attempt anything unnatural, Matt makes a quick addition.

“Will you… will you give her a shot, Foggy? I know you’ll like her, just give her a chance.”

Foggy sighs, hoists his guitar case over his shoulder again and starts down the corridor, “You know, it’d be easier if she’d cut me a break too.”

After the show Foggy feels a wreck. Or a wreckage not quite heavy enough to sink to the ocean floor, and not quite light enough to wash up on the shore. Stuck. In retrospect the show was probably pretty good considering they hadn’t played a live show together in months. They must’ve done something right because their agent said that a few people bought their album from The Waterboys’ stall. Probably had nothing to do with Foggy since all he could think about the entire time was Matt. And Marci. Matt and Marci. The music came naturally. They’d practiced and practiced and the set list was nailed into him. Marci had made a couple of mistakes but nothing
they couldn’t fix, nothing the crowd would notice. But between the music on that stage, a stage still tiny but bigger than they’d ever been on, he saw the way Matt interacted with Marci during their play. The way he seemed to look at her, the way he smiled when she smiled, and the way he nodded at Foggy seemed like nothing more than a basic courtesy.

The Waterboys invite them out to an after show at some club nearby and Marci is surprisingly good about drinking, she doesn’t accept a drop, yet she acts like she’s drunk. There’s some contemporary pop song blasting out of the speakers in the dark club and Marci pulls Matt out on the dance floor, leaving Foggy to hang by the fringes. Even from the edge he can hear Marci bad mouth the Waterboys, claiming her carelessness for their type of music. Foggy grips his glass and doesn’t dare make eye contact with one of the boys, except that means he’s staring transfixed at Matt and Marci on the dance floor and that’s something he wishes he could un-see.

He steps away, excuses himself from The Waterboy’s company and goes out to the front of the club. A ways down the street there’s a payphone and he makes his way towards it. He slips into the phone booth, clacking the door shut behind him. He jabs a couple of coins in and dials home. His Dad’s kind of mad at him because it took a call from Aunt Faye to let him know they’d arrived safely. Guess he’d had other things on his mind. But it’s actually good to hear his Dad’s voice, get some advice from him. He’d told his Dad a half-truth. That since Marci returned, Matt seemed to cut him off a bit, as if Matt only had time for one other friend in his life. Of course he didn’t tell his Dad that they’d been sleeping in the same bed, that sometimes they held hands, that sometimes they would hug until dawn while Foggy’s chest felt like it was exploding.

Maybe his Dad knew, maybe Ed had some kind of inkling about something different going on, in his quiet judging sort of way of acting. But he’d never been more specific than Foggy so Foggy’d never been sure. Either way, Ed had some solid advice for him, for dealing with Marci, combating her assertiveness and stubbornness to be right. And after a long chat about that and a chat about how Ed won’t be happy with Foggy if he keeps forgetting to call his Dad, and after emptying his pocket for more and more minutes, Foggy finally is able to hang up.

He drops his head on the cool metal of the telephone, his hand still gripping the handle of the receiver. It’s one thing to listen to advice and another to take it on. Competitiveness with Marci only seems to make things worse, and he supposes his Dad hasn’t seen that side of Marci to know how bad it gets. And as much as he’d like to adopt his Dad’s advice, he foresees it would only break them up, push them away from each other. Whether he likes it or not, Marci’s going to be in their band, and she’s going to be in a close relationship with Matt, either romantic or platonic, whether Foggy likes it or not. And he supposes the only way he’s going to get through the life of the band is to be passive with Marci. After all, he only seems to makes things worse, with her, for himself, when he tries to call her out on the shit she says. It’s too bad that she’s always at her worst when Matt’s not around. Matt’s presence seems to dim her, and the key, he supposes, is to accept it all or be expelled from Matt’s friendship altogether.

The sound of a bang against the fibreglass of the booth startles Foggy upright. He clings to the telephone box and glares out the glass, spotting Marci’s wicked grin as she punches her fist against the door, forcing it open.

“There you are Foggybear! We’re going home now!” Marci shouts.

She’s connected to Matt by her other hand, and Foggy’s eyes trail up from Matt’s pink hand, up his arm, over his muscled shoulder and up to his neck, his flushed cheeks.

“Come on, I want to go home!” Marci says, suddenly angry.

Foggy grits his teeth, “I’m going to stay on.”
“Fo-ggy,” Matt hiccups, “you sho-uld, come with us.”

Foggy stares at Matt’s glazed eyes, then his gaze falls to stare at his lips, wet and plump as Matt smiles at his own ridiculousness. He then shakes his head, redirecting his sight to the floor.

“Suit yourself!” Marci smirks, and spins to lead Matt away.

As they turn their backs, Foggy steps into the doorway of the booth, gripping the frame as he looks on. He still can’t understand Marci. If she’s ever telling the truth, or the wildest lie. More to the point, he doesn’t understand why Matt likes her so much. He gets it on Brett’s level, or on why any other dude would take a fascination to her. She’s hot. Nice face, nice enough hair, good tits and ass, not that Foggy cares about that at all. But Matt wouldn’t be able to tell these things unless someone’s told him, unless they’re physically close… Maybe Marci boasts about herself. Foggy wouldn’t put it past her.

Beyond looks, beyond her mood swings, there must be something about Marci that Matt has come to like. Come to love. Even after they disappear from his vision he seems to see an imprint of their figures in the dark. A shadow in the night, hovering, shimmering off the road like heat on a summer’s day. It was only a couple of weeks ago that Matt’s hand in his was a reality. Not so long ago that Foggy thought he’d had something with Matt. That he was building something. And now all he has to hold on to is the tight rope strung between him and his best friend, and Marci’s performing circus tricks out in the middle. Maybe he’s going around in circles but it’s only because it’s hard to face the truth of it all. Hard to face the fact that he feels lonely now, lonely amongst friends and potential lovers and maybe he deserves what he’s been dealt, since he’s been passive the whole time, really. He’d never meant to push anything too hard and when he didn’t he got left behind, chasing after a moving train, a step too slow.

He rewinds, clocks himself back into the club, but detours away from Scotty and skates toward the bar. The pop music’s so opposite to Foggy’s tastes that he orders a few drinks to get through it, skulls each down because he’s sick of taking things slow. Sick of getting his fingers bent back when he tries to catch the passing train. Lights splash green, blue and yellow in his eyes, distorting bodies, dispersing shadows. As his vision blurs, waves, the people in the club start to take stencil forms. Folded paper cut into the shape of people and expanded out, multiplying and multiplying until they’re all in a big line, all connected by their hands and feet. The paper’s stretched out wide, tearing, tearing up.

Foggy’s never been much of a dancer but he’s always been one to crave intimacy, to accept it when offered. She’s frayed at the edges from being torn from the stencil but the edges are surprisingly soft, inviting as she pulls his arms around her waist. He remembers the change in temperature against his cheeks, hot club air, cool night air, the stars shining like they’re balls of fire in front of his eyes. He remembers her hair getting lost in the spaces between lights, long dark strands slicing through the brightness. He remembers looking down at her smile, her lips wide over her teeth. He remembers it looks like her mouth holds more teeth than normal, monstrous, and she licks her lips, her teeth pearly, glistening. He remembers feeling another temperature change, cold and hot, air and breath and he returns home to Aunt Faye’s late and smelling of perfume and BO and just a little shaky.

Shaky because he got a bit close, too close. Shaky because he had thought virginity only mattered to those who valued religion. He didn’t know he valued his virginity until he found himself thinking it was Matt on his knees. From the front door he peers down the hallway. He can see them on the couch, entwined, maybe, maybe not. The shadows make him see things that aren’t there, makes him see a frame paused for eternity. Alcohol tingles in his fingertips as he runs them across the plaster walls to his room, as blind as Matt in the darkness. The figures on the fold out lump
together in the corners of his eyes, roll out to the blankness of the walls of his room. The moonlight peeks through the skylight. He collapses on his bed, cramped on this single ship, swaying in the dark waters. He faces the dim light and transposes the memory of the girl on her knees with Matt, his lips wet like he saw earlier, but not wet from the dryness of alcohol, wet for the taste of Foggy. This time he allows himself pleasure, pleasures himself with the wish otherwise, dreams about the way it would feel to have Matt’s plump lips around his dick.

It’s not the first time he’s done it, fantasised about it, and it’s not the first time he’s felt weird about it afterwards. Guilty. Passivity wins out this time, or alcohol does, compelling him to not soak or bathe in being spent, but to pass out, his heart exposed to the devices of the devil.

Their tour heads south, Philadelphia, New York, Boston, across to Chicago, Minneapolis, Seattle. They stay with relatives and friends where possible until the label starts to organise hotels for them, which happens the moment they move across the Western states, friends and family running dry. They stay in each city for no longer than three days. Hotel, performance, party, move on to the next place. Repeat. Their tour with The Waterboys finishes up in San Fran, a couple of days after Vancouver. Foggy’s into it now, the rhythm, the backwards sleep pattern, the endless travel, an invisible moving walkway pulling him forever forwards.

Except the hotels aren’t anything like how he remembers they were when he was a kid. He supposes there was so much to romanticise about touring with his Dad in the summer break. He was only ever allowed to go when The Call was making good sales, a solid cross country tour booked out. His Mom let him skip the last day of school to take him to the airport, a flight attendant sat next to him and made sure he got off the plane and into his Father’s arms in San Francisco. He went around to different cities with his Dad and band mates, met other musicians, got Peter Salisbury to sign a CD for him, stayed up late, ordered room service in fancy hotels and watched all the cartoons he liked on the television set.

It’s funny how memory can make things seem bigger, better, when in reality the very same hotel he stayed in as a kid is far from grand. Maybe it wasn’t ever, and it was because this hotel was his first taste that it became his benchmark. The damask wallpaper he thought signified wealth has since peeled off to reveal the rotten wood panels beneath. The furniture is old and worn, the carpet crunchy and smeared with stains, indicating both age and neglect. Room service exists, as in many of the hotels they’ve stayed in, but to an unsatisfactory level. They may as well be serving Mickey D’s than claim they’re offering anything fancier. And the prior allure of staying up late is no longer a luxury, but a necessity.

He supposes he had romanticised it for years onward because he never really understood how tiring it could be until he was living that rock star life. How worn out playing night after night can be when you’re trying to maintain your regular schedule. How on top of playing, you’re travelling and socialising and moving on, setting up, moving on again, all within collections of three days at a time. Strangely enough, Foggy’s coming to kind of like it. It’s a rocky schedule but it’s the rock’n’roll flavour, and Foggy can still find the time to romanticise certain elements of their tour just to make it all worthwhile.

Drives along the highway at midday, the lamp posts flipping passed, steady, counting down from a million to zero. The sunlight glints off rooftops of cars, buildings, the railings, daring to blind him, to shine a ray of light in Marci’s eyes, pull them up on the nature strip between speeding cars, a
reflection in the steamy window showing just that. Drives through the night where he sits down low, his whole line of sight opening up to the expanse of the twinkling sky. So close to the floor of the van, the street lights look like stars, bigger, suns. The outer glow, the solar system. He’s passing through all these lives, some known, most unknown. All of these people in these cities as they go through them, only privileged to encounter the residents in thirds, in fractions of time. An hour or so in some club or bar, or concert hall if they’re lucky. And even then, he only meets a fraction of them too, after the show, at the stall or partying or out on the streets, shopping or just going from A to B. And it’s funny to think about how many people he’s missed out on meeting, how many lives have mismatched alignment. They mightn’t even know them from the music journalism that comes as a product of their shows as they function in a different world. Sports or business or school, or whatever, unknown variables with potential overlaps. Either way, Foggy, Matt and Marci, they play their part, and then they’re onto the next city, the next group of people.

xx. shades of blue

red.

“Wait, wait, not this,” Foggy says as Marci pops the tape out and tunes in to the local radio station.

“I want to listen to the radio!” Marci cries, her foot pedalling the accelerator.

“I’ll put Bob Dylan on, just give me a sec,” Foggy unbuckles his seatbelt as he leans forward, trying to fish the tape bag up from the van floor.

Foggy lifts the bag onto his lap and takes out The Wild Swans tape, packing it back in his home. He takes out another tape and jabs it at the mouth of the player, but Marci covers it with her hand. She yelps.

“What are you doing?” Foggy growls.

Matt can hear the plastic of the tape bump against Marci’s hand again and again.

“Stop it!” Marci cries.

“Just let me put the tape in!”

“When you’re the driver, you can pick the music. But I’m driving and I wanna listen to something different!”

“Can we have the radio?” Matt speaks up, “I like the variety.”

“Huh?” Foggy asks.

“I like the variety,” Matt clears his throat, “of the radio.”

“See, Matt knows what’s up,” Marci grins, tacking her hand back on the steering wheel.

He ignores the way Foggy pushes the bag of tapes back down to the floor and the way he folds his arms and hums monotone, blanking out the pop music. He ignores it as best he can until he doesn’t
have to. Blondie comes on the radio and Marci turns up the volume, sings along. Music always does sound better when it’s loud.

It’s *Call Me*. Certain songs, certain sounds, pull him back to memories. Back when he was ten, curled up on the couch, early morning. It’s the morning music show, hits of the 70s and 80s play. It’s about the only time he has to watch TV. Early morning or when his Dad’s out boxing. Any other time he’s studying, getting those good grades in right from the start. This particular time, he’s got mangoes in a bowl, juice all over his fingers and chin and he’s staring at Debbie Harry prancing along the stage. Her red, red lips. The camera zooms up on her singing, her lips against the microphone, her blonde cropped hair frizzy and sweaty, leaking onto her red dress. Blondie makes him see red, makes him taste mangoes and feel the morning chill, the night not yet lifted from the depths of Hell’s Kitchen.

**green.**

She’d almost been late for their show. Foggy had said she was red eyed. Flushed. And she’d come in with a broken fist and blood dripping from her dislocated bones but she’d insisted on doing the show. Screamed about doing it and she did it one handed until the medical officers at the theatre had pulled her off stage.

The click of the first aid box blares green in his line of sight. Green plastic from his Dad’s tackle box, a makeshift first aid kit. That’s what he used to reach for up on top of the fridge when his Dad came in with wounds worse than Marci’s, worse than what Matt had ever had dealt to himself. He’d heard fingers rummaging through the contents of the first aid box and he’d thought of the way his old tackle box folded out into various compartments, medicine and bandages and scissors and thread, all squashed into every possible corner of the tackle box. He’d heard bandages peel and stretch, fix up torn skin, thread popping through layers, the metal clamp. He’d heard all this and thought green, green when it all gets folded back into the tackle box, heavy and stained with blood.

“Maybe we should call Ed over?” Matt offers quietly.

He already knows what the answer is going to be but he can hear Marci’s small hisses of pain whenever she has to lift her hands off the steering wheel. Usually she’s restless, lifts them off when she doesn’t have to. Sometimes Matt will wake up from a nap or rear back in full wakefulness when Marci props the steering wheel between her knees, leans over to rifle through her bag, or adjust the rear view mirror, or flick between radio stations, change tapes over after one song, one hand on the wheel to read a track list, roll a joint.

“I wish I could drive,” Matt says after a while.

“If anything,” Foggy begins grimly, “Marci’s driving should make you not want to drive.”

Wind shrieks through the small gaps between the square piece of cardboard and the frame of the window. Marci grips the wheel tight, silent. The bandages stick to the leather with sweat and blood and it’s completely unnerving to witness her so still. No comeback.

“I’ve always liked the idea of driving,” Matt muses.

“Sorry to break it to you,” Marci snaps, “but you’re never going to drive unless you can grow a new set of eyes.”

Her grip tightens on the wheel and she winces.

“Maybe you can’t drive Matt,” Foggy pipes up, “but you could try a bike maybe. I’ve heard about
“this blind guy who rides bikes.”

“Motorbikes?” Matt thinks he sounds hopeful.

Marci scoffs, “That’s an accident waiting to happen.”

“Says you!”

blue.

He thinks he’d fallen asleep. Woken up in some desert, some hot sandy place with the sun baking
him to death. Water laps at his heels, salty, and Marci can’t stop laughing at him. Calling him
names, beetroot, lobster. Foggy wonders if he’ll tan, Marci bets he’ll peel. He’d never been to the
ocean, never seen it properly, not the real ocean, anyway. Only the grey gasps of the water banking
Manhattan. Water is inexplicably blue. Deep blue. Depths of the ocean, the tide, the splash of a
wave, blue. And the sun reflects the sand, yellow, but the sun is brighter, a big yellow spot like he
drew as a kid. Red sunburns, the pain of scorched skin. And he wishes he could see the sunrise
with his friends. See how red he is, see how blue the sea is, see how yellow the sun and the sand is,
flaking over his skin. He wishes he could see his friends. See Foggy’s long hair, see how his eyes
must twinkle, how his nose must wrinkle. Foggy tells him Marci looks like Debbie Harry. Red lips,
blonde hair. And do Matt’s bruises look blue, purple, black? The shadow that lurks behind him,
hugs his shoulders, is it death? He can never see.

black.

Matt’s trying to warm up to the electronic music scene since Marci’s so into it but it messes with
his senses, makes it harder for him to process what’s real and what’s mixed. DJs use sounds, a mix
of manmade and natural recordings. The synths distort reality, transmute splitting rocks to
squeaking rubber, cheap shoes running up a mopped hallway. A dial tone transmuted to the shrill
clank of machinery, malfunction and manufacture. And if he doesn’t have sound, he has taste and
smell but those senses are dulled by the alcohol, by the smoke he has no choice but to inhale.

“I’m going to be sick,” Matt chokes as he clutches his stomach.

The sponge padding of the tent changes to wet grass, wet by both alcohol and rainwater. He sways
on his feet, his equilibrium knocked off balance by the swirl of the crowd he’d had to wade
through to get to open space. He can hear Foggy sifting through the crowd behind him, trying to
find the weaker links, peeling apart bodies to create a clear path. His friend reaches him, places a
hot hand on the small of Matt’s back.

Matt collapses then, in the grass. His head spins with his body, flips, the grass pressed beneath his
back, licking his bare neck.

“You’ve gotta take it easy, buddy,” Foggy tells him.

Foggy’s hand reaches for Matt again, clutches a bent knee as Matt grimaces, his stomach folding in
on itself. The music vibrates between the threading of the tent, he can see it, spikes radiating into
the sky, day or night, blue or black or red.

“I can’t do it, Foggy,” Matt breathes between revolts in his stomach.

“Dude just vomit, you’ll feel better,” Foggy says, his fingers pressing in on his knee like darts.

His muscles hurt all over, weak and wretched. His bones feel as thin as rope, threaded between the
sheets of his muscles, and he could grab a hold of the rope and wring out the sheets around the
fibres, twist it and shred it, rip it to pieces. His body isn’t as formed as it was a year ago, his
discipline lost in the smoke.

“I put up with it, at the start, Foggy… I tried to ignore it, but I’m drawn…” Matt lurches up and
pushes Foggy’s hand off his knee, replacing it with his. He pulls his knees in close, knees against
forehead, holding back the vomit because if he vomits it all comes out.

It all comes out.

“What are you talking about?”

The trees sway in the light rain, wind whistling between branches, tugging leaves to curve the
trunk. It sounds calming to him, like white noise, natural TV fuzz. Foggy puts his hand on Matt’s
shoulder, comforting, still hot though, still hot compared to the drizzle.

“I’m scared to go back, but I miss it…”

“It’s okay to be scared.”

“No,” Matt swallows away sobs, “it’s not.”

Foggy embraces him, arms stretched around him and Matt’s arms feel unlike his own when he
clutches onto Foggy’s, keeps him still, holds him secure. Skin spread thin, bones hollow, stomach
churning.

“Tell me what you’re scared of, Matt, tell me what’s got you like this,” Foggy pleads, sniffling.

“I miss home.”

They play a couple of tracks on a talk show. Marci’s late again. It doesn’t make sense to Matt.
They arrive together, then Marci goes away. Sometimes she comes back earlier, other times, right
on the dot. She hasn’t arrived by the time they’re meant to play so they have to move the segments
around to accommodate. When they finally get on the stage, the raised floorboards reeking of
decades of sweat, Matt becomes irritated with the way Marci drums. Foggy’s good, he’s always
good. But Marci… the audience wouldn’t be able to tell unless they had as keen hearing as Matt.
The slight miss of the beat, milliseconds, but it makes a difference to Matt and he winces every
time he hears her bandages unravel, makes a faint muffling noise against the skin of the drums.

Sometimes it’s hard to even get her out of bed. She’s taken to booking three singles. Not the
cheapest option, and not every hotel offers three in one room either. Still, it means Matt’s always
got company. And getting his own bed means he doesn’t have to fit around someone else. Still,
he’s worried about her. She insists she’s alright but he can smell something about her, something
in her blood that’s got her acting different and Matt wonders if it’s just because she needs space or
if there’s something else going on.

The show doesn’t ask them to the after party. Marci drives them home in silence, her hands hot on
the wheel. This time home is some dingy motel in Houston, as humid as the talk show set Virgin
books them to play. Lights blaring like fire, stuffy room, crowded and sweaty and starched carpet, aged floorboards. Triple’s not an option. Only double bed and couch. There’s a disagreement about generosity. Who should have the bed. Who should have the couch. In the end, Matt can’t stand sleeping on the couch while Marci willingly sleeps on the floor, so he gets the stiff ironed sheets on the double.

He’s tired of shitty hotels, motels, bed and breakfasts. The latter’s a luxury they can barely afford. Washing machines can’t seem to ever rinse out the stains in the sheets. The cleaners do the basics, miss the messes left behind the bed frames, ignore the grime build up along the ceramics, the hair tangled in the shower drain a lost cause at every place. The state of them make his skin crawl but he can’t do anything about it. Have a smoke before bed, numb his senses, knock himself out.

It’s not that they’re not doing well. Their openings for The Waterboys went so well that they were able to pick up more shows through to June. Album sales in the U.K. picked up too. Their label puts it down to their similarity to The Jesus and Mary Chain. Except they’re not trying to be like anyone. Nevertheless, their popularity is rising. Hit a hot niche, garage rock, shoe gazing, psychedelic. They’re trendy, accidentally.

Matt lights his joint, takes the ash tray with him as he stretches out on the bed. He can hear Foggy and Marci in the other room, bantering about who should get the thicker blanket. Neither of them should want it if they could smell what Matt could smell on it. Matt’s careful about tapping the ashes into the tray, not wanting to further damage the mattress. He’s left the window open. Always. But with his friends in the other room he contemplates closing it. Closing off any entrances that Stick could use to gain the upper hand. But his friends are still awake, awake enough to be aware, alert, and so he leaves it until they find sleep.

He can hear traffic out on the main street outside the motel. Cars and trucks and buses screech in and sink out. If Matt concentrates he can chase one. Follow a taxi weaving through traffic for the fastest route. Or trace back their van, wheels turning clockwise, trace it back to the start of their journey. Towns and people present but absent in their path. History. But all history comes full circle whether we want it or not. Matt’s hoping it will, anyway. He misses Hell’s Kitchen, misses its people. All except one and he’s enough to keep Matt away.

They check out the next day, late in the afternoon, deposit ruined. This is how they’re making losses over profits. That and gas, and food and alcohol and drugs. Foggy’s always grown his so Marci’s had to deal. That’s how Marci becomes in charge of their money. She gets a good price, usually, but lately she’s been getting what she’s given. No persuasion. The fight is lost in her and Matt doesn’t know how to help her.

The man at the front desk sighs deeply as Foggy signs for their stay, then slaps a thin envelope down on the counter.

“Some smarmy guy in a suit dropped this off this morning. Must be pretty important because he sure didn’t look happy having to come in. He looked the type to throw a fit if a fleck of dust landed on his tie.”

As Foggy sniggers with the attendant, Matt gets up from his chair.

Foggy recovers, then informs Matt, “it’s from our agent, Matt. Express.”

Matt frowns, “Wesley dropped this off himself?”

“Wesley!” the attendant shouts, “That’s the name of the guy, I remember now. Mr Wesley. Geez, if I’ve ever seen a man who did not want to be where he was this morning… Anyway, he told me
to tell you kids it’s for your girl.”

Matt presses on, “what is it?

Foggy locks the pen back in its holder and turns the letter over in his hands. Matt reaches around his friend and brushes his fingers over the print on the outside of the envelope. ‘Express’ is written in big letters across the side, a small plastic window disguises the addressee and contents from him.

“It’s a letter from the government… The zoning department.”

Frowning, Matt clocks his ears toward Marci who has just finished shoving the last of her bags in the boot of the van. Foggy finishes paying the fine for overstaying and Matt follows him to the van. Marci’s about to climb into the driver’s seat but stops when Matt and Foggy get close.

“What’ve you got there fellas?” Marci drawls.

“Our agent dropped off a letter for you. Guess he didn’t have enough time to hand it to you himself,” Foggy says, handing it to her.

“A letter?” Marci grabs the envelope and as she rips it open, she coos, “Is it a love letter?”

She pulls herself up on the chair as she reads it, the shredded envelope falling to the ground. She tuts sharply, starts reading aloud in a rushed manner, “… Have been removed from their home of…. Failure to make mortgage repayments, what the fuck is this shit?”

She scrunches up the letter and pegs it at the ground, then leaps off the chair, pushing Matt and Foggy aside.

“Hey! What’s going on?” Foggy chases after Marci, leaving Matt by the open door.

Marci races around to the back of the van, yanks open the doors. A couple of bags fall straight out and she grabs them, plus a few others, and bundles them up in her arms.

“It’s wrong Matt! They can’t do this! It’s not right!” Marci cries as she kicks the doors shut again, “Those numbers are fabricated! You can’t just kick people out of their homes based on unsubstantial shit like this!”

Foggy catches onto Marci and says, “what are you doing?!”

Marci stops, her face close to Foggy’s, “I’m going to catch a plane, idiot.”

“A plane?!?”

“It’ll take me fucking days to get there in this rotten orange,” Marci spits at the van.

“You can’t go! We’ve got shows!”

Matt runs a hand along the side of the van and joins Foggy and Marci, “Marci, please rethink this.”

“Matt’s right, whatever’s going on, I’m sure you can do it over the phone.”

“We need you Marci.”

“You don’t understand,” Marci growls, “I need to sort this shit out for them. They’re hopeless on their own. And you know what? I don’t fucking appreciate this from either of you. I’m going
through a crisis right now and you’re not being very supportive of me, for Christ’s sake.”

“Virgin’s not going to be very supportive of us if you go,” Foggy quips, “We might be Wesley’s newest snag but shit’s not going to go down well when he finds out you’ve run off again!”

“The difference between you and me, Foggy,” Marci spits, “is when I want to do something, I don’t wander about thinking about all the ways shit could go wrong. I just fucking do it,” she yanks herself away from Foggy and marches toward the street, “I’m not wasting any more time!”

“Marci!” Matt roars, chasing after her, anger building in his chest.

She meets him with matched fury, spinning on her toes to face him as he catches up to her.

“Back off! I don’t want you stitched to my side like Foggy does! Fuck, just give me some space to sort this shit!” She grunts in annoyance as she pivots again, making her way out of the motel driveway.

Matt hears her stomp out to the main road, cusses falling from her lips, a mirror of Foggy’s.

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**thursday.**

The washing machine spins faster and faster, rocking out of its spot. It spins so fast Matt wonders if it’s pretending to be a rocket taking off. Ed’s chatting to the attendant as she makes them all coffee. He can smell the beans. There’s nothing she’s going to be able to do to stop the coffee from tasting awful. Burnt or unburnt. Matt will have it for something to hold on to.

“It shouldn’t be long,” Matt says to Foggy, leaning back in the plastic chair.

Foggy sits straight, cocking his head to one side, “The washing or Dad?”

Matt’s reply gets caught in his throat. He chokes on the word ‘Dad’, and instead spits out, “Ed.”

“He’s with us now. Even if Marci does come back, he won’t go away.”

Buttons and zippers clang against the inside the barrel of the washing machine. He hopes Foggy hasn’t left any bits of paper in his pockets this time. He forgot to check.

“Marci will come back,” Matt replies assuredly.

“You don’t know that.”

Matt’s fingers trace up the arm of his plastic chair to find Foggy’s elbow. He wraps his hand around Foggy’s forearm. There’s a sense of calm washing over Foggy, but the moment Ed starts moving toward them, Foggy shifts away from Matt. Ed holds all three paper cups of coffee at once, palming off the first one to his son, then presses the other in Matt’s open hand.

“I’ve been to this same Laundromat just over a decade ago,” Ed muses as he takes a seat beside Foggy, “Same machines, same 80s mural. Same chick at the desk,” he chuckles, “At least I think so. Could be her sister, or daughter.”
“Quit being racist, Dad,” Foggy sneers.

“What? Memory is unkind to me son. The old girl looks familiar but don’t they all?”

“Stop, please,” Foggy hisses, "or at least keep your voice down!"

“I’m just saying.”

Ed takes a sip of his coffee then spits it back in the cup.

“Still makes shit all coffee. I remember that the most about this place.”

“Thought you said this was a good place to go?” Matt says.

“Good by the dollar, cheap machines, cheap coffee. It’s either one or the other. Got any pages yet?”

Foggy fishes out the pager from his pocket and shakes his head, “You’re all gonna know when we’ve got one. This thing vibrates like a nuke.”

“Is that what that was before, in the van?” Ed asks.

“Yeah, I got one from Virgin. Said Marci has seven days to return or we officially have to find a replacement.”

“We’ve got a timeframe on finding the replacement too,” Matt adds.

“Everything’s gotta be so set in stone for them, hey? Well,” Ed shrugs, “at least that means I get to play a couple of shows with you boys.”

Matt can tell Foggy doesn’t even want to look at his Dad. He tries not to smile except when Ed tries to take a sip of his coffee again, only to spit it out, Matt can’t help but laugh. He guesses Ed’s not all bad. Sometimes Matt can’t even tell if Ed’s joking or not, an evenness in his heart that tricks Matt. Probably why it’s taking Matt longer to warm to him. He’s not easily read.

After Marci fled, they’d had to call Ed in. They didn’t have much of a choice. They couldn’t very well pay a taxi to drive them up 200 miles. Imagine the bill on that one. Calling Ed meant they’d had to sit through him complaining about the time it took him to take a flight across then take a taxi to their motel, then drive them to their next booking. There’s all this whine, but Matt doesn’t think Ed actually minds. He’s happy to be a part of their affair. Only Foggy isn’t. Foggy’s shier around his Dad. Not in terms of speaking out against his Dad but in terms of interaction with Matt. He supposes it’s for the best if Foggy has this obvious barrier to affection. Like Marci, but more effective.

“It’s a real shame though, don’t you think?” Ed starts.

“What is?” Foggy asks monotone.

“What’s happening over in Hell’s Kitchen. They’re really trying to relocate whole blocks of residents. It’s nuts. I’ve seen signs go up on buildings still occupied. Plywood and fencing and tape starving them from the outside in.”

“The government can’t punish whole blocks for not paying their bills. Where are the people going to go?” Foggy says.

“Don’t think they care much. These signs they’re putting up have their plans, concept art stuff. Looks like they wanna demolish everything, build something new.”
“It sounds illegal,” Matt states.

“They’re historic, you know, the buildings. They can’t just tear ‘em down. It’s not going to be easy for them to get the permits to do what they wanna do.”

“Is it the government behind this?” Matt asks.

“Not to my knowledge. Private realtors, I’ve heard. Some loaded fuck with a vision. Bet they have ties with senators anyways. It’s gotta be the only way they’re going to get away with what they’re planning.”

“Somehow I don’t think we’re going to get Marci back this time,” Foggy says.

“She’ll be back,” Matt says with certainty.

“You always say that,” Foggy replies.

“She knows what’s at stake.”

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friday.

Since their next show is scheduled in Philadelphia, Ed makes them cancel their hotel and stay at his old friend Ben’s. Matt can tell Ben’s surprised to see them. He’s just about to head out to the hospital when they rock up and Matt feels bad for making the man flustered in taking them in. Foggy is so adamant about being organised that it’s strange to comprehend that Ed’s the complete opposite. Could have put Ben at ease if they’d given him a forewarning.

Ben settles them in nevertheless. His apartment seems to be poky, cluttered. Even with his senses on high alert, Matt has trouble not running into piles of paper and books and boxes and things as he navigates his way through Ben’s apartment. Ben doesn’t have much in terms of furniture, so Matt takes a seat on a bean bag. The polystyrene beads inside are well worn, stiff and clumpy, but his uncomfortableness is a worthy distraction against thinking about how close he is to Hell’s Kitchen. His skin is crawling with the idea in the periphery of his mind. Closer than he’s been in months, but still far, still miles away from Stick.

After Ben makes his leave, Ed and Foggy finish arranging their bags in Ben’s apartment. When they’re done, Ed lies down on Ben’s bed for a quick shut eye. Matt’s stomach starts to churn when he feels Foggy’s hand slip into his, lifting him to his feet. He’d actually prefer a nap than to take a walk, sleep away his worries. Then again, he doesn’t think he’ll be able to sleep with his problem of proximity weighing on him, so he accepts Foggy’s wordless invitation.

Foggy leads Matt out into the hallway and pulls the door to Ben’s quietly shut behind them. He then hooks his arm around Matt’s, takes him outside. Summer breathed its last gasp months ago, dead leaves crunch under their feet. Foggy leads him into a park area. Matt can smell the dew laden leaves off bushes and flowers and he can smell the damp bark on the trees, frosted into hibernation. Thinking about it, this is probably the first time he’s actually taken the time to walk around a new city. They’ve been to so many places, so many shitty hotels and sleazy bars and dingy clubs, old and new buildings, empty and filled, and yet barely done any sight-seeing. Matt doesn’t think it’s because of any kind of consideration towards Matt, but because it’s just not what
Foggy and Marci are interested in doing. Not at this point anyway. Especially considering Foggy’s already seen a lot of America from touring with his Dad, and Marci’s seen Europe which is arguably incomparable to the States. Still, Matt wishes that they could have more time for things like this. He can enjoy experiences like walking through a beautiful park just as any other person can. If not more, because he experiences it through a friend, feels what they feel in reaction to the motions of nature. But explaining that to Foggy would mean explaining so much more and he’s sure Foggy’s not ready for all of that.

“Dad’s pretty good at playing my parts,” Foggy says, sidling up to Matt as a breeze sweeps down the pebbled pathway.

“Yeah, he’s alright.”

“And drums are actually pretty easy.”

“You’re not as good as Marci. Besides, you’d hate having Ed in the band officially.”

Foggy remains silent for a long time, taking Matt along a pebbled pathway which leads up to a structure. Matt can tell from the humid exhaust lifting off the building that it must be a greenhouse. Foggy takes them up to it, pushes open the door and leads Matt inside the stuffy room.

After a while of walking slowly around the maze of a room, his friend admits, “I’m glad she’s gone. Two time’s the charm. Good riddance, I’d say.”

“She’s got a handful of days still, she’ll be back Foggy.”

Foggy stops by a pond. Fat fish lurk across the depths of the pond, not daring to surface.

“I hope she won’t.”

“Why?” Matt questions, but he receives no reply.

Foggy kicks his sneakers up on a rock poised by the pond, moss leaves against the rubber sole.

“I know you’re not dating her… you don’t have to tell me because I can already tell you never kiss…” Foggy’s voice cracks and he tightens his grip on Matt’s arm, “But if you are, do you only fuck when I’m not around, or what?”

Matt bites his lip, “I’m Catholic, Foggy.”

Foggy seems to hold onto Matt’s arm for dear life, “I’m Catholic, Foggy.”

Foggy turns to him, “I miss it being like this. Just you and me. Why have you forgotten? Sleeping in the same bed, beside each other, because you asked me to. I could,” Foggy raises a hand to Matt’s chest, “I could feel your heart beat through the mattress. I could,” he leans into the crook of Matt’s neck, “feel your breath on my neck, as I slept. Or didn’t.”

The tension between Foggy’s lips and the skin on Matt’s neck pulled taut is like the space between two negative charged magnets.

“If Marci’s right about anything it’s that I do worry about stuff too much when all I’ve really gotta do is make my move and ask questions later.”
Matt feels Foggy’s lips on his and yeah, he anticipated it and yeah, he didn’t do anything to stop him. Not straight away anyway, because Foggy has a point. He’s always on the money, more than Matt gives him credit for. Yeah, he remembers nights sleeping beside Foggy, or pretending to, soaking in the life of Foggy opposite him. His love, his tenderness, his thoughtfulness. And yeah, he likes the way Foggy’s lips feel on his own, the way Foggy’s hands gently press on his abdomen, on his waist. And yeah maybe he’s being unfairly dishonest, using religion to cover his truths but Matt’s as afraid as Foggy’s been.

Matt pulls away, breathless, “I’m, I’m Catholic Foggy. I can’t.”

Foggy wipes the back of his hand across his lips, takes a step back, “God damn it Matt.”

Foggy’s a fuming steam engine in Matt’s perception of the world and when Foggy slips his hand around Matt’s bicep again it’s like the flaming hot coals burning in the engine. Foggy’s got his teeth grit shut, his hold on Matt firm and painful and he marches Matt right out of the greenhouse, back towards Ben’s apartment. Matt finds himself trying to make excuses but Foggy shuts him up at every attempt, shushing him into silence and Foggy leaves him at the threshold of Ben’s apartment, ice cold in juxtaposition to Foggy’s furious heat.

Matt understands why Foggy leaves then, needs some time apart. But as the distance between them widens, and Foggy’s saliva starts to disappear off Matt’s lips, Matt starts to grasp the gravity of the situation. Gauge the stretched distance. A cold chill shoots up his spine when no one answers him buzzing Ben’s apartment number and he presses it a few times, praying that it wakes Ed up. The glass door finally buzzes open and Matt imagines he can see Stick looming behind him, readying his pounce. Serves Matt right for playing with angels.

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saturday.

Wind snakes the outside of the apartment building, the body of it constricting the structure, collecting the air from open windows, rewarding the motionless with motion. The wind in Foggy’s room sucks the door open, pushes it shut again. Matt hears Foggy’s restlessness, his annoyance at the continuing sound and his reluctance to do anything about it. Styrofoam beans meld together under Matt’s weight. He stretches out, and they gush, a stale groan. Curtains riddled with holes shudder in the harsh breeze, Ben’s papers scatter.

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sunday.

Matt fumbles with the TV remote, wondering why they can’t all be standardised. What is the point of a remote with unique button placement, when it’s not the input, but the output, that’s valued? In the end it doesn’t matter what channel he has it on, so long as there’s noise. So long as it’s loud.

Ben went to see his wife and Ed had gone with him this time. Foggy tagged along and Matt could tell his invitation was withdrawn by his friend. Matt wishes he had had the courage to make a scene.
Not his style.

But he can’t sleep. Won’t move. And Ben highly disapproves of their smoking habits.

So he sits perfectly still. His senses clock up to full capacity so that he can hear everything. A cockroach runs across the tiles in the corner of the kitchen. He notices the cobwebs hanging off the ceiling, floating. He can smell the dirt on the shoes of Ben’s neighbours, either side, opposite. Someone’s fingers coated in fish, scale remnants under their nails. A bird picking at fruit dangling from a cage. And beyond the main floor, out in the street, Matt can hear the thick droplets of chipotle dribble down someone’s chin. The thick plastic tyres of a scooter barging across asphalt. And yet, Matt can’t help but worry that Stick might slip through the cracks in his shield. Sneak up on him, his unseen shadow, sewn to his own.

He can’t bear it. Being alone. He should’ve chased after them. Insisted on going with them. Or tailed them. All with their own risks. Of being seen, of being left too far behind. In the end he’s stuck with the choice he’s made, so he remains focused, legs crossed until he starts to lose circulation in his feet. He risks a break, crawls across the carpet to make a call, contact. The moments between the dial tone opens up vital seconds for Stick to snatch him, straighten him out.

Courtney doesn’t pick up the first time round. The dials are excruciating, like twin saws dismembering his symmetry. The tone drops and Matt’s breathless, hands clammy, the set slips in his hold. He fumbles for the phone, punches in Courtney’s number again. He dials wrong, sweating, teeth clenched, his shadows creeping up on him and he tries again, all he can do is try again. The dial tone rings shrill in his ear and is cut short, the blade of the saws twanging at the halt.

The voice on the other end of the line keeps him company when the Nelsons won’t speak to him. Ben is civil. A layer of hostility is laced under his graciousness, abiding by his loyalty to his good friend. And Marci is silent in her extended absence. He’s heard chatter from Courtney. Lawsuits, protests, petitions, and it’s only been a few days. Her deadline close but not deadly. But Courtney has a life too, has places to be, things to do. He can’t be on the phone with Matt all the time. So when Ben and the Nelsons leave for the hospital, Matt focuses until he’s on the brink of wearing himself out. He can almost feel Marci, on his periphery. Just out of reach. His breath is heaving and he tries to call again, no answer. So he uses his waning focus to find Foggy, not far off, reachable.

Ben lives close to the hospital, and he pays the price too. Matt supposes the only benefit of the close proximity is being able to see his wife at any point, being only a fifteen minute walk to the building. Still, it would come with its own inconveniences. A considerable distance from Ben’s workplace, the shocking rent price, and the compactness of the space. Matt’s only been in Ben’s house for a few days and he’s already starting to feel claustrophobic. It doesn’t help that Ben doesn’t seem to have time, or the energy, to clean up.

Normally Matt would be able to follow anyone based on a number of things. The sound of their voice, of their heart beating, of their breathing, and even the way they smell. This time it’s not hard to trail Foggy because despite his calm demeanour, Foggy’s blood is boiling inside. Matt wonders if the heat will ever simmer, reduce, subside. But even with this blaring beacon on his radar, he doesn’t dare trail too far off. Stick hovers at every corner, on the opposite side of every crossing, on the chairs outside of coffee shops. He feels Stick notice him, he feels Anton judge him, his Father shake his head and God withdraw his guidance.
As always, Matt prefers the rooftop route but he fears the greater distance would invite danger. All he needs to do is trail Foggy without being noticed. He knows his prayers will fall flat. He imagines himself up there, to compensate. The pollution from the street will rise up to match the level of the rooftops. A thickening atmosphere, and Matt will be slipping through the tip of it. He will feel, and can feel it even now just walking at a steady pace, his legs muscles working to keep up with his brain signals. He can still pinpoint exactly which muscles moan in response to movement. He can pinpoint where they’re weak. What’s he to expect from nearly a year of neglect?

He imagines himself leaping over gaps he would have been confident about before, running through the city to meet at Foggy’s house or chasing down a thief, a murderer. He imagines now, if he were to try, he would fail. Inflict a gash on his ankle, graze the palm of his hands. And he’d have to stop up on some rooftop and press his palms against the hem of his black t-shirt. Hold them firm as blood speckles from his wounds. He imagines smelling the blood and sweat seep through the threads and he shivers. He misses it. He actually misses it. The fight, the adrenalin. And didn’t he promise himself to live only one life? Or did he just run out of time, run out of the capacity.

Distracted, he almost loses Foggy in the fever of the hospital. He comes up the pathway the Nelsons and co had taken and stops, trying to locate Foggy in the mess of lives, half dead or elevated, woozy. He compacts his stick and slips it in his pocket, deciding not to enter even without it because someone’s going to ask him a question. And that usually draws attention to himself, because for some reason people think that if you’re blind, you must be partially deaf too. He opts for rounding the back of the hospital. At this point he doesn’t need to be close to Foggy, he just needs to be close to anyone who will notice his disappearance. The hospital has surveillance cameras running day and night, and enough people around that despite their business, someone’s going to have to notice a kidnapping in plain sight.

Matt’s glad he didn’t take anything before leaving Ben’s home because the hospital’s full of noises, human and technological and it’s hard enough to concentrate on Foggy’s figure moving through the masses. He jumps the fence bordering a grassy area, perhaps a garden or relief zone. The area is empty, as suspected. With Foggy in his periphery, he listens out for air pressure behind a door, locates one without a lock and makes his way to it. He makes his way toward it when he stops at the sound of a woman barging through the door, fiddling with a lighter.

The door swings backwards behind her, then outward, and backward again until it settles. The woman paces as she rolls her thumb across the safety of the lighter, again and again, the fuel gurgling beneath but not enough to ignite. She makes a frustrated grunt and pegs the lighter at the ground, digging out a bit of dirt before Matt’s feet.

“Sorry, I wasn’t aiming at you,” the woman says.

Her voice is husky and strained, her throat tight from stress. The sound of where the lighter has dug into the ground is a weight in his black vision and Matt easily finds it. He clicks the lighter on, knowing exactly where the fault in the safety is, and offers it to the woman. She hums briefly, takes out a cigarette and steadies her shaking hand around Matt’s as she lights it.

The woman takes a dangerously deep intake and after breathing the smoke out, she asks, “Aren’t you going to tell me that I shouldn’t be smoking?”

Matt lifts an eyebrow, “No, why would I?”

“Because this is not the designated smoking area? Because I’m a nurse and I shouldn’t be smoking? Because smoking is bad for your health?”
Matt smiles, “They say that about a lot of things.”

“They say that because it’s true,” the nurse replies.

She goes to tap her ash against the brick framing of a curtained window and turns back to Matt.

“I actually never smoke.”

Matt can tell she’s telling the truth and he supposes any company is good company.

“That’s what they all say,” he smirks.

She nudges his shoulder, then rakes her fingers through her greasy hair. It smells of blood and vomit and she sighs before speaking, “I’m sick of this. Crazy hours for bad pay. And with the rezoning happening up in Manhattan? People are getting forced away from their homes and they don’t always arrive here in one piece. I had this guy who was involved in the protests who had been pepper sprayed directly in his eyes. It’s unlikely he’ll ever see again.”

Matt thumbs his stick in his pocket, pushes on the bridge of his sunglasses.

“We all want to help them, well the nurses do. Not sure about the doctors, because the higher ups, you know, they have their own ideas about who deserves treatment and there’s just no hope for some patients. Or for the nurses keeping this place going.”

“I didn’t realize the rezoning was affecting other cities too,” Matt says.

“Yeah, they have nowhere to go, you know? Whoever’s doing it up there in Manhattan, government or industry or whatever, they’re not making room for the people whose homes they’re uprooting. It’s sick, it’s really sick and it’s just the tip of the iceberg about my problems with this place. It doesn’t help when the Chief of Staff is profiting off what’s going on here. He’s taking what he can from our patients and then turning them out on the street.”

“It’s unethical.”

“You’re completely right. It is unethical. And what’s more, they’re planning to pump pure oxygen into the terminally ill patients—“ The nurse bites her tongue, “I should probably not be saying this to you, maybe you already know. How long have you been here?”

“Me? Uh, not long.”

The nurse rests her elbow in one hand as she smokes, “You must be pretty new. I haven’t seen you around before. Anyway, as I was saying. Hospitals shouldn’t be run this way, don’t you think? But it all does seem pointless when you’re the underdog. I bet if I tried to do something about it… no one’s going to listen to a nurse,” She sighs, “I’m almost at the end of my internship. I’m doing a double degree, two completely unrelated things because I couldn’t decide between my heart and my brain.”

“It’s always a hard decision to make:”

“Well, my friends and family, they say I have a knack for nursing, but I say, anyone should have a knack for taking care of people if they ever have an open wound in front of them and something to patch it up with.”

Matt laughs warmly and he hears the nurse breathe out. He’s not so good with facial expressions, not unless he knows the contours of their face well enough, or can recognise the signatures of their
smiles. And the latter’s only possible with awhile of knowing them, but he’ll entertain the idea that the nurse is smiling softly now, the tension lifted from her shoulders.

“Sorry for unloading on you like this. You’re the lucky guy who’s in the wrong place at the wrong time to hear my mid-life crisis.”


“Exactly!” the nurse cries, but he can sense heat swelling around her cheeks.

The nurse finishes her cigarette and sighs, “Anyway, thanks for listening to me. Talking it out helps me think straight.”

Matt pauses, “So you think it’s hopeless to try and change anything?”

The nurse shakes her head, “I don’t think it’s hopeless. There’s only so much I can do in my position without jeopardising my credit points. I’ll do what I can, I think, and hope for the best.”

The nurse finishes her cigarette and crushes it against the brick windowsill. She lets the bud fall to the ground amongst a generation of cigarette buds. She stretches her arms over her head, yawning, then turns back to Matt.

“Sometimes I just have to talk it out with someone, you know, even if it’s with a perfect stranger. What’s your name anyway?”

Matt hesitates.

“You’re an intern right? Only staff have access to this area, but don’t worry, I won’t tell your supervisor you’re skipping so long as you don’t tell mine.”

Matt spaces out for a moment, trying in earnest to pick up on chatter from within the hospital, learn any name that could be believable but instead he realizes Foggy and co are on the move again.

“I need to get going,” Matt says quietly.

He then turns around, making his way back to the fence.

“Hey! Where are you going?” she calls after him, “That’s not the way!”

Before he jumps the fence, he pauses, “You’re right to be hopeful. How are we meant to move on with life without hoping for redemption?”

-

monday.

The Nelsons only try and talk about the hospital when Matt’s not around, when they think he can’t hear them. Matt thinks Foggy doesn’t want him involved. He’s allowed to have a life separate from Matt but that doesn’t mean he doesn’t care. Of course he’s going to care if Ben, Ed’s good friend, says he can’t afford to keep his wife there much longer. Can’t afford the machines to keep her alive, or to pay for a dedicated carer in his home. He goes from pay check to pay check as the cost of care rises. And he’s not alone. Matt’s more aware of the situation than Foggy suspects.
tuesday.

He stands on the drain in the shower. The hot water fills the basin, the compression sucks the soles of his feet against the grate, the water above pushing around the sides of his feet, plying apart his toes. It was because Courtney didn’t answer. It was because Vlad, and Brett, and Anton Newcombe didn’t have much to say to him that he wanted to hear. It was because he didn’t have anyone else to call except the devil. So he got up on his two feet. His Dad fell down but he never got knocked out. And he did it because he couldn’t be sure if Foggy would ever talk to him again. The hot water leaks over the seal, bursts over the brim. It spills like the blood in the mouths of his foes. Ben will be happy. Ed will be happy and Foggy would be fine too, and although they wouldn’t know Matt had anything to do with it, he could be content in their relief. And above all, Stick would be proud, if he saw. Matt bets he saw, from up close or afar, because either way, he felt no encounter. No retaliation. Matt shivers under the steam at the thought that he’d been free this whole time.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for sticking it out with me. I'm hypothesising that the next part will be completed by mid-end March. And by then we'll have more episodes of Daredevil!
Chapter Summary

Thanks to Matt's friendship with Courtney Taylor-Taylor of the Dandy Warhols, B.R.M.C. embark on their first international tour in Europe. Problems arise when they deviate from their agent's planned tour schedule, which unravels the start of secrets and lies.

(previous chapters have been updated with beta credit and fan art)

Chapter Notes

this chapter is beta read by wtchcool (ff.net)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

part iv

Screaming Gun

[2001-2002]
Foggy dumps his half-eaten popcorn in the bin on the way out of the movies and shoves his hands in his pockets. He instantly regrets throwing the still hot popcorn out when he exits the theatre, the cold night air chilling his bones. She has two days. Two days to rock up and declare she’s been to the Moon for all Foggy cares. But it’s not just her deadline, it’s his.

Matt’s right, he hates doing shows with his Dad. Not because Ed’s been out of the business so long he’s forgotten how to be a good musician, that’s never been a problem for Ed Nelson. It’s really a number of things that aren’t exactly his Dad’s fault, but are a result of his presence. The main problem being around these parts, so close to Hell’s Kitchen, people recognise his Dad. Recognise him as Ed Nelson; The Call. Foggy noticed faces turn a little more during their first show in Philly. It wasn’t like they announced their change in line up, but people were familiar enough with The Call to know who their new bassist was.

Their second show in Philly was booked last minute. Ed was the one who booked it upon receiving encouragement from Ben. And by all means, Foggy’s accepting of playing as often as he can, but he was sick to his stomach about playing at that bar. Ben told too many people, too many old friends and new kids and people who all probably thought Foggy only got to where he was now because of his Dad. Afterwards he’d told his Dad he was going to catch a movie. Picked one he knew his Dad wouldn’t be interested in, and didn’t bother asking Matt.

“What movie are you going to see, son?” Ed had asked him as he finished packing up their equipment into the van.

“Monsters, Inc.” Foggy replied as he checked his wallet for cash.

“That’s a kid’s movie ain’t it? Don’t you want to see something else?”

Foggy had shaken his head, Matt’s dark figure in the backseat still and ghostly. That’s another thing that annoys him about this whole change up. Matt plays like there’s nothing wrong and Foggy kind of hates him for it, and respects him at the same time. He can see that Matt’s trying to make things like normal, go back to the way they were. Matt’s staying quiet and distant and maybe it’s what Foggy needs to help sever that tie.

“Well, at least a kid’s movie is gonna be short,” Ed had said to him, “You’ve got some phone calls to make tomorrow son. Gotta be up bright and early to catch your agent.”

Having his Dad as a temp has changed the whole feel of the atmosphere. He hopes the temporality of the situation remains true. Things feel all up in the air now. On the road, with just him and Matt – and Marci – time was intangible. They drove from place to place in the night, in the day. The clock had rotten like the orange peel coloured paint of the van and somehow they weren’t ever late for shows. Always either too early, or on time. But between waiting for their time to go on stage they had freedom to do whatever. Eat, sleep, jam, smoke. He imagined that his Dad would be alright with that kind of schedule. That’s how he remembered life being like when he toured with Ed in the summer. But he guesses awareness of time comes with age. It’s really only been a few days but already Ed has set bedtimes for his son and adoptive son. Strict timetables for what they would do in the day. Ed seems to know how long it takes to walk to the hospital and back. How long it takes to drive to the sights around Philly, what time the traffic will affect their travel. And he becomes anxious, prickly, when Foggy falls behind.

Clouds lay low over the city, cloaking the sky in darkness, making the streetlamps work harder to illuminate the surroundings. Foggy walks down the dimly lit side path and he thinks he hears his name for a second as he comes up to a particularly busy club. He shrugs it off, determined to get
through the noisy street and down towards Ben’s. Foggy wonders if his Dad’s looked up the show times of the movie in the newspaper, wonders if he’s already got an estimate on the time Foggy will arrive back at Ben’s. On one hand, Foggy thinks he shouldn’t keep his Dad waiting up for him, but on the other, he’s an adult, he should be able to do what he wants, when he wants. Take another page out of Marci’s book. He’s decided that if Marci doesn’t come back from her sabbatical then he’ll take it as a sign. He’ll break it off with her, and with Matt too. They’ve made a good first album, first and only and maybe Foggy will have a go at a solo career. Works for some people doesn’t it? And it’s not Foggy’s tardiness that Wesley is unimpressed by. Maybe he can get something going still with James Wesley’s name attached to his contract.

It’s almost midnight and still Foggy can see lines of people in front of clubs and bars spilling with drunken fools. He walks through the nightlife district, filling his ears with other people’s entertainment because thinking about breaking off what he’s started here is as bad to him as saying it out loud. Again, he thinks he hears his name, and this time he follows the voice, looks over his shoulder to the open landing above a club.

“You’re right, it’s him! Franklin!!”

For a minute Foggy thinks it might be a fan recognising him for the first time, then again, if there’s any recognition registered, it’s probably in respect to his connection to his father. Foggy spots the owner of the voice and sees him dangling over the railing, waving both hands at Foggy. Arms wrap around the guy’s waist and pull him back onto the landing.

Foggy hears the guy say, “Hey! Lemme go!” Then he bellows, “I’m coming down! I’m coming down to meet you Franklin!”

Foggy rushes up to the entrance of the club but a bouncer steps in front, nods towards the line of somewhat patiently waiting patrons. A minute later, the guy who was trying to catch Foggy’s attention before bursts passed the bouncer. The bouncer gives Foggy a disgruntled look at being shoved aside, as if it’s Foggy’s fault.

Then, Foggy sees Marci dash after the man, trying to ensnare him.

“Vypuskat’!” the guy snarls.

“Marci?!” Foggy cries, shocked to see her.

The guy frees himself from Marci and straightens out his clothes, tucks his shirt back in. As the Russian tidies himself up again, Marci tries to get back into the club but the bouncer refuses.

“She did not think it was you, I knew it was you down here and I have not met you before, yet I knew,” the Russian starts saying, stumbling on his words.

While he and the Russian talk, Marci tries arguing with the bouncer to let her back in, but fails. She comes over to punch the Russian in his side and spits, “Vlad, you ruined my entrance, did you know that?”

Vlad winces and then shakes his head. He holds out his hand determinedly and Foggy shakes it, his whole body moves vigorously with Vlad.

“It is so good to meet you finally Franklin P. Nelson. I have heard much about you from Matthew and Marci and I am happy to finally know you.”

“His name’s Foggy,” Marci sneers.
“Ah yes, you sign your record as Franklin, do you not? Foggy is such a strange name. Very strange. You know what else is strange? I did not know my darling was back in HK until Matthew called me.”

“He called you?” Foggy presses.

Vlad seems to ignore him, “Marci, is a very good friend of mine, and she did not call. I am very upset and she does not care!”

“Aww,” Marci coos, “are you sad I didn’t come see my drug dealer when there were a million cops around? How selfish of me.”

“I am your friend too!” Vlad cries.

“I was busy. Besides, someone gave Brett a heads up and I knew I’d run into him if I went anywhere I normally go. Oh! Guess what he is now? A cop. Likely story that the force accepted him knowing how he stole from you hey Foggy?” Marci clutches her stomach as she laughs, her hair flipping over her shoulders.

“Hey, cut it out guys,” Foggy growls, “I need to know how long you’ve been back. Is everything alright at home?”

Marci waves her hand, “could be better. Just had to fix a couple of things, and leave ASAP. Vlad knew about some nice parties around so I came down with him… When was it? A couple of days ago, I think.”

“What, and you didn’t think to let us know?”

“I was going to, Jesus. Well, it’s all fine now anyway isn’t it? Everything is fine,” She squints at Foggy, peers around him, “where’s Matt? Why isn’t he with you?” She then steps back, shaking her head slowly, “oh don’t tell me you guys broke up.”

“Shut up,” Marci hisses, “I meant the band, idiot. Foggy, don’t tell me you disbanded because of me going away. I had a legitimate reason this time. No, scratch that, I always have a legitimate reason. And I don’t do it very often! Anyway, I sorted it all back home. I’m back now, alright, I’m here. We’re good to go. Fuck. Say something.”

Foggy clenches his fists. He’d said Marci returning would be a sign, didn’t he? Who knew she was actually back in town before Foggy had even decided to make any kind of ultimatum in the first place. Still, he’s actually thankful she’s going to be around. In a small, small way. If Matt cares for her, he can’t help but care for her too, and he’s admittedly been worried about her this time. Seeing her now, she’s truly a wreck. Her hair’s all matted and dirty, dark bags hang under her eyes and her skin’s uneven, blotchy. Even her clothes are wrinkled and frumpy, which makes Foggy wonder if she hasn’t been looking after herself. And yet, her presence before him is lit by her spirit, her positive determination is relentless.

Foggy catches Marci’s glassy eyes and sighs, “we’re good Marci. I just saw a movie.”

“Oh what movie?” Vlad asks.

“God, can’t you be quiet for a second? We’re having an important conversation here,” Marci glares at Vlad, then turns to Foggy, eyes glistening, “where’s Matt? Is he okay?”
“He’s fine, he’s back at Ben’s.”

“Ben? Who’s Ben? I thought you were at the hotel.”

“Ben’s my Dad’s old friend. Used to be a music journo…”

Foggy glosses over what’s happened while she was gone; Ed having to fly over to drive them to Philly in time for their show, Foggy having to take up drums while his Dad played the bass line, how they ended up staying with Ben and how Ben was almost homeless before the hospital miraculously allowed Ben’s wife to stay indefinitely. He’s pretty tired after the show and movie and by the end of explaining it all he’s as bored as Marci looks.

When Foggy’s done talking, Marci turns to Vlad and grips his shoulders, “you know what Vlad? I forgive you for blowing my cover. Otherwise I would’ve rocked up at the hotel and there’d be no one there to greet me! Shush, shush, don’t speak. I’m going to hail you a taxi so you don’t ruin my real entrance.”

It makes Foggy sick watching the way Matt embraces Marci. A hand on the back of her head, his fingers caught in her hair and his other hand on her lower back. Foggy feels guilty for wishing he could etch that sight out of his memory. Except maybe he shouldn’t. Let it serve him as a reminder as to where Matt’s interests lie.

There’s an annoyed grunting sounding from Ben’s room. It’s late and Ben’s unit is small and old enough that sound travels, so Foggy hushes his friends and gets them to bed. They could talk about it in the morning. Only when Foggy peels off his clothes and slips into his makeshift bed, he finds he cannot catch sleep easily. Somehow everyone in his life seems to shuffle him in with the junk, like he’s useless and soulless and not worth the effort. The shapes in Ben’s ‘office’ are shadows, relics of Ben’s past and illusions of Foggy’s. In the corner Foggy sees the handles of workout equipment as the thin claws of an angel, a body cloaked in a sheet, hunched and waiting. Cupboards stand open, books and papers spilling out onto the floor, clothes of strangers strewn old and mouldy. Foggy wonders if the magazine mattress made for him contains articles written by his host.

His body is rendered as still as diamonds when he hears voices, but their flirtation dies out against the howling wind outside.

Foggy sits slumped in the row of chairs in the airport. He rests his head on the body of Matt’s acoustic guitar, slowly plays with the strings. It’s nothing good yet, just a song that’s been cooking in his mind.

*It’s in your skin, moving too quickly*
Matt follows on in a hushed tone, nodding to the attendant at the information desk arguing with Marci.

“We’ve shaken hands and the criminals won
To the end with an empty grin

Foggy plays faster as he finishes the verse.

“You come when I say, you come when I say
Son, Sunday’s sun never shone on me

He then abruptly stops by pressing his palm against the strings, and shouts, “Marci!”

Instantly she barks her reply, “shut up! I’m getting somewhere here!”

“Our chant must be working,” Matt says, then adds, “that’s a new one. It’s sounding good.”

Foggy sucks on his lip, “it’s a tough one. I’ll need your help on it.”

“Hey, the rules are – you start it, you finish it,” Matt replies, edging into the corner of his seat.

“Nope, you’re in it now with those lines. No way out now, buddy!”

Matt smiles in response, shaking his head. Silence sets in between them, a stark contrast to the incessant sound of the wheels of suitcases rolling across the tiles, the chatter of travellers and the flight announcements. Foggy watches the lines back up faster than people can file in, then fixates his eyes on the screens informing travellers of the flight schedules. Blue text rolls with each announcement, flickering from receiving data input, the occasional delay.

“I still can’t believe this is happening,” Foggy comments, turning to see a grin grow on Matt’s face.

Foggy wasn’t expecting to do a tour outside America until their second album release. That’s what their agent had told them, anyway. Wesley knows they already have a lot of content for a follow up. Matt managed to get the guy to agree with Matt’s proposed arrangements so long as they would be back in the fourth quarter to record again. It’s not that Foggy’s mad, he’s just a little annoyed since they weren’t meant to do presents. They’d all promised not to spend the money and yet on Christmas Day, cosy around Doris’ hospital bed, Foggy became the butt of the joke.
“You don’t need to call them. What you have to do is… no… I’m telling you what you need to do is check it again. I have two years left on this thing,” Marci loudly argues with the check-ins, something wrong with her passport.

He watches security guards come out of the staff door behind the desk which only exacerbates the situation. He kind of wishes his Dad were here to help but then again, if Ed were here, he’d find some way to get on the plane with him. Still, his Dad’s a pretty straight to the point kind of guy, and that’s fairly helpful dealing with Marci. Ed might’ve been able to help Marci spit out what she’s got churning in her stomach. The explanation never came, see. She’s good at hiding it all. Excels at accelerating, changing the conversation, always on her toes and she’ll never let anyone see her fall back on her heels. And yeah, he still can’t believe that they’re joining The Dandy Warhol’s European tour and yet as things are going, maybe they won’t ever get there.

“If we actually lift off today, I’m going to get you something so good,” Foggy smiles, clenching his fist in comic emphasis, “so good it’ll knock your socks right off.”

Matt laughs, “you don’t have to get me anything. In a way, it’s Courtney’s gift to us, not mine to you.”

“Hey, you can’t get out of this one,” Foggy chides, “I’m definitely gonna get you something. I’ll get everyone some great souvenir that won’t be topped, just for leaving me looking the fool. I don’t know what it will be yet! But you’re gonna love it.”

“I’ll love anything you get me.”

Foggy sits with his bandmates around a table out on the balcony, the moon stoops high above them. He should probably be listening to the conversation but his eyes are drawn to the fullness of the moon. He doesn’t think he’s ever seen it this close, or this yellow, and he’s starting to entertain the idea that maybe the moon just might be made out of cheese.

They’ve finished off their first show in Oxford, riding on a wild after show buzz as they try and keep up with Courtney and his club crawl. Courtney convinces them all it will help them acclimatise to the new time zone. Except it feels like they’re doing the complete opposite. Drinking and smoking until the sun rises and they’ve all got to pile into the tour bus and move on to the next city. Foggy supposes it’s a tried and tested way to start an endless tour and he’s not complaining about all the free drinks that keep being passed their way. Being a rookie in Europe mightn’t be as bad as he’d thought.

It’s kind of funny how a show can feel bad for him but good for others. Or vice versa. Foggy finds the best shows are the ones where he’s not only playing their songs well, but he's getting into them and exploring them in ways he hasn't before, or that are at least different than the recorded version. He guesses sometimes even though that makes a show good for Foggy, the audience still might not be into it sometimes. They might think their experimentation is bullshit, or conversely they might be craving to relive that extended play. Or be entirely indifferent. Foggy’s played shows with all types of audiences. Rowdy, chill, bored. Ultimately he can’t ever predict how shows are going to go, and he guesses he shouldn’t try and predict anything anyway.

Still, there’s something so different about playing in the UK. Matt thinks it’s because there’s
already some sort of fan base for them in the UK. Thanks to The Jesus and Mary Chain, people are aware of the kind of music scene they’re playing into. Not that they’re trying to copy anyone, it’s just helpful towards their success, Foggy supposes. Also helps that they’re opening for a big band like The Dandy’s, again with a similar style of music to them as opposed to opening for The Waterboys or other random acts across the second half of the previous year. Still, he can’t wait for the time when they can be the headlining act. That’s when he’ll know the audience is there for his music, not whoever else is headlining. But who knows when that’ll be.

Their agent’s hoping they’ll hit gold in America in 2003. That’s with a follow up album in the works and a string of successful shows behind them. Their continued contract with Virgin all seems to hinge on new material, good shows, and playing the part in interviews. Which means keeping stability within the band. Although in reality, Wesley doesn’t seem to give a shit about interpersonal relationships so long as he gets his commissions back on signing up BRMC. That’s the music industry for you.

“So if I have my facts straight, you were trying to establish yourselves as The Elements in the beginning, is that right?” the interviewer’s saying, making short hand notes on her notepad.

“Yeah,” Marci jumps in, “the guys started out with that name, played with a faux drummer too.”

“Oh, there was someone before you?” the interviewer leans in.

“Oh yeah, he’s not worth talking about. In fact, he’s an entirely different person now,” She leans across the table and taps Matt’s hand, “did you hear that our old man B’s a cop now?”

Matt brings the conversation back on topic, “we liked The Elements. We had it for a good handful of months until we realized about six other bands had the same name. So of course we had to change it.”

“And Marci kept coming up with these ridiculous names like, what was that one? Something to do with a berry?” Foggy says.

“Boysenbarry,” Marci corrects, “but the only reason why The Chrysanthegirls works as such a good name is because one of the girls is actually called Chris.”

“Oh yes, The Chrysanthegirls. You were the drummer before they disbanded. Did you… pick that name too?”

“I did,” Marci replies, chuffed, “I’d like to have it on record that they couldn’t survive without me!”

The interviewer smiles feebly, “I’ll… make sure I put that in the article somewhere. And… what made you decide on Black Rebel Motorcycle Club? It’s quite the mouthful!”

“It was Foggy’s idea,” Matt begins before Marci can say anything, “The Wild One is his favourite movie. He made me watch it a million tim–”

“– Pardon, you did say, ‘watch’, is that correct?”

Foggy glances over the table to catch Matt’s smile drop, then his jaw clenches. Just before he can say anything, a waitress comes over and tops up their beers. Matt thanks her quietly before she leaves and Foggy doesn’t miss his restraint for a second.

“I was told that you’re blind, Matthew, which is – “ the interviewer pauses to scoff, “ – really hard to believe after seeing you up on that stage.”
Foggy interjects, “it’s really funny actually, we’ve had a kind of a weird run with names,” Foggy speaks a little louder in order to draw the interviewer’s attention away from Matt and then continues, “We were trying to improve on BRMC too. Tried to pick something shorter, you know. And we went back to *The Wild One* because the other motorcycle gang in the movie was meaner. But the other gang is called the *Beetles*.”

“Black Rebel Motorcycle Club definitely sounds a meaner name. It’s very memorable. Your show was too.”

“Thank you,” Marci says.

The interviewer’s eyes flick back to Matt, “definitely very memorable performers. You’ve all got something, don’t you?” She points the end of her pen at them each as she talks, “Franklin, your Father’s been big in the business already. Marci, well, female drummers are a rarity for sure. And Matthew, *blind*? That’s really something. Like Stevie Wonder for rock ’n’ roll.”

Matt clears his throat, “we want to be remembered for our music, not for who we are as people.”

“That should be the title right there,” Foggy stabs his forefinger against the table.

The interviewer puts her pen down and sits back, “it could be, if you could think of a way of saying it in fewer words, but you guys aren’t the right people to ask huh?”

She laughs at her own joke and then starts to wrap up her interview. She shakes hands with them each and grabs some details about their upcoming tour before moving on to try and speak with Courtney and Zia. Foggy wonders if it’s too much to ask of their agent to ban interviewers from asking them anything to do with their personal lives because it gets tiring having to redirect it all the time. He supposes it wouldn’t really slide with Wesley, so they’ve got to keep control of the conversation themselves. Apart from protecting Matt from invasive questions, he doesn’t really understand the appeal of music journalism being about anything more than the music. It shouldn’t be about the drama within bands, but he supposes that kind of stuff is interesting to some people anyway. No doubt people are going to be curious about a blind dude playing guitar, but he just hopes that in doing interviews, he and Matt can help keep the focus on the mechanics behind creating the music rather than making Matt’s disability a selling point.

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His Dad had given him some customs acceptable medicine to help him sleep and Foggy turns to popping a couple of them when the marijuana seems to make him more nervous. Only instead of putting him straight to sleep, it’s making him feel perpetually drowsy. His eyelids feel like they’re made of heavy leather, his eyes water and he’s frustrated that sleep won’t come to him. He tries listening to his tape deck but it exacerbates his headache, and all he really wants is a quiet place to rest. Any noise seems to spike alertness in him. His co-passengers move around the bus, cups clattering, beer bottles skating across the floor, random shouts and pockets of extended conversation carry through the bus like a TV channel out of tune.

Foggy presses his forehead on his palms, breathes evenly with his eyes still closed. The bus is divided into three hierarchies. At the back, amongst the beds and couches, is where it’s the loudest. In the middle there are cooking appliances and storage and constant movement. At the front it’s the quietest and Foggy just needs to gather enough energy to move from the back to the front, or
hopefully pass out somewhere in between.

He starts with opening his eyes. At first he’s not even sure if he opened them because all he sees is a dark blur, but when he lifts his head, the colours within the blur alter to the red coverings of the couches, thin slivers of flesh shimmering in an indefinite position. He decides it’s best not to rely on his vision as he pulls himself up, uses whatever he can grab onto to drag himself forward.

He should be used to the way the bus rattles, from years of travelling in the old orange peel, but flying must have reset that quota and as he lurches down the aisle, he can’t help but feel afraid. It might also have something to do with Marci having her hands on the steering wheel. Foggy has a mind to punch the person who let Marci drive.

Marci takes a sharp turn, too sharp for a large bus and Foggy swears the whole thing tips sideways. His stomach lurches out of his throat, his fingers clawing for something to hold onto. He blinks rapidly, his eyes covered in rainfall and he hopes it’s enough to blind him from seeing them all crash and burn. A moment later, he feels the bus right itself, dropping back on all four wheels and the passengers in the back holler and cheer.

Somehow Foggy gets to the front seat without falling down the steps to the door. He fumbles for the seatbelt and straps himself in. For extra safety, he grabs the seatbelt for the seat beside him and attempts to tie it to his own but the thick fabric flicks back and retreats to its hold. Foggy still can’t see much of anything but he finds solace in the unusual quiet despite Marci’s presence.

He doesn’t remember closing his eyes, but he seems to wake at some point, his vision having cleared up only to project the rainfall outside. Rain drops like darts on the large bus windows and he looks over at Marci hunching over the steering wheel, glaring. Behind her, Matt lounges with the bus driver curled up in his lap and Foggy can’t help but feel a pang of jealousy.

He takes his attention to the road slipping beneath the bus like a river. He’s no expert but he feels as if Marci should be driving slower than she is, considering the weather. Except she seems to be pedalling fast up the dreary highway, taking over tiny cars and trucks bigger than the bus. Foggy imagines there’s a slipstream trailing behind the bus like in arcade racing games. A force so speedy that it’s strong enough to strip the outer layer of paint off the bus.

Foggy probably sounds the way he does because he hasn’t spoken to anyone in hours, not having the stomach to speak without fighting the urge to throw up.

“You’re going to kill us all,” Foggy stammers.

Marci cocks her face towards him briefly, smirks, then turns back to the road and slams her foot on the accelerator in response. It’s a wonder they haven’t been pulled over yet.

“Foggybear, I’ve decided I’m going to teach you how to drive,” Marci says.

She zooms passed a line of cars and swerves to overtake the last.

“I don’t want you to teach me!” Foggy yelps.

“Why not?”

Foggy can’t help but laugh when she actually sounds offended.

“I mean, I know you hate me but I’m a great teacher.”

Foggy swallows, “sorry, I didn’t meant to–”
“– No, stop, don’t apologise. I’m,” she pauses to sigh deeply, casting her gaze out the rain coated windows before snapping back to the road, “I know you don’t hate me, not really anyway. Matt, he… thinks it’s a defence mechanism, or something. Thinks I’m too quick to judge.”

“You would’ve made a great defence lawyer,” Foggy replies.

“There’s still time,” She grins, then after a while she picks up the original topic, “I’m still going to teach you whether you like it or not. I’m sick of being the driver when you boys get to go around partying like animals all the time.”

“No one’s forcing you to drive, we do have a bus driver.”

“Keep your voice down, he’s asleep!” Marci hisses, nodding behind her.

Foggy glances over at the seats opposite him and raises his eyebrows at Matt. At this angle he’s not quite sure if his friend is awake or not. Then again, Matt could be sitting perfectly still and look asleep even with his sunglasses off.

“Technically, Marci,” Foggy begins, leaning over the aisle to whisper, “you’re not allowed to drive in the UK with your type of license, so it would be kinda really super illegal for you to teach me too.”

“Whatever,” Marci huffs, “Being the passenger is boring anyway.”

“It’s probably a good idea for you to learn Foggy,” Matt croaks.

Foggy recoils, “You’re awake?”

Matt yawns, tries shifting under the weight of their true bus driver and admits, “Couldn’t really sleep… I’m uh, extremely uncomfortable.”

“You’re a pushover Matt,” Marci says over her shoulder, “I would’ve kicked that freeloader off the moment he sat next to me. I mean, there are plenty of free seats!”

Matt laughs, “He seemed pretty worn out.”

Foggy curls his legs up on his seat and presses his back against the wall of the bus. He watches his friend opposite him squashed underneath essentially a stranger and he can’t help but feel jealous of the guy.

The smiles doesn’t fade from his friend’s face as he adds, “it is uh, unfair that Marci has to drive us around… Even when you don’t have to, it would be good to have another option.”

Foggy blinks, the storm outside calming with their descent down the mountain, “Oh, so you’re on her side now? No, no, you’re right, you have a point.”

He sighs, wraps his arms around his knees as he watches Matt becoming engaged in hushed conversation with Marci. It’s crazy that the bus driver hasn’t woken up, and crazier that the guys up the back of the bus haven’t hurt themselves yet. He’d always said that he wouldn’t get his driver’s license until he’s got his motorcyclist license. That’s because he didn’t really need to drive before. His Dad would drive him where he needed to go, or his friends, or he’d bus it. Before starting the tour, getting his license wasn’t a top priority. Then it became one and… he didn’t do much about it.

Even though Marci drives like a maniac, he’s generally alright with her taking the wheel. He
supposes it boils down to less responsibility for him. More opportunities for him to zone the hell out in the backseat. And now, even with an assigned driver, she’s kept busy. If their roles were reversed, he can’t imagine what kind of havoc Marci would wreak on the place. What kind of destruction would burn in her shadow.

Still, Matt has a point about fairness.

Foggy clears his throat, cutting into their conversation, “I’ll learn, but Marci’s not teaching me on this bus. That’s a death wish.”

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The telephone in his room rings and rings and Foggy growls at it, wishing that he could will the phone set to his hands without moving. He opens his eyes, the ringing in time with his vision flicking between the sights of ceilings. Hotels across states, across countries, shimmer until the reality sets in. Finally he extends an arm out of his tightly wrapped blankets and knocks the receiver off the set. The receptionist runs off the usual spiel about obligatory wake up phone calls and Foggy curses himself for organising all this. But of course he had to, if he hadn’t forced others into it, he would never have got off his ass and done anything.

The busy signal echoes in the room when she hangs up. Foggy pulls the blankets around him again, cocooning himself in warmth. He stares at the outline of the blinds covering the window. A golden rectangle, a sliver of light representing the heat outside. His roommate, a sound techy for The Dandy’s, seems to be impervious to the cold, but near allergic to the heat, leaving Foggy to shiver in his sleep the past two nights. The air conditioner breathes out another cycle of ice and Foggy wonders if it’s possible to catch pneumonia just by sitting in this ice box.

The busy signal changes to an incoming dial tone and Foggy moans as he rolls over, clocks the phone back on the set. He’s getting up, alright? He crawls into the shower, quick, he’s probably leaving her waiting. He slaps on the same clothes as yesterday. No one’s going to notice. Then locks the room door behind him as he goes down to Matt’s.

The door’s open ajar when he gets to it. Marci calls him in and he folds back the blankets on the single bed to sit on it as he waits for her to get ready. He can see her in the reflection of the bathroom mirror, allowed for by the bathroom door left also ajar. Inviting. She’s leaning close to apply eyeliner and Foggy comfortably watches the way her mouth distorts the O shape as she carefully moves the pen across her eyelids. Briefly her eyes dart at such an angle that Foggy makes contact, and he deflects his glance away, rakes his hands through his hair as he stretches his muscles in distraction.

She comes out for a moment, tying her hair up in a high pony tail, “Hey, don’t wear that face. We’re both sacrificing something here, alright? Think about it, I could be setting high scores in every arcade across the continent. It’s really too bad virtual racing doesn’t count as experience for your license.”

“You’d be teaching me how to win, not how to drive safe,” Foggy points out.

She scoffs, “I wouldn’t teach you my tricks.”

“Oh yeah, you have to be the best, right?”
“You got it.”

Marci goes back to the bathroom mirror to pin down her hair and Foggy quickly glances over the room. It’s sadly easy to tell whose stuff is whose. Matt’s clothes are all neatly arranged in his suitcase, and Marci’s are strewn all over the place. No wonder it takes her hours to pack up and move out. Marci trots into the bedroom and hunts around for a jacket.

“Won’t need it,” Foggy waves his hand, “It’s hot out.”

Ignoring him, Marci pokes around the room until she finds Matt’s leather jacket and pulls that on instead. She then lunges over to Foggy, hooking an arm around his and leads him out. A large window at the end of the hall blares a stream of white across the lines of rooms and spills out on the cream floor, making the carpet look dirty compared to the purity of the sunlight. A vending machine glints in the morning light, metallic sharp edges. Marci skids to a stop in front of the machine and peers at its contents. Matt’s jacket looks like it’s her own, a perfect fit, the black leather absorbs the sunlight, no reflection.

“Got a couple of bucks, Foggy?” she asks him as she taps her finger on the glass price panel.

Foggy doesn’t have much money himself. After each show, Marci gives him and Matt a fraction of it, just for snacks and entertainment, that sort of thing. The main chunk of it’s going straight to their bank. Foggy isn’t happy about the decision that was made, really, he should be the one to look after their expenses, but since Marci is always the one who ventures out to obtain their illicit drugs, she has control over their money. She has this hot pink bum bag smeared with ash and lipstick stains, and inside she stuffs in their earnings after every show. Then once a week, when they’re in a big city, she’ll wander off and bank what they’ve got. She’s a fairly good banker, doesn’t like coughing up the dough they’ve saved. Still, Foggy would like to be able to keep track of it all. Know just how much they are spending on drugs or drinks or hotels or gas. However much they’re spending, seems to be sustainable enough because Marci ensures they can sustain their current lifestyle.

He fishes out a couple of coins from his pocket, enough for Marci to buy a pack of cigarettes. Foggy’s still blinking through the brightness of the hallway, but he can hear the spring uncoil and the cardboard box clatter in the collection tray.

She shoves it in the pocket of Matt’s jacket and explains, “For later,” then marches down the hall again, waving at Foggy to catch up.

Foggy hurries up to meet her speed. The chain hotels they stay at seem to be labyrinths to him. Endless hallways and door numbers and those big windows at the end of each. At some they’re so clean that they look like a cut out in the wall. Like maybe Foggy could keep running down the dusty carpet and burst outside, no glass to knock him back.

Marci curls her arm around Foggy’s and pats his arm like she does Matt’s, when she’s trying to catch his attention. She hums nonchalantly, “You should stay in my room tonight.”

“Huh?”

“Are you deaf? I said you should stay in my room tonight.”

Foggy sucks in a sharp breath, “Can’t say I really want to sleep on the floor when I’ve got a perfectly good bed to my name.”

They get to the elevators and Marci thumbs the down button and then runs her spare hand through
her pony tail, combing out any knots she finds along the way.

“Oh, you’d have a bed.”

“Is Matt taking the floor? He’s *that* mad about having singles rather than a double?” Foggy bites back the fire in his throat. Envy and jealousy and frustration.

The elevator doors ding open and he follows Marci in amongst the other hotel patrons. She presses to the back, letting go of Foggy’s arm, only to pull him by his shirt to make him stand next to her.

“Maybe,” she says.

The elevator slips down the shaft, the lights flicker. Marci leans against the back wall, her hands shoved in the large pockets of Matt’s jacket. He supposes when such a tight knit group of people travel together, nobody’s clothes stay their own. Marci’s done shows in Matt’s shirts, in Foggy’s jeans, in Zia’s glasses and Courtney’s wristbands. And Foggy’s done much the same when he’s unable to tell the difference between who’s shirt is whose because everything’s black and ripped and what fits loose for Matt fits regular for Foggy.

“He’s mad about something.” Marci’s saying, “He hasn’t slept in his bed for a couple of days now. I wonder if…” She goes to touch her arm, then catches Foggy eyeing her, and she rights herself, “That’s why I want you to have a little sleep over with me Foggybear. I’ve grown so accustomed to company that I feel wicked lonely without Matt next to me. Help a gal sleep better, huh?”

“Well first I wanna know where he’s going. This is the first time I’ve heard about it.”

The elevator dings down at the car park level and they file out. The bus is parked in a designated area, higher ceilings and wider manoeuvre spaces to accommodate, which means it’s out of the way of the compactness of the regular parking. A bit of a walk to get there. Marci takes long strides, forcing Foggy into a half run to keep up with her.

When she starts to speak again, she slows her feet, looking carefully into Foggy’s eyes, “I don’t know where he’s going. I thought… at first he was hanging out with CC, going with him to the arcade or the casino you know. But I was chatting with Zia yesterday and she was talking about how she barely sees Matt anymore. Isn’t that weird?”

“W-“

“I mean, what could he be doing other than hanging out? He can’t exactly see the sights!”

“Maybe he‘-“

“No, you say anything and it requires one of us to be there to help him.”

“That’s not true, Matt is very capable.”

Marci hums, “maybe. Sometimes I find blood in the bathrooms.”

Foggy raises an eyebrow, “Sure it’s not your own? Or leftovers… Some of these hotels…”

“I don’t want to hear about your horror stories..” Marci says, raising both her hands in defence, “I’ve got enough of them, thank you very much. I just know for a fact that sometimes – I should say rarely – Matt’s been in the bathroom and there’s… stuff, you know. He can’t hide it all and maybe there’s a spot on the mirror or he hasn’t closed the lid of the bin properly. And you can see it on his face, too, do you remember a couple weeks back he wouldn’t take his sunglasses off?”
“It went back that far?” Foggy asks, annoyed he’s been kept in the dark.

“I didn’t think too much about it but now that he’s not sleeping I’ve started paying attention. Putting the pieces together and building up a solid case. Except I’ve got next to nothing.”

They get to the bus, the glass pearlescent and ominous in the half darkness of the car park.

“I think I know what he’s doing.”

“Clue me in, will you?”

“And if it’s that, we don’t have much to worry about.”

Marci raps her fingers on the side of the bus in impatience.

“Sounds like he’s boxing again.”

“Boxing?”

“You know his Dad was a boxer,” Foggy begins. He can’t help but feel a sense of superiority in knowing something about Matt that Marci doesn’t know, like being friends with Matt and knowing all about him is some kind of insidious competition. “He has phases of going back to boxing, when he’s stressed, I think. We all have different ways of dealing with being away from home and this is Matt’s.”

“But boxing?”

“You wouldn’t understand Marci. When you’ve lost someone… you want to do what they loved to do, to feel close to them.”

“Who says I haven’t lost anyone?” Marci scowls, “have you?”

“In a way… My Mom left my Dad when I was a kid, moved to Brooklyn to become a lawyer. Except in this case I’ll do anything to not become like her. Working as a suit makes me sick.”

“Good thing I’m in the right career then huh Foggybear?” She winks, then says, “Come on, let’s get started with this lesson already. I’m tired of talking.”

She keys into the bus and stomps up the steep stairs. Foggy follows her. The stairs lead up to the seat which looks smaller each time he comes up to it. He once viewed it as a throne, and now it’s anything but. Thin cushioning wrapped around a flimsy wire frame, and he’s meant to sit on this for more than a minute? He tentatively sits down, grips the large steering wheel. He can already feel himself starting to sweat. The dashboard looks increasingly unfamiliar, more buttons appearing which he swears weren’t there before.

“Just remember Foggy, if you can drive a bus, you can drive anything.”

The sun peaks over the valley, shining down onto the morning fog lifting off the winding road. Foggy’s got the bus geared low, afraid that he’ll lose control otherwise. He’s making the descent slow and cautious, his heart in his throat at every sharp corner, of which there are many. Marci advises him on his technique in swinging the load of the bus around the turns, points out his faults and how he can improve and it does take him a few turns until he can get around one without
slowing down completely.

Traffic piles up behind him and when he finally gets out onto the highway stretch, locals file out in front of him. Despite being on a safer road, Foggy remains as close as he can to the big steering wheel and keeps his eyes focused on what’s in front of him, the monstrous mountain road looming behind him. Marci makes faces at the cars that overtake him, and when the last has sped by, she slumps over the rail behind Foggy’s seat.

“Pull over at the next rest bay and we’ll turn around,” Marci instructs him.

Foggy’s forehead burns, “Can’t you drive back?”

“I haven’t got any shoes on,” is Marci’s excuse, and she hoists one bare foot on Foggy’s shoulder.

He reels, shrugging her foot off, “Gross!”

Marci laughs hysterically, falling back in the front two seats. He glances at her in the aisle mirror, her legs pulled back on the seat, the sun outlining the shape of her thighs. He looks at her smile, her blushing cheeks. How long has it been since he’s made Matt laugh like that? He turns back to the road, listening to her laughter subside, then glances back and sees her gawking at something out the window.

“What are you looking at?” Foggy asks her.

She shades the glare from the sun with her hands, and says, “Best thing about not having to drive is that I can actually look at shit. Jesus, look at all those birds in the tree over there. What is it, the best tree in the world?”

He chances a look and only manages to see the flock of white birds in the tree for a second before he starts to feel panicky about not seeing the road in front of him.

“Hey Foggy, do you think in the future they’ll have machines that can make a movie out of your memories when you die?”

It’s Foggy’s turn to laugh, “You say some weird shit sometimes Marci.”

“I’m serious! Sometimes I see something that I really don’t want to forget, so I stare at it for a long time. Kind of burn it into my mind, you know?”

“I think that’s what they invented the camera for,” Foggy points out.

“See, this is why I don’t tell you stuff. You’re demeaning me.”

“I’m not!” Foggy protests.

Marci sits up, “Hey, hey slow down! You’re going to miss the rest stop.”

Foggy slams on the breaks, almost flinging Marci off her seat. He pulls off the highway, takes the loop then waits by the edge until there’s a big enough gap for him to re-join the traffic. Cars seem to speed down the highway in a steady stream. Just when one car comes around the corner with nothing behind it, it passes and another car appears around the corner. No safe opportunity.

Foggy suggests, “how about you buy a camcorder? It would be cool to document what you see.”

Marci bites her lip, “Don’t have the dough for that.”
“What do you mean? You must have as much as Matt and I do. I’ve been keeping track, I mean, I don’t know exactly how much we must have in our savings but I have a rough idea and you could definitely pick up a decent camcorder whenever you like.”

Marci ignores him and instead leans over him to honk his horn, “Oh for fuck’s sake Foggy just floor it or we’ll be stuck here all day.”

With Marci breathing beside his ear and his foot hovering over the accelerator, he takes a chance. The car in the lane behind him honks and veers off to the opposite lane, then speeds passed him. Marci claps him on the shoulder and he breathes quickly, eyes wide, the mountain rising up in front of him.

Before he reaches the ascent, he glances at the mileage reader on the dashboard.

“We sure have done a lot of driving,” he remarks in response to the six digit number, “don’t we get charged by the mile?”

Marci sighs, “Don’t worry about expenses, I’ve got it covered. Just focus on the road okay, I don’t want to die in a wreckage today.”

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“I’m glad you came today,” he tells Matt.

Matt’s face is unchanging, a cold statue. He stops in their path. The wind sifts through his hair. Dim sunlight catches on the frames of his glasses and glints off the bruise against the bridge of his nose.

“I’m sorry I haven’t been around much,” Matt says.

Words come out in hot gasps of fog, dissolving against competing temperatures.

“It’s okay, I understand how hard it must be for you. You’re boxing again, right? Makes you feel closer to home.”

Matt hums low in response, then begins to move forward again and Foggy takes his place by his side. The wind ghosts over the snow encrusted sand, working at lifting off the upper powder layer, reshaping the foot shaped curves of the mounds. Matt walks slowly beside him, sinking in the snowy sand every so often. Waves crash on icy rocks up ahead, the cold wind lifts off the ground and attacks the holes in Foggy’s jeans, the gaps between his gloves and jacket, the tips of his ears, coasting across his cheeks, his blue lips.

“What does it look like now, Foggy?”

Foggy casts a glance over his shoulder, studying the tracks they’ve left across the beach. Camera flashes spark at the end of the wharf way back across the basin. If it wasn’t for the wind or the crashing waves he bets he would be able to hear Marci’s laughter booming across the ocean, mixed in with the chatter of The Dandy’s during their photo shoot session. He looks back at the cliffs stooping in front of them. The surface is black, stained by the ocean spray, and the darkness against the cloudy sky disfigures the sharp edges. One bleary glance makes it out to be a smooth solid.
And besides the cliff, stands Matt. Dark hair, pale skin, glasses casting a grey shadow across his face, black and blue. The steel of the ocean in patches of shallow and deep, the imperceptible grains of white sand, the façade of stability in the sheer black cliffs.

“Everything is grey, Matt.”

xxii. six barrel shotgun

Injustice replicates as they course through cities. Magnified in populous centres. London, Oxford, Manchester, Glasgow, Dublin, then Paris through to Warsaw and looping back through again, snaking through cities and leaking out into towns, villages, population 300. Same problems with different people, same people with different problems. Problems halted, broken in their trail and yet they’re not finished, left with the power to breathe and live again and why does Matt have to feel so guilty? Is it because these problems mirror across populations? Is it because he arrived a day late, left a day early, moved onto the next too soon, too far away to continue?

Pain and tears and fear claw into his shoulders, the weak hands of children, and he wonders if he does any good. If anything he does helps anyone at all. He’s not asking for recognition yet he’s on a steep mountain and the ground keeps giving way beneath him, crumbling down the slope in an avalanche that’s headed to destroy all that he’s built.

His fingertips chafe and bleed but he keeps playing, lets the liquid drip over his strings, blaring red in memory. Maybe being a part of Anton Newcombe's music worked so well because of the violence. The absence of violence makes it less messy, less aggressive. Now passive, now self-inflicted. A tiny public hall, the warm up and the after show, hours and hours of music, taxing his soul. And then out on the noisy streets, but not tonight.

“Are you sure you want to keep going?” Foggy asks loudly.

Without hesitation, “yes.”

“I’ll get you a drink.”

Matt folds his hands between his knees, palms the bruises beneath the denim which coats beyond his inner thighs, curls around his hips and up his spine. Foggy threads over to the bar as Matt checks his inventory. Zia and Marci are at the bar together, the rest of the guys dance disjointedly on the floor. They’ve been touring with The Dandy Warhols for almost five months now and still it feels like he hardly knows Peter or Brent. Thanks to his time touring with The Jonestown boys, he already knows Courtney and Zia pretty well. Back then he was shy and those two were eager to befriend him. Now, he has been away from it all. Busy. He supposed he should make a show for their last night out together.

He can hear Courtney behind him somewhere in the crowd, excited but weary. The tour has seemed endless. Matt has a structure for it now and he can’t bear the thought of slowing it all down. The thing is, Courtney’s desire to return home is catching. He misses the American
Summer. Romanticism of the weather and the food and the beaches. Zia talks about getting back in the Odditorium to mix their album and it’s probably for the best. Matt’s heard their stuff. Courtney’s been sitting on it for months. The material’s raw but good and could be better with tweaking, with some fine producing. Zia’s worried that if they don’t get it all down now they’ll forget it. Music does that to you sometimes. You’ll have a good idea about a song in your head and the longer you leave it untouched, the less you remember of how it was, the more it becomes something else and then you might not think it’s that great anymore.

Matt completely empathises with their desire to lock it all in because he can feel it happen to the music in his head, feel it fade or dissolve into something else. They always had more content to put on one album than their agent would let them. It looks like some songs start to evolve in their unpublished state. Songs once complete and precious but now in flux. He both invites it and rejects this mode. Rewarding to play live, but a challenge to isolate and tame into a single 4min track. Still, the idea of returning home doesn’t sit well with him. Not when he has so much to do still here, not when it would mean facing his demons. Cowardice and fear go hand in hand.

Matt cocks his head to the side as he notices Courtney bounding away from the dance floor, then braces himself as his friend leaps onto the couch.

“Dude,” Courtney announces. He flops back on the leather cushions, lets his feet bounce against the tiles, then drawls, “You should totally come back with us.”

Matt sits up, pressing his back into the seat. He can feel Courtney’s heartbeat through the bounded leather, fast under the influence of drugs. Courtney would offer them, but Foggy was always one for the basics. Nothing hard. And Matt, he’s been keeping clean, for the most part. There’s not much he can do when it becomes a matter of passive smoking.

“You can use the Odditorium!”

He shakes his head, “I couldn’t.”

“You so could,” Courtney grins.

“You’ve already been so generous Courtney,” Matt begins. He pauses as he hears Foggy returning to the lounge area with Marci and Zia in tow. “You all have. I, uh, we cannot accept any more favours.”

“Favours…” Courtney starts, then calls out, “Zia! I have an idea.”

Sweet alcohol sloshes out of her glass as she drops into a couch opposite them. “Did he say no? I told you he would.”

“I haven’t asked him yet,” Courtney says impatiently, “He thinks we let them tour with us as a favour.”

Zia chokes on her drink, “We’re not expecting anything in return, Matthew!”

“Except, maybe…” Courtney prompts.

“Right! Right…” Zia adds slyly.

“What’s… going on?” Foggy questions.

“You guys can all return the favour by doing something for me…” Courtney says.
Matt searches through Courtney’s anticipation for signs. His hand in the pocket of his jeans, brittle plastic.

“Do… what?” Matt asks slowly.

“Well,” Courtney seems to make eye contact with Zia, her heart flutters in excitement. “We want to do a little experiment. We know that you’re all pretty easy going, preferring pot and that—” Marci’s breath hitches, “—But we’ve been talking, Zia and I, and we think you should try—“

“—Shrooms. So you can see.”

Matt bursts out in laughter, making the others laugh too, “You want me to try a hallucinogen?”

“Yeah dude! Return the favour and all,” Courtney replies.

“You know he’s blind, right?” Foggy points out, “Hallucinogens work on the barriers your eyes use to perceive colour.”

“Yes Doctor Scientist,” Zia berates, “but they act more on distorting sounds than they do on visuals.”

“Either way, we wanna see what it’s like for you Matt,” Courtney says.

Matt shakes his head. He suspects Courtney has wanted to ask him many times before, and perhaps on any other night he would have refused.

“I’m game.”

Foggy sounds surprised, “really??”

“Yes!” Zia hisses.

Matt shrugs, “It’s the least we could do.”

At that, Courtney whips out the plastic bag from his pocket, snaps open the seal and plucks out the mushrooms. They smell bad. Freshness sealed in plastic for weeks. He supposes all drugs smell bad until they smell like the best thing in the world.

Foggy gasps, “What, right here?”

“Why not right here, right now? It’s the last time we’re going to see you guys til, when?”

Marci pikes up, “I booked us more shows out til September. Hey CCTV, where’d you get it?”

“Oh, I know a guy in Berlin,” Courtney explains curtly.

“He’s been holding onto it for that long,” Zia tuts.

Courtney reaches for Matt’s hand, turns it over and presses the mushrooms in his palm.

“I’m not taking them all am I?” Matt laughs.

He keeps one and passes the handful on to Foggy.

“Are you sure you want to do this Matt?” his friend asks, voice tender and soft in contrast to his tight fists. “Right here?”
Matt smiles away his worries, “I’m curious, aren’t you?”

Foggy purses his lips as he takes some for himself, then passes the mound of drugs to the others.

Courtney bubbles with excitement, “You have to tell us everything that you see, yeah?”

“If he sees anything,” Marci adds, curling her feet up on the couch as she swallows hers.

Matt knows he won’t see anything, doesn’t mean it won’t feel good. The mushroom has this awful bitter taste to it, soaked in oils, traces of plastic wrap. Matt can still taste it in his mouth long after he’s swallowed it. Marci claims the first reaction, a dud, a falsity. Chatter resumes and he does start to feel good, but he doesn’t see anything. The couch starts to feel like it’s moving, swaying on a peaceful ocean. The voices of his friends align with the buoyancy. He tells them he sees nothing and they tell him their vibrant distortions. Soon Courtney slinks away with the girls to the dance floor, each drawn to the flashing lights and the hypnotic beat of the bass. A space on Matt’s boat opens up, a gateway for Foggy to crawl onto the couch beside him.

The cushions dip beneath Foggy’s weight, the leather peeling with hot skin. Half an hour in and Matt feels like he’s sinking into the depths of the couch with Foggy right there beside him, drowning in quicksand. Any movement will exacerbate their plight, and yet, Foggy does the opposite. He breathes deep, edges closer. Heat bristles the hairs on Matt’s arm and the whirlpool is twisting, coiling, pulling them together. At the brink, Foggy’s head in the nape of his neck, sweet mumblings, sloppy kisses on Matt’s collarbone, exposed. Matt cranes his neck, drawn to the attention but his fingers are aligned with his soul, push Foggy gently back.

He runs his fingers over Foggy’s shoulders because that brief window let him feel Foggy’s stress. He seeks out the knots in his friend’s back, hears the stress grind and sigh. Matt’s brief enablement loosens the knots, his quick rebuff only tightens them once more, love and death upon him, he recedes. The tide withdraws, a suction, a lip smacking noise. He’s pulled to his feet, detachment, and he can feel Foggy’s sense of rejection, his disappointment. It anchors him farther away from Matt.

Anticipation leads to no action, so he turns away. He makes one step forward, a lurch through time. A pebble thrown in a pond to a boulder smashed into the sea. He extracts himself from the lounge area, zooming toward his friends on the dance floor, the tapping of their shoes feather light against the bass. He’s slipping through time, and space, on another plane, what frequency are you on? He hears familiar voices, but the syntax is broken, rewound. He steers towards Marci, Courtney and Zia but like the hand of a clock, he comes back full circle, Foggy’s figure flickering with his heartbeat on the couch.

And then, as he slides towards Foggy, he hears the truck roaring down the street, the old man, he can still see him, a clear outline of a blur. Red. He’d run out, pushed him away, and the truck had swerved. White. Missed them both but upturned, barrels clanging against the asphalt. Silver. Acid sloshed on the ground as easy as alcohol slips from a glass. Green. He remembers the sounds and the colours associated, he remembers it all so distinctly now that he sees his Dad’s face, the last thing he ever saw, alarmed and worried and crying because Matt keeps screaming about his lost sight.

He knows he’s come to the couch now because he bangs his feet into the side of it and he topples over the arms, gouging at his missing eyes. His Dad’s face cracks and pops and fades too quickly. Colours spike in and out, sirens from the music, an orange tiger roars. Foggy grips Matt’s wrists away from clawing at his face and Matt feels Foggy’s hair drape over his skin. He thinks he sees it, blond. He knows it’s blond. Foggy holds him back, weak, Matt’s muscles are stronger now, back into training and fighting and he wonders if Foggy can see the blood dripping from his fingers, see
the dark red dried under his fingernails. He’ll never be clean.

It was never about him becoming pure.

“I can’t see.”

“I’m sorry.”

Time seems arbitrary.

“I can’t see.”

His voice sounds funny. It falls off the walls. Slipping, his words slick, they don’t seem to stick.

“I can’t see.”

He feels the blood pulse in Foggy’s hands, fire beneath his skin and it’s white hot, the passion, why won’t he quench it, how does he keep it all in? Matt’s wrists feel cold and numb, like wintered skin against hot water. Can’t tell how bad it really is until it’s too late.

“I’m sorry.”

The air tastes salty, and it’s not only because of the bag of chips in Marci’s lap. A sharp blade chisels into linoleum, cork dust and linseed oil, the hemp backing sticks to the pads of Foggy’s fingers. Precision doesn’t seem to be an issue. Marci’s swift lane changing redirects Foggy’s aim, only a slight hint of annoyance over satisfaction.

Matt turns down the volume in the front and asks, “Foggy?”

Marci glances over her shoulder, “He’s got his headphones on,” then shouts, “Franklin!”

Foggy yanks his headphones off and growls, “what?!”

“Matt’s trying to talk to you,” Marci snaps back, the chips rustling in the aluminum foil bag between her legs.

“Oh,”

Matt blushes as he speaks over his shoulder, “Foggy I… I was wondering what you’re doing back there?”

“Me? I’m uh, cutting up some linoleum, I guess.”

“Linoleum? Like the floors?”

“He’s making art, Matt,” Marci informs him, then coos, “oh look at this sweet town. Those gabled rooves,” She slows down the rental to a safer speed for the main street, cruises along the paved road.

Matt’s surroundings seem so quiet now. The Dandy’s have long returned to the States, leaving
them to continue the second half of the year touring small towns across the continent. A big group allowed for distractions, forbade quiet and peace and Matt can tell Foggy’s noticing his frequent absences more now that his friend’s entertainment is often left to the hands of Marci. Matt thinks they’re better now. He hopes so, anyway. They’re going to have to be because Matt’s worked out the perfect alibi for his crime fighting. Something close to the truth and in alignment with his interests that he’s got everyone believing that he’s taken up boxing again. The explanation has his friends satisfied, keeps them from asking too many questions.

Still, since Matt’s been keeping his distance. Foggy has been too, taking up activities beyond music making. Matt’s taking it as a sign of respect, or perhaps acceptance.

“I grew up in a town like this,” Marci says wistfully.

Matt hears Foggy sit up, setting his tools aside. Foggy pulls himself to the gap between the two front seats, “You didn’t grow up in Hell’s Kitchen?”

Marci purses her lips, “Sometimes it feels like you don’t know a thing about me Foggybear.”

“Sharing is caring,” Foggy replies.

Marci hums in response, then parks against the curb. She passes the chips to Foggy and then pulls out a baggie. Matt hears Foggy clawing his fingers inside the chip packet, scavenging any remaining chips for himself.

“All churches are the same, aren’t they? The first one’s amazing, the rest after are only imitations,” Marci says.

Foggy lifts up the bag and pours the remnants into his mouth, only to choke at Marci’s words, “Are you kidding? We’ve been to some pretty stunning churches.”

“Basilicas,” Matt corrects.

“Yeah, I still don’t get the difference…”

“I’m not talking about cathedrals – *basilicas* – I’m talking about the small old churches in these rotten old towns. Literally made of mould and decay and falling apart. It was nostalgic seeing the first one like mine back home, but now it’s just sad knowing they’re all basically like this.”

She starts rolling a jay, then tips it back into the bag again.

“You know what, I can’t do this here,” Marci states.

She starts up the car again. The vehicle swings sharply around a corner, then pulls up against a new curb. With the ignition off, she starts to roll the jay again, except she stops when Foggy bursts out with laughter.

“What is it?” Matt asks.

“No, no this place is worse!” He falls in the back, clamping his mouth shut as he tries to hold in his laughter, “Go, go another corner Marci! Maybe we’ll find the Department of Immigration!”

Marci licks the paper and sticks it down, holding the fat joint in between her fingers. She clicks the lighter, then says coolly, “if I had a super power it would be that I’m invisible to the police. Yeah, yeah, laugh away.” She tuts her tongue, “I just rolled my eyes, *hard*, Matt. Let me ask you boys a question. Have you ever seen me be pulled over before?”
She winds down the window to blow her smoke out into the spring air. Matt surveys the buildings across the street, the business of the police station catching his attention.

“Have any of my friends ever told you that I have? It would be a story to tell, you would’ve heard it,” she flicks her ash over the panelling of the car and then passes the joint over to Matt, “As much as I’d like to be able to flirt my way out of a speeding ticket, I’ve never had the opportunity.”

“I can’t believe you’ve never been pulled over,” Foggy wheezes, trying to be serious.

“Marci.”

“Believe it! I’m invincible!” she shouts. Quickly she latches on to Matt’s arm before he can put out the joint, “What are you doing?”

“Believe me, we need to go,” Matt says as a siren begins to whirl down the street, “Right now.”

Marci drops Matt’s hand and kicks the car into gear, “You’re my guardian angel, Matty.”

She swings her arm around the back of Matt’s chair to help her reverse, and Foggy comments, “sure you don’t want to wait and see what happens? I wanna see you flirt your way out of trouble.”

The car ignition, the anticipation, the chemical reaction to a dark look.

“Foggy, darling, you’ll see it.”

Matt wakes in the early morning, a snow storm brewing beyond the frosted window panes. He pulls the blankets over his head, curling his knees to his chest. There’s a small collection of families unfortunate enough to find themselves stuck in the hotel over Christmas. The Shining, holiday edition. Some kids wake up, or rather, can’t bear to pretend to sleep any longer. Matt hears them trampling over their parents’ beds, jumping up and down. At the orphanage, you never really had a chance of believing in anything otherworldly. Some older kid was always going to spoil that, no matter how hard the nuns tried to keep the spirits in the younger kids. He supposes it wasn’t always easy when the Christmas donations each year could be as varied as the Christmas Day sermons. Their chaplain abided by standardisation, so much so that Matt doesn’t think he ever changed the sermon the whole time Matt stayed in the Orphanage. If Matt were to take a visit today, he’d bet all his money the same old chaplain’s going to deliver the same old speech, and Matt could repeat it verbatim.

Christmas at the Orphanage was consequently much of the same thing every year. Same activities, same choir music, same second hand goods passed off as new. The only change permitted was that perhaps no presents were gifted or received at all. Depending on the charity of the neighbourhood in a given year. In all honesty, Matt doesn’t miss it. Not for a second. He loves Christmas with the Nelsons. Sure, they have their own form of standardisation – the usual drinking schedule, the cooking, the partying, the music playing – but Matt finds that the Nelson get togethers are so full of life. So vibrant and talkative and yeah, maybe they do the same things, or similar things, but there’s always some new topic to talk about, a relative he hasn’t gotten around to speaking to yet. And there’s always Foggy, giving as much as he can to the people he loves. A rocky battle in keeping everyone content. Matt has to admire him for his loyalty. His family treasures Foggy as much as Matt does.
Squeals of happiness pierce his ears and he sits up in his bed. Dizziness strikes his mind, his brain buoyant, sloshes. A head cold coming on. He grips the mattress and follows the cabled edging as he rounds the bed. Foggy is curled up on the couch and Matt sneaks by quietly, praying he doesn’t step on Marci’s hair spread out on the carpet. She stirs, her back must ache, but she doesn’t wake.

Close to the door to their hotel room a small bar fridge stands with a kettle housed on top. Matt runs his palm over the wall until he finds the outlet that the kettle is plugged into, about halfway up the wall. In his half sleep, he trails the cord down to the kettle, feels if there’s any water in it. It’s full. He taps the on button, then pulls his sweater out to catch the steam as the water heats up. Warmth chases up against his abdomen then rises up his stomach, trapped below his chest by the tightness of his sweater. He curls his toes under his feet, numbed by the natural chill of the room in contrast to the heat put off by the kettle. The heat tickles his skin and he’s still a little drowsy, a little dreamy. His mind drifts to thinking about things he doesn’t always like to think about. It’s Christmas, and even though Foggy instructed them not to get each other anything, what’s to stop him from treating himself? He indulges himself in thinking about heat, about warmth, about skin to skin, about touch and the way hearts sound as a result of it all. About the way Foggy breathes for him sometimes, the way his heart responds to Matt, about how it would feel to have Foggy’s hands skate under his shirt rather than around his arm, always and forever around his arm.

The kettle begins to boil, the bubbles popping Matt’s eyes open, his dreams shut. Instead, he wonders how soon in the day he can go out, get his muscles working, sweating, then instantly feels guilty. Christmas Day is such an important day to Foggy. He’d probably make Foggy upset if he decided to go out, especially in the oncoming weather.

Speaking of the devil, he hears Foggy wake on the couch, probably awoken by the sound of the boiling water. Matt lets go of his outstretched sweater and flicks the kettle off as Foggy wanders over to him, rubbing sleep out of his eyes.

“You know that’s not how a kettle is meant to be used, right?” Foggy mumbles with a smile.

“This isn’t a heater?” Matt jokes but his voice cracks.

He can hear Foggy chuckling quietly. Matt tousles his damp hair, straightens his sweater, the darkness should disguise his dishevelled appearance.

Marci announces her wakefulness by yawning loudly, then slowly chants from the floor, “presents. Presents. Presents!”

Foggy turns to shush her, “Since I’m Santa this year, I decide what’s going to happen. First, I demand cookies and milk!”

Marci groans, rolling to her side, “You told us not to get you anything!”

“I can’t believe you didn’t get Santa cookies and milk. What kind of home were you raised in?” Foggy asks appalled.

“As soon as room service is up and running I’ll order you some,” Matt offers.

Foggy shakes his head, grips Matt’s shoulder, “I’m joking buddy!”

Foggy’s hand slips from his shoulder and Matt tries hard not to recall the touch, a ghost limb. He’s usually good with it, but spending more time with Foggy only serves to remind him how much he...

“Presents! Presents!” Marci chants again.
…”values being around his friends.

“As per Nelson tradition,” Foggy says sternly, raising a pointed finger in the air, “presents must not be opened until the sun has risen. So, since we’re all awake, we’re going to have to wait. It. Out.”

“Ugh, I’ll just go back to sleep again!” Marci complains.

She pulls her blankets over her head and goes still, except Matt knows she’s not asleep at all. Foggy curls his hand around Matt’s arm – always and forever – and takes him to the couch. Foggy lifts off the sheets he was using and pats them over Matt’s lap when he sits down. Dangerously close, Foggy must know.

Foggy gives Matt’s arm a soft squeeze and lowers his voice to a whisper, “do you remember sleeping on the fold out couch b –”

“–Argh, if you guys are going to whisper sweet nothings I’m going to have to stop you!”

Marci then leaps around the couch, curls her arms around Matt’s neck and sits on his lap. She stretches her legs out over Foggy’s lap and then repositions herself despite the grunts and protests from both Foggy and Matt, until she has her head rested in Matt’s lap comfortably, Foggy’s going to have to deal with her knees in his face.

“This so beats sleeping on the ground,” Marci grins, “Matt, can you pat my head?”

Matt pauses, “Alright,” then begins massaging her head.

He picks up on a note of jealousy in Foggy, which subsides very slowly. Marci relaxes and drifts into sleep. In time, Foggy seems to become captivated by the sunrise, the warmth in the room rising only slightly, still veiled by the frost covered windows. His friend’s hands start to trace up and down Marci’s legs, skin on skin. Marci drifts in and out of sleep then, pleased by Foggy’s touch and Matt’s happy for them, he really is. He’s wanted it from the start – for them to be together. Matt clenches his teeth. Better Foggy and Marci than Foggy with himself because he can’t… he can’t bear to unload his burden on anyone else. Foggy doesn’t deserve that.

Matt takes his attention away from Marci’s swallowed moans and Foggy’s generous heat. Instead he focuses on anything else. Literally anything else that will keep him from thinking about how much he’ll hurt Foggy. The families with kids, happy and chatting and playing and the opening and shutting of doors and the sound of trolley wheels rolling across carpet.

“H-has the sun risen yet?” Matt chokes.

“I think so,” Foggy replies quietly, then he reaches over to give Marci’s shoulder a quick shake, “Marci, you can wake up now.”

Marci groans and sits up, wedging herself between them, “I’m up, I’m up already.”

Foggy slinks off the couch, “Alright, you guys stay there.”

He goes over to his suitcase and yanks at the zip, squeezes out two large gifts wrapped in thick paper. The suitcase flaps closed again after Foggy gets the presents out, a sigh, a gasp. He then passes one parcel to Marci, places a large A4 sized bundle in Matt’s lap. Marci lifts up hers and gives it a shake, listening to the contents inside. Something rattles, indistinctly to Marci, cogs and shutters made out of fine metal wobbling in their arrangements.

“Hey, be careful with that,” Foggy tells her.
Matt’s face goes still. He runs his fingers over the wrapping paper, newspaper. The ink is raised slightly in the paper. Headlines he’s partially responsible for burn up his spine. Details in the stories either fabrications or partial truths. He takes his hands off. Away. Puts one on the arm of the couch, the other stretched out on the back, sweaty palms sticking to the frayed fabric. Meanwhile Marci tears into her present, paper flying, fragments of justice dealt or fled searing where the shreds land.

“Oh Foggy!” Marci shrieks when she uncovers the contents, “Foggybear! This is so nice I really wanted a camera!”

“I can’t… actually tell if you’re being sarcastic or not,” Foggy says timidly.

“I’m being honest!” Marci grins, pulling Foggy in for a hug, “I love it!”

“Well, good. I already loaded it with film so you can start taking photos but you should really –”

Marci clicks the shutter button three times straight.

“–read the manual… before you do anything,” Foggy sighs.

“I know how to use a camera, Foggy,” Marci says, standing to her feet.

“Do you?” Foggy asks.

She ignores him and starts pulling on some jeans and a jacket.

“Where are you going?” Foggy asks.

“I want to go outside and take some photos of the snow.”

“Wait! You shouldn’t go until Matt has opened his present,” Foggy cries.

At the door, Marci slings the camera strap over her neck, “No need. I already know what it is!”

She shuts the door behind her and Foggy takes his seat on the couch again, tutting his tongue, “That girl has no idea about Christmas Day etiquette.”

Foggy’s hand squeezes Matt’s shoulder.

“You can open yours now,” Foggy prompts.

The present boils in his lap. Bones sinking in broth. The stories about his secret identity’s escapades stapled all over and even from his thighs he can feel the words. Too close.

“C-can you? I don’t want to ruin it,” Matt lies.

“Actually,” Foggy begins as he plucks up the gift, “that’s probably a better idea. What’s inside… is pretty fragile.”

Relief washes over Matt as Foggy begins to unwrap the gift himself. He peels away the layers and layers of newspaper to reveal a collection of thickly cut linoleum. Foggy places the sheets in Matt’s hands.

“You can’t see what I’ve printed,” Foggy says sheepishly, “but you can feel how I made them. Here, this top one?”
Foggy takes up Matt’s right hand and moves it across the top layer. Small incisions are made across the linoleum. It’s distinctly a shape, of what Matt’s not sure yet until he’s accustomed to knowing what Foggy’s art style feels like.

“This is your guitar and my bass. I can’t be really detailed, I’m not good enough yet, but they’re meant to represent us making music together.”

Matt smiles and runs his fingers over the shape. Yes, the guitar shape, he can visualise it now. He lays his hand flat on the image, and Foggy takes it as a cue to move to the next.

“This is us in the garage. *That’s* the TV,” Foggy explains, moving Matt’s forefinger over a sharply cut square, “I couldn’t make it detailed enough to be specific about what we were watching but it’s safe to say something starring Marlon Brando.”

Matt laughs.

Another image.

“This is my favourite one. It’s when I saw you at school after those bullies wrecked up your guitar. Do you remember?”

Matt runs his fingers across the indents. A tree, a fencing – the bricks. A shape on the bricks, small.

“Of course I remember,” Matt says.

Foggy grins, leaning in closer to direct Matt’s touch to a particular feature, “you had the strap in your hands, you thought I couldn’t see.”

Matt can taste Foggy’s breath and he keeps still. Foggy’s thoughtfulness pierces a hole in Matt’s chest. It puckers, widens, because Foggy’s art only seems to confirm something for Matt. On the surface, the images Foggy has gouged out of the linoleum are representations of their friendship. Respect and admiration and fond memories, but in between Matt can feel the emotions Foggy won’t voice when he made the incisions. Love, fear, jealousy, longing. Rejection. He feels Foggy’s unvoiced feelings in the deep ridges, in the bold outlines, the remnants of paint and blood in the mistaken cuts.

Matt swallows, “Can I feel the prints too?”

Foggy pauses, but obliges. He peels away from Matt, extracts the folder of his prints from his luggage and brings them over. There’s more here, more stories, but less pain. From pen to paper, the depth lost in the tool. He finds the matches to his stencils, plus one more. A favourite of his own. Many criss-crossing waves, short lines, with long sharp lines to the right, a road or a field, something natural.

“What’s this one?”

Foggy blushes, “oh that’s not… That’s not a good one, I messed it up. It shouldn’t even be in there, I thought I threw it out.”

Matt clutches onto it, “I like the feel of it.”

“I think… I still have the lino cut, do you want that too?”

“Please. I love it. Thank you for this gift Foggy.”
Foggy blushes more, fumbling as he goes over to dig through his suitcase again. He tentatively pulls out the lino cut and brings it over to Matt. He thanks Foggy again but as soon as he touches it it’s like a shock to his system. Immediately he feels the pain inside the cut. The wound. Negativity is amplified in this piece, rejection, sadness, loneliness.

“It’s of that beach we went to in Genoa,” Foggy states.

He runs his fingers over the lines. Finds a solitary figure. Alone.

“Is this me?” Matt asks, his voice low.

“Yeah.”

A lie.

Summer should be at its last gasp but it’s decided to cough out a locust plague, a warning sign. The waters of the Rhine drift in near silence down the canal, a sharp juxtaposition to the sound of Marci’s boots kicking against the shell of the car, scraping off the mangled bodies of the pests. Foggy digs at the pebbly shore, tosses tiny stones into the river.

“Have you been able to get onto your Dad yet?” Matt asks.

Foggy rolls a pebble in his palm, then chucks it when he speaks, “Haven’t been able to catch him. The phone keeps ringing out.”

“Sounds like he’s mad,” Matt says.

Foggy shrugs, “I don’t have time to call him every day. Besides,” he pulls his hair out from underneath his collar and drapes it over his back, “I’m not a kid anymore.”

“You’re across the world from him, he has a right to be worried about you.”

“Yeah well, it’s not my fault he doesn’t answer when I call.”

Marci’s working on a particularly gutsy part of the bumper bar, slam, slam, slam, the serrated rubber of her boots bouncing right off, the sound a horrible echo across the quiet town.

“Marci thinks we’ll play at Olympia one day.”

“Which Olympia?” Matt asks, leaning back.

“Paris, L’Olympia.”

Matt hums, “You want to be that big?”

Marci seems to give up with her boot and fetches a CD case from the car to help blade into the thinner curves of the car.

“Don’t you?”
Cold air lifts off the river and skates over the shore, rippling a shiver up Foggy’s spine.

“Not really,” he detects surprise in his friend, and adds, “I mean, it would be great to be that well known. But most bands who play there are sell outs.”

“I’ll die before we sell out” Foggy says firmly.

“I hope it never comes to that...”

Matt hears the wooden frame of windows fling open suddenly, a woman shouts across the riverbank.

“What?!” Marci shouts in reply.

More German shouting versus confused English yelling and Foggy gets to his feet, pulls Matt up with him.

“Where’s Vlad when you need him?” Marci’s saying as they come closer.

“Vlad’s Russian,” Matt points out.

“He’s European, isn’t he? Europeans know all the languages, except English obviously!”

“That’s not…” Foggy begins, then stops when he seems to notice the woman standing in the doorway of their hostel, “She does not look happy.”

The woman seems to be making frantic phone gestures against her ear while she tugs the handset on the cord, stretched out as far as it can go. As they draw closer, Matt can hear the tight cord sag in relief when she steps back, pulling the three of them in close around the telephone. The woman presses the handset into Foggy’s hands as she mutters something angrily in German, then stomps down the creaky stairs to the basement. Matt holds on to Foggy’s arm as his friend brings the phone to his ear. He can feel Foggy’s nervousness, his anxiety lifting off his skin, evaporation.

“H-hello?” Foggy answers.

“Franklin!” Wesley sounds relieved, but it’s hard for Matt to decipher emotions over the phone. It’s already hard enough to hear what’s being said on the other side with Foggy practically clamping the plastic against his ear.

“Who is it?” Marci asks.

“It’s Wesley,” Foggy informs her, covering the speaker with his hand.

Marci snorts, “You should hang up on him. That’s what I’ve been doing!”

She grapples for the phone but Foggy pushes her away. She grunts, then stomps outside again. As Wesley yells at Foggy over the line, Matt can faintly hear Marci attempting to clean the exterior of the car again.

“...What in the hell do you think you’re doing?” Wesley’s saying.

Foggy sighs, presses two fingers against the creases in his frown, “Thought you’d be happy, we’re making you money, aren’t we?”

“I never permitted you to book your own shows. There are systems to these things, and you kids...”
Foggy’s arm tenses and Matt holds on tight, spreads his fingers over Foggy’s sleeve, presses, holds the veins in from bursting.

“You need to return as soon as possible.”

“Return…”

“To Hell’s Kitchen! Christ! I’m the one who’s meant to book you shows. The whole thing doesn’t work when you don’t follow the rules.”

“I didn’t know… we had anything after The Dandy’s. Marci arranged-“

“Marci?! I paged you the itinerary for the third quarter, did none of you see that?”

“What page… I didn’t get one…”

“See, this is why I didn’t want to book kids. You’re high as fucking kites all the time. No respect for authorities, no commitment. Jesus. You need to get to the closest airport and book the first flight out, you hear me? The fundraiser is next week and you have to practice.”

“Wait, what fundraiser?” Foggy’s voice quavers.

“The fundraiser. Don’t you even know what’s happening here? Look. All you have to do is come and practice the songs I want you to play at the fundraiser on your new instruments and all of our investors will be happy.”

“Why do we have to do it? Couldn’t you get a more high profile band to play? We have shows booked down south, our fans—“

Wesley starts laughing, “Your fans! Your fans can wait. You don’t know a thing about the economics of the music industry. That’s why you need an agent. That’s why you need me. And I need you, a low profile band, to play your—, ” Wesley scowls, “hits, when I ask you to. I’ve already picked out which songs you’ll play.”

Foggy pauses, “which songs?”

“I’ve chosen Whatever Happens and Spread Your Love because they are your least political, and coincidentally, most popular. Just make sure you don’t swear. Your audience would not appreciate that.”

“Only two songs?”

Wesley’s sigh crackles over the speaker, “Yes, only two songs.”

“But… a fundraiser?” Foggy pulls the cord as he takes a step back, “that’s not really… our thing. We don’t want to—“

“Shush, you’re going to do this, no questions asked.”

Foggy doesn’t miss a beat, “No.”

Wesley makes a strangled noise over the phone and barks, “God damn it, I have already arranged this! If you do not show up to the fundraiser concert I’m going to make sure no record company in the country will ever let you sign on so long as you live.”

Foggy grips the phone so hard Matt can hear Foggy’s fingernails scraping against the plastic.
“You cannot ruin this for me. I have connections, Franklin. I have partners across the globe. I will tell them all about you. I will blacklist you, and Matthew, and *Marci*, and your friends and family and make sure *none* of you will ever make another cent from the music industry.”

“Fine! We’ll do it!” then under his breath, “…if you want it so bad.”

Wesley hums, “That’s more like it.”

Matt hears the dial tone and Foggy lets the phone slip from his hands. He shakily places the phone back on the set and Matt asks for information about what has just happened, as if he hadn’t overheard the whole conversation.

“She made Marci sick and the flight attendants had to lift her off the plane. It was just a panic attack, but she’s been allowed to go home.”

“Be thankful I was the one to take the call,” Foggy nudges Matt’s side, leaning in ever so slightly into Matt’s warmth, “that guy really knows how to use God’s name in vain.”

**xxiii. going under**

No one’s happy about having to return home so abruptly. They put it off. Play a few more shows, earn a handful of hundred dollar bills and finally they can’t put it off any longer. Rental returned. Flights booked.

Marci’s sick on the plane. She makes Matt sick too, but Foggy’s enough to help him out when the plane lands. Medics have to lift Marci off in a stretcher. This whole big scene. Sirens and red and blue lights flashing against steel. You’d think someone had committed a murder mid-flight but it’s just this young woman, severe panic attack, unconscious, unresponsive. Foggy’s worried for her but at the same time he can’t help but wonder if part of it’s all an act. Foggy wasn’t allowed to bring his lino cutting tools, which are considered weapons. Marci wasn’t allowed to bring her drugs stash, a.k.a. illicit compounds.

Still, Foggy hadn’t felt like making a big scene about it. They could always get more. Besides, Marci had told him where she’d buried the drugs, in case she forgets. Behind wood panels in a lonesome hotel, buried with the roots of a rose bush, wedged between the lining of the rental, number plate memorised. He doubts any of it will be there when they return. If they return. Who knows what kind of clauses Wesley will pull out of their contract.

No one had had time to call Wesley and let him know they were on their way to the hospital, yet somehow Wesley finds out exactly which room number Marci had been admitted to and he storms in, spit flaying from his mouth as he yells.

“How do you think you’re going to pay for this hospital bill,” Wesley begins, stabbing his forefinger in the air, “when you can’t even pay my fees?!”
Matt, who’s sitting on the single chair beside Marci’s bed, clamps his hands together. “What fees?”

“My fees, Matthew. They have been unpaid since, oh let me see, February.”

“February?” Matt repeats.

Foggy backs up against the wall, uses it for support. There’s no way that that could be true. Marci, she…

“Go away, I’m going to take care of it!” Marci despairs.

“You keep telling me that, and I couldn’t do a thing about that bullshit with you kids on the other side of the globe. Now let me make this clear. You are going to play the concert Thursday night. You are going to play the songs I have prepared for you. You’re going to wow the investors and then after that, you’re going to play the shows I’ve arranged for you to pay off your debt.”

“How much is that debt?” Matt inquires evenly.

“$17,000.”

Foggy feels faint.

“I’m rounding up here.”

“How is that possible?” Foggy pants, his world tilting, tilting.

Matt reaches for Marci’s shoulder, curls around firm and Foggy’s faintness intensifies.

“I’m going to take care of it. I’m going to take care of it!” Marci wails.

Machines start to beep wildly and shortly after, nurses race in and bustle everyone else out. Despite his seesaw vision, Foggy lurches over to help Matt out. Except it feels more like Matt’s the one keeping Foggy upright, he’s shivering so hard. Shock. Out in the hallway, busy, feet padding up and down the linoleum floors, he heaves into Matt’s body, maybe he’s got what Marci’s got. Or rather, now he understands why she’s ill. She’s spent their earnings. Spent on what? Everything did seem more expensive overseas, but it couldn’t have been that much more.

Wesley brushes off his tailored suit and then plonks a suitcase on the waiting chair outside Marci’s room. Foggy glances in, sees nurses attending to Marci, fiddling with dials on the machines, on drips, injections. The snapping of the buckle in the suitcase attracts his attention again. Papers whoosh out, slipping over the mouth of the suitcase. Wesley grunts in annoyance as he snatches them up, and shoves them back in his suitcase.

“Your instruments are waiting for you at the studio,” Wesley says, holding back a scowl, “You should have come when I told you to. You are days behind schedule.”

Matt keeps a straight face, “We’ll be ready.”

“You know what’s at stake.”
The clock is ticking. Heart monitor beeping. Marci stares out the window unblinking.

“What about our savings?” Matt asks her softly.

Her hands white, as frosted as snow laden pines.

“What savings?”

Matt looks at him like he can see exactly where Foggy’s eyes are. Glassy jasper stones meets blood shot red.

“Maybe we weren’t clear enough…”

“You willingly gave me money,” she says, tight lipped.

“That’s because we thought you were sending off Wesley’s payments and banking the rest!” Foggy cries, exasperated.

He half expects Matt to retaliate, make him calm down, but his friend doesn’t. He waits for a response, looking for an answer as much as Foggy is.

Marci sucks in a gasp of air, grits her teeth.

“I had a plan to fix it. They just needed help with… I’m all they’ve got… We were going to earn it all back… I had a plan-“

Foggy interjects, “-Is that why you booked us more shows? Did you-” Foggy raises his voice to speak over Marci, “Did you delete Wesley’s post-tour schedule too?”

Marci flinches at being interrupted, sends the window a glare, “let’s not forget you both willingly gave me money.”

“Our first and every mistake was trusting you,” Foggy snarls.

Marci starts to cry. Beeping intensifying.

“You don’t know what I have to do…”

“So tell us so we can help you!”

Foggy watches Matt curl his hand around Marci’s.

“Tell us what’s going on so we can understand why you do this shit,” Foggy pleads.

“Do you ever have a secret so big… that you’ve worked your whole life around it…?” she wonders out loud, then swats Matt’s hand away, “Ow, you’re hurting me!”

Matt squeezes his hands between his thighs, matches Marci’s gaze out the window. Despite his calm exterior, there are hints of sullenness. Darkness under his eyes, cracked lips, stiff movements.

“$17,000…” he murmurs.

“Your Dad could pay it off…” Marci suggests blankly.

Foggy hesitates, but before he can say anything Matt says, “No, we have no choice but to go through with it. Play the songs he wants us to play, do the shows he wants us to do…”
“Because of Marci, we’re Wesley’s puppets now.”

“If we get on his good side…” Marci trails off.

“We need to stay in his good books,” Matt says firmly, “Three years and we can choose to retire from our contract. Three years won’t feel as bad as being blocked out of every record company.”

“You’re right, you’re right,” Foggy holds up his hands.

“I don’t like it either Foggy,” Matt offers.

Foggy sighs, “Promise me one thing, Marci. Don’t ever leave our sight. Or – uh, our presence. You’re going to stick this through with us. You owe us that much.”

“...”

“You need to get up,” Foggy hears Matt saying softly, firmly.

He hovers in the doorway to Marci’s room, hot coffee steaming in the flimsy paper cup.

“Marci,” Matt presses.

“I can’t.”

A hesitation, "How about we go for a walk. You could take your camera."

"I don't want to," she says in reply, voice hollow and distant.

Matt insists, “the show is in two days’ time. You need to practice.”

There’s a long pause, indistinct whispering. Foggy suspects flirtation. In contrast, steam stiffens his features.

“We’ve been touring nonstop, I know my part,” her voice shaky.

There’s sniffing, twin crying. Foggy thinks sometimes Matt’s blindness has given him a third eye, lets him see into other people’s souls and read how they’re feeling. How they’re hurting.

Then, loudly, “I’ll wing it! Oh! Foggy there you are, where’s my coffee?”

Foggy wanders in sheepishly. He catches the end of Marci wiping away her tears. Matt’s back faces him. Shoulders tense, Matt won’t turn around. Foggy wonders if he’s hiding any tears. He passes one cup to Marci, then perches on the windowsill. The street lamps from outside cast a dreary yellow on the side of Matt’s head, turned away.

“It’s cold,” Marci says as she wraps her hands around the cup, takes a sip, “and bitter.”

“Want me to get you another?” Foggy offers.

Matt’s in one of his moods. Doesn’t want to be talked to, except when he’s the one to talk.

“Would you? You’re a treasure, Foggybear.”
She smiles warmly, her lips cracked, spotted with blood. As Foggy takes back her cup and starts to walk back out of the room, he sees Matt turn back to Marci and clasp her hand. The ceiling fan clips, shuttered whispering.

The things Foggy does to be close to his love.

**xxiv. rise or fall**

Matt thinks he’s seen more of Foggy and Marci these last few days than he has their entire European tour. That might be an exaggeration, but the last few days have definitely been intense. At least with them, he’s safe.

Foggy came and went as he pleased whilst Matt persevered in coaxing Marci out of bed. In the end it wasn’t easy. If it came to it, Matt was willing to carry her out of bed himself, but it would expose him far too much. So they’d had to bring practice to her. Foggy had fetched their new guitars made special for the show. It’s only going to be a couple of songs, ones they’ve played a hundred times before, but something feels wrong to Matt about the instruments. Like there’s something in them, buried in the walls of the body or woven into the strings. At first he thinks it’s because it’s not his own, that he’s not used to the way it makes sounds. But as he’s tuning it for the fiftieth time backstage as they wait for their cue, he thinks there’s definitely something wrong with the build. Something off. It’s a classic Fender but it’s heavier than it should be. Any modifications made to it, he supposes, aren’t meant to be found.

“How about we pull a Johnny Cash meets Nixon?” Foggy says as he fiddles with his guitar strap, “Might be time for U.S. Government to be heard?”

“Gutsy,” Marci coos.

Matt smiles, “Not sure it’s worth the risk.”

“Suppose you are all about playing it safe,” Foggy replies.

If only his friends knew how unsafe he truly is when they’re not around. Yet he’d always felt safe, because he knew what he was capable of. That feeling of safety only returned to him after he’d left Hell’s Kitchen, after he’d got back into boxing and fighting and helping people. He knew his capabilities and his limits. And returning to Hell’s Kitchen cemented that his limits were still limiting. Freedom was good while it lasted.

The hospital staff wasn’t too pleased with having them practice. At first it was a novelty, but after hours of it they wards had kicked them out. He guessed they’d need a break sooner or later. Besides, he was fairly sure Foggy hadn’t even told his Dad he was back in town yet. Matt could tell Foggy wanted him to go with him, and he could sense Marci was actually looking forward to some peace and quiet. So he’d appeased one friend, rejected another.

“You going to Fogwell’s? I’ll come with you,” Foggy had insisted.

“There’s no need, Foggy,” Matt had reassured him, “Besides, the Gym’s been unpowered for years. You wouldn’t be able to see a thing.”
Foggy grips the handle of his guitar case, plastic hot off the conveyor belt, “Are you sure? I can grab a flashlight from the corner store.”

“It’s fine, really, Foggy. You need to go see your Dad. And I… need some time out too.”

There’s a drop in Foggy’s breathing, resignation, “alright. Try not to beat yourself up about Marci. We’ll be okay. And buddy? Try not to literally beat yourself up.”

Looking back, Matt’s kicking himself in the ass for thinking everything would be okay. He’d tested the waters fine in Philly, but Europe was oceans away from Manhattan. He supposes he’d been neglectful because he hadn’t had to think about Stick in months, and besides, he was only going to be in Hell’s Kitchen for a short time. And yet, that short time had reminded him of where his own heart remained. Locked in the rib cage, anchored to the Hudson River. Spineless.

He’d been in the old ring when he’d realized he’d taken advantage of his freedom barricaded by land and sea. The ring dusty. Warm. Air conditioner long broken, windows kept shut. Stuffy. Small grains shifted inside the punching bag with every hit. He probably should’ve been more furious with Marci than he actually was, but unlike Foggy, he could feel her pain. He knew she was paying her penance by adopting the emotional toll.

The throbbing heart of the city, dying, fat clotted vessels. Diseases natural and man-made killing the white blood cells off, peeling back the population. He could feel the souls of the city emanating like white hot light out of the heart of Manhattan, Hell’s Kitchen. Blood pumping, coursing through the veins, the streets. He could feel the blood draining, retracting, and he tried to ignore all the people and problems that he’d left behind. Focus on the connection between his fist on the bag, and it was in that ignorance, that forceful bliss, that he’d felt a foreign fist punch his neck. Knocked him off balance.

Stick always had a way with making his presence known. And made sure that Matt knew he wasn’t above anyone. That he had a long way to come still, a lot left to do. Time squandered on drugs and music and Matt’s work in Europe wasn’t enough evidence to the contrary. Punched in nose, heaving gut, blistered fists. Stick reminded him that the work done in Hell’s Kitchen is what matters, is what’s important.

After that encounter he can’t help but feel paranoid. He’s got his senses working on everyone in the hall and outside of it. He’s backlogging the details about every person, about every socialite, and a-socialite slinking by the walls. The guards, of which there are suspiciously many, lurking behind the thick marble walls. Walkie talkies fuzzing, fussing. And his friends, tension crackling. Foggy’s still pissed off, he’s trying to be understanding but he has a right to be mad. He is trying though, which is something. If only Foggy could hear her paying her penance with every breath she takes.

Marci’s picking at one edge of the curtain. She peels it back and comments, “this is the first time I’ve seen that woman in person.”

“What do you mean?” Matt asks.

“There’s a bunch of graffiti murals of her around where my parents live, of her and that bald man. They don’t really do her justice,” Marci laughs.

“Are they politicians?” Foggy asks as he comes up beside Marci to peer through the gap, “where are they?”

“There,” Marci points, “I don’t see the bald man. I wonder if he’s actually handsome in person. I
do quite like bald men. They try harder. I guess that’s why he’s a man with an idea.”

His two friends continue to survey the crowd for a few minutes, then Marci starts up again.

“I still don’t get why we only have to play two songs,” she says, “Just look at this crowd, there must be over a thousand people here! The only time we’ve ever been able to play to an audience this big was with The Dandy’s. Now it’s our turn and we’re only allowed to play two songs? What is that?”

“It’s all too weird for me,” Foggy agrees, stepping back from the curtains, “They’re all so… upper class. They don’t look like the type of people who usually enjoy our music.”

“Looks aren’t everything,” Matt says.

“But they’ve been playing classical music over the speakers all evening,” Foggy shakes his head, “This whole situation just doesn’t sit right with me. But I guess we have to do it.”

“Hey, don’t look at me like that Foggy,” Marci says as she closes the curtains, “It’s not my fault.”

Matt hears Foggy becoming riled up and he holds up a hand, “Not now, let’s just get through this.”

“Matt, you’re bleeding,” Foggy says.

Foggy reaches up to his cheek and Matt flinches away. It’s not intentional, a painful reaction to his altercation with his Master.

“I think it adds to our image, don’t you think Foggybear? Like we’re truly a mean motorcycle gang.”

Suddenly the classical music ceases, replaced by the sound of a finger tapping a microphone.

A woman clears her throat, “ahem.”

She has barely spoken a word but already the voice connects with a memory in Matt’s history. He pulls back pages in his mind, a flicker of the stink of a public bathroom, of Foggy hurt and retaliating, of violence.

“Thank you,” she begins, motioning for the applauding to cease, “Thank you all for attending this evening. I see so many faces of people I know already, and many I look forward to getting to know. For those of you who don’t know who I am, I am Vanessa Marianna. I am here with you all this evening to share with you, my benefactor’s dream for our beloved city.”

As she continues, he attempts to isolate her presence. He cuts away the groups of people, stilettos on marble, leather on carpet, ignores the crackling receivers of walkie talkies behind the walls, pushes back the sound of Marci’s long fingernails scratching her scalp. It was such a long time ago, a very brief encounter, yet he never forgets a voice. Slightly rusty, hoarse, a hint of an Israeli accent. Matt bites his swollen lip. What’s the connection between the woman at the club years ago and now? Did she have something to do with the violence and drugs?

“Before we begin, we would like to start with a short performance arranged by a… future colleague of ours. We know you will enjoy our benefactor’s taste.”

Marci vigorously scratches her head, “That’s our cue! That’s our cue!”

The curtain pulls open and Marci dashes over to her kit, the sticks slipping in her hands. Foggy
quickly finds his footing on the pedals, and they count in.

“One, two, three, four!” Foggy starts.

Ears turn to them, impressed, disgusted, ambivalent. Some return to their conversation, chase down the waiters offering tidbits and wine. He should’ve guessed they’d be ignored. Foggy’s right, their audience is present not for their music but for the presentation. Still, during their song, he’s wary of them all. Noisy but quiet, gentle drawls, elongated heart beats, tired sighs. Wine softens them, conversation irks them. The crowd is one he’s never witnessed before. And he’s not sure he likes it. Playing live is one of the only times he permits himself to be self-centred, and the majority of these people don’t seem to care.

Matt knows their song like the palm of his hand but as they get closer to the outro of the song, he leaves Foggy to keep up with the voice work, distracted by the change in the crowd. Foggy finishes the last verse and plays into the outro and strangely enough, that’s when the audience seems to be paying the most attention. Matt can hear the beeping coming from his guitar, and travelling out of Foggy’s bass, and the way the crowd seems to be a collective, entranced by the beat of Marci’s drum kit, swayed by the chords Matt and Foggy play.

As soon as they finish their song, the curtains drop again and the woman continues her speech.

Marci immediately slumps in her stool, dumbfounded, “Did you see that? They actually dug our music!”

Foggy swings his bass to the side as he comes over to Matt, grips his shoulder, “Are you okay? What happened at the end there?”

Matt shakes his head in response, waving Foggy to be quiet as he listens to the speech.

“…My benefactor, yes, you will know his name soon,” Vanessa says reassuringly into the microphone as she paces beyond the curtains, “he has a vision for this city. How many of you have also had ambitions to change how things are? How many of you have begun your careers in order to make a difference? Yes? It is common, it is human nature to want the best for us all. Now, how many of you can say that you have achieved your ambition? No? Not many, it is tragic. We get caught up in promotions and wealth and we lose our way. Not today, my dear friends. Today, our benefactor has a dream like you all once had, and the willpower to achieve it. With your help, we can change this city. We can clean it up, renew it, and make it sustainable.

“Ah, I see your faces light up. Sustainable. A popular word in politics, no? However, there is more to it than economics. There is social and environmental sustainability. Perhaps not so happy anymore? Loaded words, but essential.. And an essential element of my… benefactor’s plan. You will come to see our Better Tomorrow initiative take shape over time. For now, we need your help. Please listen to us, hear out our ideas, assess our plans, discuss with us, and donate, if you wish. I am afraid you are making the wrong decision if you choose to ignore us.”

Vanessa pauses and Matt notices the clear difference in the crowd. Subdued, placated, numb. After hearing Whatever Happened… it’s as if they’ve turned to dough, mouldable. They’re absorbing every word Vanessa speaks, believing her speech like gospel. Ordinarily, her speech isn’t anything exceptional, nothing inspirational. Matt deduces there has to be something to do with their modified instruments, perhaps played in a certain way to generate an influence over crowds. He could either play what they were designed to play and stay silent about the effects, not play anything at all and risk being dropped, or test the waters. Only problem is, he only has one chance to try.
“Now,” Vanessa continues, “I would like to tell you a story. My benefactor was not close with his Father, but his Father did teach him many things, as all Fathers do. His Father introduced him to music at a young age, made him understand what music can do to a person. They would sit in their small lounge room and listen to the radio. My benefactor’s favourite song is Brown Sugar by The Rolling Stones. And one of the most important lessons his Father taught my benefactor was that no matter where you are, music always sounds better when it’s loud.”

At that, the curtains rise again, revealing Matt and his friends to the crowd again. Foggy jumps back to his pedals, but Matt grabs the mic before they begin.

“The Stones huh? Our good friends The Dandy Warhols are big fans of The Stones,” he says as he plays the intro to Brown Sugar.

Foggy covers his mic with his hands and hisses at Matt, “what are you doing??”

Matt ignores him as he keys into the intro to Bohemian Like You. To his band mates, he says, “think you can play Courtney’s tribute?” Then back to the mic, “this one goes out to our agent, James. He always believes in us.”

Marci howls with laughter as she picks up the drum beat. The Dandy’s played this song nearly every show they did but it’s the first time Matt’s tried playing it himself. Matt can tell Foggy’s struggling with remembering Zia’s part but Marci’s picked up the beat easily. It’s completely different to Spread Your Love, and sure enough, Matt notices some of the audience members waking up, actually becoming appalled by the music that’s being played.

Matt goes into the chorus and he can hear Wesley talking loudly to himself, “do they want to get fired?!!”

Matt comes to the chorus and he notices more and more audience members break free of their trances, frustratingly, only to express their distaste for the music. He experiments with playing, trying to play into a chord of Spread Your Love and sure enough, the modifications within the body of the guitar start to gear up again. He falls back to Bohemian Like You but suddenly the electric output blacks out, cuts to a dull strum, a result of someone having switched off power to their guitars.

Matt freezes. Guards march out from the side doorways to the stage. Two go straight for Marci who’s still drumming, the rest coming straight for Foggy and him.

“This was such a bad idea,” Foggy cries

He rips the guitar strap off his shoulders, ripping out his sound blocking ear plugs at the same time, having been tangled around the strap. He then drops the guitar on the ground, bracing himself as the guards come to take him off stage.

The plastic body of the guitar clatters over the wooden boards and the modification seems to dislodge, rolling out onto the stage. It begins to beep incessantly, likely seeming a lot louder to Matt than to anyone else. He clamps his hands over his ears, pushing in the plugs before the effect of the mod can sweep over him. Guards charge for him, uninfluenced by the numbing effects clearly taking hold of his friends, and the crowd.

Without hearing, and without seeing, he’s defenceless. A black hole, soundless, lightless, a void. In response, his body becomes hyper-sensitive to touch. He can feel every individual hair on his skin prickle. He can feel the air creep down his throat and into his lungs. The air around him shifts from movement. The two guards grasp his arms and he flinches, instinctively going to shake the
grabbers off, but in doing so, he allows the sound to affect him. Suddenly he feels numb, placid. The guards order him to move and he does, as if their suggestion is the greatest idea he’s ever heard.

His mind is cloudy, dizzy. Voices spark through the mist like lightning, calling him back to reality. He doesn’t remember much, can’t remember how he ended up sitting in a chair in the small storage room just off the stage. He remembers… he remembers playing, and suddenly someone had pulled the plug, and then… Foggy’s guitar clattering across the stage… the modification rolling out… and not much after that.

“You’re right Wesley, I am concerned. My friends and neighbours have received a full blast and you have said yourself the long term effects are unknown!” Vanessa whispers hoarsely.

“If you’re really worried, I’ll have them play the finishing song,” Wesley replies.

“Perhaps that would be for the best…”

Matt feels as if he’s slowly surfacing from being submerged in the ocean. His limbs are tired, drained. Air once a thick liquid becomes heavy with oxygen, hard to breathe. He has the urge to collapse, to let his muscles unwind and rest but before he can, he notices Foggy and Marci close by. Their hearts beat at a slow steady rate, strung out, sedated. Whatever kind of technology Wesley implanted in their instruments obviously hit everyone without earplugs far worse. Luckily Matt was only subjected to a short portion of it.

“I really don’t think it’s necessary,” Wesley reassures, “Look there, our patrons are freely unloading their wallets. The influence might last a little longer than expected, but I can’t see the harm in that. Look how inspired they are. They believe in you.”

“I don’t know… I will have to speak to him about this.”

“I’m sure he will see the benefit of this situation. Now, you must save face Marianna. I’ll take care of these imbeciles.”

As soon as Vanessa exits the small room, Wesley addresses Foggy, Marci and Matt by name, instructing them all to stand up. Play numb, play dead. Guards escort them to a car, flanked. Silence, extended play. The quiet rumble of a sleek drive, automatic. The occasional expulsion of white noise, transceivers, an escort code. Stationary. Shuffled out of the back seats, his friends miss the step, stumble. Low ceiling, cement, parked cars, side by side. The guards peel back, destination reached, ignition fires, screeching rubber over slick road.

Elevator up, anti-gravity, doors ding open. The familiar smell of the Virgin studios hits him, staff entry behind him. Wesley orders Matt and his friends to follow. Foggy’s hand twitches. One foot after another. Matt runs through possibilities. Tries to deduce Wesley’s reasoning behind going so far to babysit his clients. Matt could pretend to have just woken up now and steer his friends out of there, away from whatever Wesley has planned for them. Or he could wait until he has enough information. Wesley could potentially be harmless.

They’re taken to the recording rooms. The first three are filled, following six empty. End studio. The mixer door shuts and sucks in a gasp of air. Wesley then orders them into the soundproof
studio and makes them take seats on the provided stools. He keeps the door between the two rooms open, and Matt can hear the escapades of air hissing through the gap between the hallway and the mixing room door, a crack in the dam.

Wesley cracks his knuckles, sighs contentedly.

“If you hadn’t been so clumsy Franklin, I would never have known exactly what this little device can do,” their agent says as he fishes out a small piece of tech from his pocket, “originally the two planted in your instruments were meant to activate through playing particular riffs, which would then focus the attention of listeners and make them susceptible to a speaker’s influence. However, at full capacity,” he taps the device in his hand playfully, “you will do anything I say.”

He grins and squeezes the device in his hands, then tosses it back in the pocket of his jacket.

“Including signing anything I shove in your faces.”

“That sounds great,” Marci replies.

Wesley blinks for a second, then barks out laughter. He turns back into the mixing room and goes over to the mixing table. Wesley’s movement creates a small gust of air which wafts across a hundred buttons and dials and adjusters located on the boards. A dull, near silent harmonica.

With Wesley’s back turned, Matt slips off his stool and hugs the wall, pressing himself flat beside the open doorway. He hears Wesley pick up the telephone, dials a short code. 0-3-1.

“Hello, yes, it’s Wesley,” he says, a hint of amusement left in his tone, “I require B.R.M.C.’s contract papers, and a breach of contract declaration. Yes, yes, they have agreed to the terms, no need for attorney involvement. Yes, yes, rare I know,” he begins to speak in a hurried tone, “promptly deliver the documents to me, I’m in Recording.”

The phone clicks on the set and Matt hears footsteps over the carpet. A carefree heartbeat, zero anticipation.

A joyful whistle, a sing-song voice, “you’re going to be indebted to me for life, my friends.”

Seconds to take action. Wesley’s sleeved arm slides over his jacket, going for something in his trouser pockets just as Matt trips him over. Wesley collapses on the ground, groaning, two small bits of plastic rolling out of Wesley’s hands. Matt quickly clocks a punch against his agent’s head to knock him out for a few minutes. He then reaches over Wesley’s body and plucks up the earplugs, rolls Wesley to the side and extracts the device from his pocket.

Carefully he runs his fingers over the device, visualising the shape of it, noting the pressure points, like keying into the sweet spot of a safe lock. He freezes when he hears Foggy’s breathing starting to even out in comparison to Marci’s.

“M-Matt? What… what are you doing?”

“Foggy…” Matt’s shoulders tense. His thumb on the activation panel. “I’m sorry to do this to you again, but I hope you never remember how cruel people can be… including me.”

Foggy sounds so confused, “Matty?”

Wesley stirs, equal confusion. Carpet cushioned footsteps creep closer down the hall, closer and closer, end studio. The button under Matt’s thumb resonates, pulses, compels his thumb to push.
“Don’t worry, I’m going to fix everything.”

Ear plugs in. A hand on the mixing room door. Button – *click*.

Chapter End Notes

I wanted to get this up before s2 drops, because some aspects of the fic may change depending on what occurs in s2. Anyway, hope you guys are liking it so far :)

(P.S. for musos - Wilson Fisk's flashback scene in s01e08 actually opened with playing Brown Sugar.)
Take Them On, On Your Own

Chapter Summary

Foggy's growing tired of Matt's absence, but in his cowardice he still tries to keep things the way they are. Later, while touring in Northern Europe, Ed decides to take the group on a spontaneous trip to a theme park called Efteling. Matt takes it as a day off from everything that's going on in his life, except his good intentions turn sour.

Chapter Notes

sorry that this update hasn't come sooner, i've had a bit of writer's block on this one. Also, I probably won't be able to update until July/August next, because i'll be overseas in June. Anyway, hope you guys like the update, and thanks for your continued support :)

Beta read by the wonderful wtchcool again. Thanks so much for grueling through such big chapters so quickly!

part v

[2002 – last quarter]

xxv. interlude [side 1]

Before the restart, Matt can hear the puzzle pieces pop into place through Foggy’s gasp, his quiet sounds of revelation, of horrified understanding.

Then, click.

Like the click of a Glock and the fire of the bullet into remembrance. Head shot.

Numbness, placidity.

No time to waste. A quick alteration of the contract in the name of abolishing debt. Secretary’s suspicions curtailed. Walk out, scot free, clarity to reassemble soon, a new slate.

Except of course he’s missed something. He’d like to make the excuse of not having enough time, but it’s a loophole he should have expected. They may be free of debt, but their freedom is not complete. They contractually have two years of allowing Virgin to profit off them, sans agent, sans support. No help booking shows or arranging transport or with marketing.
Marci wants to wait it out. Foggy feels trapped in Hell. Matt’s at home, the temptation to stay is strong but music leaks out of him when every punch falls short, no target.

xxvi. interlude [side 2]

Foggy sees grid blocks in a dizzy blur. Streets of red and blue, green and yellow, and black and black and black. Too fast to make sense of any colours, any signifiers of anything interesting. The city is a stencil and Matt’s cutout is missing, out of shape, won’t slot in with the original. Matt said he’d go to the gym, but it had been hours and Foggy had wanted to check up on him. They were all feeling a bit woozy after the fundraiser. Foggy was only looking out for Matt. Pitch black, dust and mess and empty. No note. Quiet message bank. Marci was looking for a drive anyway. An excuse to drive fast and roll slow while Foggy combed through the streets to find any trace of him.

Marci brings up a tired conversation, “I just don’t like it Foggy.”

“Can we not go through this again?” Foggy pleads, his forehead pressed against the cold window of the van.

“I can’t make sense of it,” Marci continues, “It makes me feel sick.”

Foggy peels his forehead away from the window, skin sticky with sweat, “You and I smoked a whole bag before we played. That’s the reason why we can’t remember shit.”

“That’s the thing Foggybear - I remember everything when I’m high.”

“No you don’t.”

“I do!”

“You make shit up, that’s what you do,” Foggy rolls his eyes and turns back to pressing his forehead against the window.

“I’m telling you, I remember everything,” Marci says adamantely, “crystal clear. I do remember that weed, and I remember playing at that dumb fundraiser, yet I remember nothing about finishing our last song. I know something’s up because that weed wasn’t even good. That’s why we smoked the whole bag,” she sighs. “Don’t you think it’s fishy, Foggybear?”

Foggy only shakes his head. He turns up the music, winds down the window and crosses his arms over the open frame. The afternoon breeze slaps his forearms as the diesel stench fills his nostrils. He swears it’s mostly Marci’s fault that the old van’s getting to the end of its life, the way she drives it. She works it too hard, treats it like crap. Sounds like someone else Foggy knows.

“You don’t believe me,” Marci says after a while.

“I just want to find Matt,” Foggy replies sullenly, then starts, “hey! You just ran a red!”

Marci shrugs.

“Don’t tell me this is your sixth sense for no police activity going again?”

“Something like that,” Marci gives his thigh a playful slap, “Brett got me the best Christmas present. It’s to make up for the past few years. I told him he still has to get me something for this
“The best… better than my camera?” Foggy jokes.

“Better. Oh don’t give me that look. I like the camera. It’s a sweet thought,” she touches his thigh again, gentle.

“So what’d he get you?”

“He got me the map.”

“The map?” Foggy prompts further explanation.

“He made marks on it and everything. Too bad I couldn’t take it with me.”

“Made marks of what?” Foggy asks again, a little frustrated.

Marci inhales, “marks of police activity, duh! Positions of red light cameras, popular places for speed monitoring and all that. Now I know exactly where I can and can’t get caught.”

“That’s… a pretty thoughtful gift. Are you sure you and I know the same Mahoney?”

“Oh it wasn’t his idea,” Marci flicks her ponytail over her shoulder, one hand on the wheel, “The guy couldn’t have an original thought if he tried. Ha! No, that’s mean. He’s a good drummer. He taught me, did you know that? Or rather I watched him and learnt from him that way. He’s not much of a giver, come to think of it. He couldn’t think of a way to make it up to me for fucking off with my stash, not talking to me, and on top of all that, becoming a cop of all things. Had to suggest he get the map for me because he wasn’t going to think of it on his own. Wouldn’t let me take it home with me though, so I had to memorise it.”

“Next you’re going to tell me you have a photographic memory.”

“Maybe I do,” Marci grins, “It’d explain why I remember things so picture perfect.”

Suddenly she sharply turns into a shopping mall parking lot. She slams on the accelerator as she zips up the ramps, the concrete walls hugging the wide van. She shifts to the brakes just before the ramp flattens out, the tires screech with her howling. Foggy looks over at her, her platinum blonde hair tied up in a mess, her eyes glinting and wild. She shouldn’t be having this much fun, and Foggy shouldn’t be either, when driving with Marci can only be a death wish.

She swerves over the empty parking lot, completely disregarding the road markings and making her own way to the next ramp. She bursts up the slope and Foggy has to grip onto the dashboard for dear life. Around the sharp corner to the top parking bays, red brake lights turn on as a car begins reversing and Marci swerves around it, not bothering to give way. Foggy swears the van tips on two wheels for a moment, then, clank, four wheels touch the ground. Marci only laughs hysterically as she pulls around the rest of the lot, empty, bar that one driver tentatively descending the top level.

She comes to a stop right up next to the pedestrian entrance to the mall and the stillness almost makes Foggy feel sick. Like his body would rather be jerked around and scared for his life than safely stationary. He still grips the dashboard, hands splayed flat, trying to grip onto the hard plastic like he’s got suction pads for hands.

Marci nudges him in the side and he retracts his outstretched arms.
“Well, are you gonna jump out and have a look inside or what?” Marci folds one arm out of the driver seat window and slaps the side of the van, “Should still be open.”

Foggy looks over at the sliding doors of the shopping mall, greyed out glass with a bright light shining behind it.

“Aren’t you coming?”

“No,” Marci says flatly.

He shakes his head, “I doubt I’ll find him.”

Marci stares out her side of the car for a bit. The afternoon sun spikes over the skyline, a hot orange fire behind her white blonde hair. He feels like a teenager, he supposes he still is, in a way. The autumn sun deadbeat on the concrete. Windows glisten on the surrounding buildings, towering over the shopping mall. The bass of the music in the van’s stereo vibrates through him. She turns and Foggy feels her eyes on him. Can feel the sadness and concern and the crazy shimmering beneath. He lets her reach out and curl a loose strand of Foggy’s hair behind his ear. Lets her fingers linger on his jaw. She’s gentle and soft and she’s rough platinum hair and onyx clothes and it’s going to cost way too much to kiss her.

He does it anyway.

It’s surprisingly warm outside. The tires steaming, sizzling away in the dying heat. Why is he even bothering looking for Matt? He hasn’t been around. Marci actually listens to him, in her own way. She makes him feel normal at least. Makes him feel warmth. His lips are sticky when she parts from him, a pleased look on her face turns sombre.

“Do you want to try looking somewhere else?” she asks quietly.

A seagull squawks overhead. Lost in this city. Sea rats, sky rats. Whoever said pigeons were the rats of the skies, they were wrong. Look at this place. The thickest of cities and there are seagulls. So far from home.

“No, let’s go back.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah.”

She kisses him on the cheek, soft. He needs softness.

Marci drives down the spiral ramp like a demon and Foggy thinks he must have died a million times already because now he’s only slightly afraid. Wary. She drives through the streets at top speed, weaving through an obscure route. She runs through orange lights, slamming for the reds that matter.

At a rare stationary moment, the van rumbling, whining, he asks, “you’re not worried about him?”

Marci taps her fingers on the steering wheel. She buzzes with energy, but she’s short and blunt with, “no.”

She then reaches over to his lap, takes his hand in hers and gives it a squeeze. The lights flash to green, and without missing a beat she returns her hand to the wheel, accelerates faster than the van should be able to handle. Ed’s going to have a beef with him about the cost of getting the van
serviced because of how she treats the old thing. Part of the upside of being overseas without his Dad was that he didn’t have to worry about what his Dad would think about what Foggy did or didn’t do. He’d lived a good year and a bit only looking out for Matt, and Marci, to an extent, and himself. What would that individualistic type of freedom feel like if he only had to worry about himself?

“He’s going to turn up and he’s going to pretend like nothing happened,” Marci begins, fire on her tongue, “so why the fuck would I care about what he’s doing when he doesn’t care about us?”

Foggy glances out the window, looking through the crowd, “He does care about us…”

Marci laughs dryly, “He shows how much he really cares when he fucks off like this. No note, no nothing. Sure, he says he goes to the gym but do you really believe that? For hours, sometimes days? And he dares to come back like no time has passed for us. With his face all beat up and blood on his clothes. How ignorant does he think we are?”

Marci huffs and sits close to the wheel, elbows bent outward. Foggy doesn’t think he’s ever seen her like this. Doesn’t think he’s ever heard Marci badmouth Matt before. Another red’s coming up and Marci makes no move to slow down. A death wish for them both. She stamps her foot on the accelerator, speeds through it.

“Whatever is going on with him, I don’t care anymore. Keeping secrets only hurts your friends. I learnt that the hard way.”

She slows down, recommended speed. One quick turn of the volume knob, background noise.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you about my parents,” she says, eyes fixed on the road, “I was afraid… that if you knew…”

“We always kind of knew they were junkies,” Foggy offers.

“It’s not just that,” Marci blinks furiously, flustered, “I thought that… Oh, I don’t know what I was thinking. Just if I kept paying their rent and paying for their drugs and shit, they would shut up. I tried cutting the amounts down but they kept asking me for money…”

“And you owed them.”

Marci clicks her tongue, “That money was mine. Yeah, I’m an idiot and spent it all in Paris but how was I meant to know they were planning to use my trust for early retirement? It was my money. That’s what Grandma said. I didn’t tell them to quit their stupid jobs,” she kicks the van into gear again with the flash of a green light, “This is all Vlad’s fault, you know, if he hadn’t supplied them…”

“They would’ve found another supplier…”

“Probably. The onus is on Vlad though for getting them on brown sugar in the first place. I’ll never forgive him for that.”

“Have you seen him since we’ve been back?”

She scoffs, “he’d be dead if I saw him.”

The drive back seems like nothing at all. Familiar driveway leading to a familiar old home. He can see his Dad in the living room from the street. The TV bright. The tires churn slowly over the gravel, and Marci hisses when the van comes to a full stop in the driveway. She sits back in her
“I’m thinking of starting my undergrad next year,” she states.

Foggy snaps to look at her, “what?”

Marci gives him a side look and pats his thigh, “don’t have to sound so surprised,” then she laughs, “Remember when you hated me so much you actually wanted me to go to college?”

“I didn’t hate you... I was, you know,” Foggy says quietly, eyeing the garage.

“What was that?” Marci asks with a grin, “Anyway, I know what you mean. Is law really for me?” Foggy’s about to give his opinion, but Marci keeps talking, “I’ve been thinking about making a career change for a long time now. Can’t be in a band forever, it’s not sustainable. That’s what my Grandma said to me before she passed. You know I already got accepted at Columbia. I’ve been deferring. I can’t defer forever or I’ll lose my spot.”

Foggy frowns, “Defer. You have to.”

Marci slides out of the van, “Have to contractually, yada, yada. Or…” she slinks around the front of the van and pulls open Foggy’s door, a grin on her face, “do you mean you don’t want me to? Hey, you can’t deny you’ve come to like me!”

“You’re not bad,” Foggy quips.

“Ha!”

She holds the door open for him as he climbs out of the seat. He can see the light of the TV dim, his Dad’s lone shadow moving across the living room window. Marci wraps her arm around Foggy’s like she does Matt’s, pats his arm as she kicks the door shut with her foot.

“Don’t you think I really have made the wrong career choice? I could’ve been such a good street racer.”

Ed makes Foggy drive the whole way up to Roy’s in the country. Marci offers to drive but Ed won’t let her. Ed's form of punishment on Foggy only makes Marci restless. Matt sleeps in the back the whole way. No source of entertainment for Marci. And even though Foggy’s the driver, Ed decides on the music. Marci aggressively pops fat batteries in and out of her tape deck and plays it loud in competition to Ed’s choice of music until Foggy declares an embargo on playing music at all. But maybe the competing genres are better than the silence.

Jet streams pierce white lines through the sky. Mossy rocks over hills, centuries old acne. To remove is to scar. The thin roads scare Foggy the most. Potholes covered again and again, patchy, soft edged asphalt. He drives up a crest, slow, cannot see the road beyond the rise. And after the rise, the bumps in the downward slope hides more path again. The road flattens then, and he can look behind and see the route he has taken clearly. Looking back he can see how he could have done better.

Their orange van looks truly like rotten fruit next to the grandeur of Uncle Roy’s house. White
doors, floors, tall ceilings, wide windows. Christmas is the same as usual, just a different setting. New Year's comes and Marci finds them a party to crash in the village. Beats playing his family songs, except everyone in the town seems to know who they are. Expecting. An old house, like Roy’s, but dilapidated. The owners leave the bright lights off, stick to the lava lamps and Christmas lights. Distraction away from how dirty it is. Matt’s lucky in that way. Can’t see the grime and the dust and the cobwebs upon cobwebs.

A local rolls them a fat one in the bathroom. Says she’s heard of them, but doesn’t like their style. Matt likes her honesty. Some crap pop song comes on and Marci drags Foggy out. They dance and Foggy doesn’t see Matt for a long time. Out of sight, out of mind. Marci’s warm and soft and he runs his hands over her waist, over the bones of her hips and he doesn’t mind kissing her. He actually really likes it. And he loves how after they draw apart, her eyes are sparkly with wanting, her tongue caught between her teeth. She never looks away from him. All eyes on him.

There’s a makeshift bar, some barrels lined up and an old doorframe pushed on top. The thinnest woman he’s ever seen shakes ice around her head like maracas. It’s a wonder she doesn’t rock herself off her feet. In front of her sits her poison and her fillers. Locally baked bread, spreads, fruits and dips and knives glistening in the dim glow. She builds Foggy a drink. Says she’s cleared out of whiskey. That’s Matt’s poison. Whiskey, neat. It’s the first time Foggy’s thought about Matt in hours, feels good not to worry.

He doesn’t specify anything, gets a concoction. Back in with the crowd, Marci clings to his body. She looks a mess. Hair damp and sweaty and her lips slick and plump from kissing. Foggy sculls his drink and Matt pops into his mind again. His old friend usually loves the Nelson holiday. So where is he? Whiskey. Out of sight, out of mind. Back to Marci. Moody red and pink glow, trance, smoky, hazy, a blunt passes around.

Some dick shows up with tattoo and piercing guns shoved in his belt like a bumpkin. Typical. No party’s without one. Marci doesn’t even scream when the gun punches a hole in her nostril. Says it doesn’t hurt a bit. The bull ring goes through, bloody. It looks good. She smiles as blood trickles down to her lip. The bumpkin spins the tattoo gun around his forefinger, threatening, playful. Foggy’s drunk enough that he doesn’t care what he gets done. A skull on his bicep, he’ll later find out.

Marci migrates to the bar. Foggy’s arm throbs, burns. Marci shoves ice at her nose, clumsy in her state, misses, and drops most of the ice on the cork floor. She decides she’s hungry. The knives shake in her grip. She uses a sharp blade to butter up a slice of bread and then picks up an avocado. She whacks the knife through the skin, it slips through easy, bounces off the seed and cuts into her hand. She laughs first, in surprise, then drops the knife. Green on red, on white skin against the black of the room when the lights switch off. Then her piercing screams, her gaping tendons, split fingers.

Nerve damage. The hospital’s far. An ambulance whirs down the tree-lined street, flashes blue across the countryside. Dizzy. Foggy sits with Marci in the gutter while fat flies buzz around them. People circling around them and the mess inside, touching base here and there and then flying off to their own cozy homes. Marci holds a towel which reddens as she pales. Matt doesn’t know about it until the next day. Roy said the gardener found Matt passed out in some bushes out back. Probably spent the night there. Missed the drama. He shows up at the hospital and Foggy can see he’s sorry but he can also see Matt’s not there. His mouth speaks in the present but his dead eyes look into another level of reality, like Matt’s functioning in two places at once.
Take Them On, On Your Own

[2003]

xxvii. stop

Foggy’s only a little annoyed that Matt has taken to asking for a single room for himself. They can just about afford it. Especially when Marci doesn’t seem to mind sleeping on the floor. Says it’s good for her back. She tries to get Foggy to join her but he can’t do it. He likes that she hugs him but he wakes up with pains up his side and dirt in his mouth. He shares the double with his Dad. It’s far from ideal but a bed’s a bed. Beats sleeping on the ground, or worse, in their rental.

The only thing that bothers him about Matt asking for a single room is that the guy’s gone most of the time. What’s the point of it if he’s not going to be using it? He knows Matt’s not in very often because he used to check if Matt was in before he went out. Courtesy call, to let his friend know where he was going, what he was doing, how long he’d be gone for. The kind of stuff Foggy would like to know in return. Except any time Foggy’s ever decided he’d go out on his own in a foreign country where they don’t know the language, Matt’s never been in. So Foggy doesn’t bother anymore. His Dad and Marci know what he has planned. If he does happen to get lost, they’ll
know the first place to look. As for if Matt is gone longer than usual….

Matt’s absences make Foggy itchy for movement. Make him nervous. His time away is always varied, but he does always turn up, full of excuses. Shows his face at dinner, at practice, at their scheduled show or departure time. It all just kind of bugs Foggy. How can a blind guy have so much to do in any given city? Or, is there really a boxing club in every place they go?

Foggy tries not to think about it too much. He overanalyses everything else in his life, he’d rather live in the dark than know what Matt is really up to. Turn a blind eye to the blind guy. It’s how it’s gotta be, Foggy supposes. He decides to go for a drive in their rental. Ed stays at the hotel. Marci comes with him, for something to do, some new scenery to look at. Honestly Foggy’s pretty tired of the cities. Tired of concrete jungles and bright lights and people charging down streets, airheads. Marci advises him on the fastest route to the state forest, national park. Frosted tipped clouds hover like mountains over the sloped hills. Valleys dipping into darkness. The clouds stream across the horizon, spreading in hot flames.

He loves how the light changes the way the landscape looks at this time. Dreamy, faded, a tinge of blue in reflection of the light of day and then when the sunlight begins to divide, purple, pink, salmon. The tree trunks once bright – pale. Then contrast – light bent to dark. The explosion of the sun having absorbed the last of the light. Within minutes, the short burst of fire has cast ashy shadows over the landscape, burnt the ground to dust, to dusk.

It becomes too dark for Foggy to continue to drive without headlights. He snaps the high beams on. At the same time, lightning flickers over the horizon. Too dark to see the misty blur of rain.

“Sunsets are so beautiful,” Marci observes quietly, one bare foot propped on the dashboard, “It’s the only time of the day I feel truly blissful,” she laughs, flashing a cheesy grin at Foggy, then snatches a blanket out from behind the seats, “and it only lasts a few minutes.”

Venice stinks. New York reeks too but it’s a stench Foggy’s used to. One he can tolerate because he grew up in it. Venice stinks of garbage and decaying flesh and skinned fish and bird shit and human shit and the water’s so aqua, it smells like what Foggy imagines acid would smell like.

Venice stinks because he tries to walk from one end to the other and gets lost because he swears he sees the same shop with the same shop clerk seven fold. Even when he tries turning around and walking in a different direction, the same leather boots shop pops up, same bushy eyebrows over tiny specks of eyes. Eventually he needs to go to the bathroom too and the WC signs lead him in a more round-a-bout route passed more repetitive shops until an arrow points to a blank wall. He ends up pissing in the canal instead.

Somehow he meets up with Marci on the bridge. He can’t escape the stink. She’s buzzing still from their show last night. Ears ringing, her healing hands shaking. He can see the specks of blood spotting through her bandages. If she’s not more careful she won’t be able to hold anything at all for half a year. Ed offers to drum but Marci won’t have it while she’s still conscious.

Foggy wriggles in his leather jacket. He’s probably hunching. He straightens, and hunches again. Fat tourists with fat wallets in their pockets, bills spilling out of their hands, stalk over the bridge, noses high. Venice stinks because the guy looks nice enough. He’d dropped his ring. His wedding
Foggy’s only trying to help him out, to do the right thing. He picks up the ring and gets accused of stealing, of damaging the jewel and owing him thousands. People start to close in on him, accusing him, ridiculing him, and it takes Matt plucking him out of the crowd to make him realise it’s a scam. Later, Ed points out that a stall sells the same plastic ring for three euros, a stall that appears over Venice as often as the leather boots shop with the bushy eyebrowed man in tow.

They take a gondola ride and Foggy should’ve taped up his nose like Matt did. He almost throws up over the side of the gondola, put in his last two cents to the stink of the place. First the piss, then his insides. He doesn’t even feel well enough to laugh at how pink Marci gets. Feels bad for her hours later when she can’t move without her skin cracking. First a cut hand and now skin burnt to red leather. Marci laughs about it but Foggy’s unsure if she means to.

Venice stinks because it’s the first place Foggy’s been overseas where he’s fallen ill. Foreign medicine, comfort food seas away. And if he doesn’t feel awful enough, he gets Marci sick too. Matt calls the shots about it. Decides he’s going to cancel their shows for the next week and go on a short fiesta away from his sick friends, away from the germs.

Venice stinks because it’s the farthest he’s felt from Matt their whole time away from home. Sunburnt Marci holed up in her hotel room, Ed off at the casino, and Matt away probably getting lost in some unfamiliar country. It’s this break from music that makes him realise that without the music, Matt is getting farther and farther away from him and he fears that gap isn’t going to close any time soon.

Foggy curls up on the couch cocooned in blankets, two layers of clothes and thick woollen socks and yet he still feels cold. Still feels numb. He stares up at the small skylight cut into the ceiling. Clouds move across the sky, endless white, until occasionally blue peeps through and the glistening sun shines through. Then as quickly as the blue appears, it disappears, white washing over all colour. The sun sparkles behind the white, earnest.

“Here, son, green’s all they got but it’ll have to do,” Ed says, a mug of steaming tea in his hand.

It takes a while for Foggy to wriggle out of his tangle. He grasps the mug his Dad offers him with trembling hands and he spills a splash on his blankets as he takes it to his lips. Ed gives him a sympathetic look, but Foggy only ignores the spill. He lays his head back, slightly dizzy from all this movement. He watches the steam rise from his tea. The vapours spiral up towards the skylight, meld with the fog around the edges of the windowpane.

Ed leaves him on the couch and takes a seat on the armchair, flaps out a newspaper in a language he can’t read. It’s funny. Foggy’s memory hasn’t ever been that great, but it seems backwards to him that he can remember their time on tour better than he can remember being at home in Hell’s Kitchen. It seems like he has trouble with the in between parts. Touring is like stepping on a moving walkway. On it, he’s moving fast, but he can see everything. And off the moving walkway, things are wound down slow. So unnaturally slow that he feels sluggish and clumsy and he becomes forgetful.

He can barely remember how he spent his time in the Kitchen after they returned for the fundraiser. His Dad reckons it’s the fault of drugs that his memory’s like this. Which honestly scares him a little. He’s only 20. That’s young. Makes him think he should quit. He does remember
some things. There are patches of memory that plague him. He remembers making up with his Dad, sort of. The punishment is having his Dad escort them on tour as their manager and sound engineer. So far it’s working out pretty well since Virgin contractually won’t give them the time of day. And… he remembers recording and mixing in Ed’s studio. Partially. They only ever went in for a couple of hours a day, if that. Matt always had this sour look on his face when he went in, and the look of relief when Foggy let him leave. Those are the only memories Foggy’s actually trying to forget. The unpleasant uneasiness. It was like Matt wished he were anywhere but recording in Ed’s studio. Other than those few hours recording their next album, Foggy can’t really remember what else he did. Probably spent a lot of time with Marci, or his Dad, or smoking until he went numb enough not to think.

He can’t even remember signing the wildest contract of the century. Why Wesley even wanted them to sign such a thing is beyond Foggy. Abolish all debts? Sure, no problem. Cut Wesley out as their agent? Done deal, brother. Let Virgin profit off of their commercial enterprises for the remaining five years of their recording contract? No. No thank you. Matt’s still pretty pissed about that last part. Apparently – and Foggy says apparently because he can barely remember being inside the studio at the time of signing in the first place – they didn’t have enough minutes to read through all the fine print. Sometimes Foggy wishes he’d pursued law - at least then he’d have the know-how to fight this shit. It all just means Virgin still gets a good chunk of their profits, through shows, album sales, merchandise, royalties, you name it. At least they only have up to the end of ’04 until they can start shopping around for a new label. Might even go indie then if they feel like it.

Still, it’s nice for a record company to take care of promotions and bookings and such. Less stress for the band, more focus on the music. Marci’s actually entirely happy to wait it out until ’05 rolls around but he and Matt… Music is their craft. They can’t just put it on hold for a couple of years. Foggy would burst from trying to keep it all in. Sounds stupid, but the world’s gotta hear what else they have to offer. Foggy loves touring but he can’t go on playing the same shit when there’s more of it. Loads of it. Enough content for a full on follow up album. The way Foggy saw it, may as well put it out under Virgin while they’re stuck in this whole mess. So that’s where they are now. Second album out, second European tour, second chances. All Foggy wishes for now is that his antibiotics will kick in so he can get him and everyone else back on the stage. That’s when Foggy’s his happiest these days. When he’s playing music, his music, music that means something to him with people who are important to him. The immersion on stage. It lasts a bit longer than a sunset.

Foggy’s startled out of his reverie when he hears wailing. Hot water sloshes out of the mug and on his blanket again, and he meets his Dad’s gaze.

Ed holds the stare, and says flatly, “I’m no one’s Dad but yours. Maybe Matt’s on paper but definitely not your girl’s.”

“But I’m sick…” Foggy whines.

Ed only blinks, then turns a page in his newspaper, suddenly very fascinated in a particular story he cannot read.

“Fine!” Foggy sighs.

The wailing continues as Foggy unravels himself from his blankets. He stumbles down the hallway. His fingertips feel hot on the exterior, cold in the centre. Dizzy, clammy. He pushes open the door to the bedroom and tries to rouse Marci from her nightmare. She awakes with a start, clinging to Foggy’s arms with such force that he feels like his arms are jelly and she’s squishing
them to a water base. Her wails stop, replaced by horrified gasps as she transfers the images of her nightmare to reality.

“M-Matt?” she pants.

He doesn’t know why she keeps asking for him. Matt’s never here. And yet Foggy finds himself looking for Matt too.

Foggy speaks in as much of a soothing tone of voice as he can manage with a sore throat, “Marci, it’s me. Foggy.”

She keeps her hold on Foggy’s arms, but she slips from each other’s sweat. She falls back on the bed, her arms slowly relaxing, melding to her side. Foggy sits on the mattress, close to the form of her body in the blankets. He takes her hand and pats it gently, soothing her as she pulls herself out of her dream state. He runs his fingers over her forming scar. She has told him it hurts when she drums and he admires her bravery, her discipline and confidence to drum through it all. To put up with it and move on.

After a while, she moans, “I hate this. I never have nightmares,” she swallows hard, and looks up at Foggy with red eyes, “I’m never sick either.”

“Three weeks in and you’d think your body’s making up for all those missed opportunities,” Foggy says with a chuckle.

She smirks at him and he drops a kiss on her clammy forehead. He pauses in her hair, rubbing his nose in her platinum strands. He adds breathily, “have you been taking your medicine?”

He watches her forehead wrinkle, “no, I’m not taking anything. My body will fix itself.”

“You’ve had this way longer than I have...”

His lips move across her skin, then he parts from her. He sits up, his shoulders hunched still. She starts to weep.

“I just want this feeling to go away,” she whimpers.

“Me too,” Foggy rasps, her tears contagious.

He takes her hands in his, runs his fingers across her wounded palm.

“I want things to go back to normal.”

Foggy says nothing in reply. He pats her hand, watches until her tears cease and her eyes droop. And from next door, he hears a window slide open and shut.

**xxviii. ha ha high babe**

“I don’t feel good,” Marci groans in response to Ed taking another corner hard.

“I’ll roll down the window,” Foggy offers as he starts to crank down the lever.

“No I need the front seat,” Marci says, then chokes out, “p-pull over!”
Acid gurgles in her throat until the van comes to a stop. She throws open the back doors and topples out onto the road. One hand on the steel guard rail, she vomits over the edge.

She wipes the back of her hand over her soggy mouth, then barks at Foggy, “I told you I wanted the front.”

Foggy places a hand on her shoulders and rubs soothingly, quietly says, “You know why I didn’t—“ She pukes again.

Matt sinks in his seat, hand clamped over his nose, and yet he still smells her bile. Her sickness is something beyond the common cold and he’s praying every minute that he doesn’t get what she has.

She takes a breather on the side of the road. A truck swerves around them, teetering up the slope around the bend. Leaves billow from the movement, spreading like seeds against the van, swept down the road with another passing car. Once she’s in the front seat, the window goes all the way down. Foggy takes her old spot, stiff, like the way tendons tighten at death.

Ed starts the van. Hard corners again because Ed doesn’t know how to drive any other way. Marci drives the same but she seems to only agree with it when she’s behind the wheel. Now she consumes the fresh air as she tries to still her stomach, freeze the contents from the crisp winter air.

Wind chops through the open window like helicopter blades. Overbearing, too loud to hear the radio. It’s better than the disco hour, in Matt’s opinion. Still, the van is filled with uneasiness. The choppy wind, Marci’s ragged breathing, the determined drum of Ed’s fingers on the wheel, and the clamour of war within Foggy’s heart beside him. Fear and loathing.

After a while, Ed says to himself, “sure is a beaut, ain’t it?”

Desperate for a change to his torturous silence, Matt leans in between the front seats and asks Ed to repeat himself.

“Oh, I’m just thinkin’ ‘bout how nice it is up here,” Ed shouts.

“Could you describe it to me?” Matt asks.

Ed fidgets, “more Franklin’s department, eh son?”

Foggy bristles. Marci winds up her window to reduce the noise, but Foggy doesn’t say anything. Matt has to tweeze something out of him, anything.

“Tell me how it’s beautiful.”

Foggy sighs, edging closer to the frame of the van and comments, “it’s just pretty mountains, nothing exciting.”

“Come on son, there’s more to it than that,” Ed says.

“Yeah, come on Foggy,” Marci grins, “Tell him how it is.”

Foggy draws out a long sigh again. “We’re driving around the slope of a mountain which cuts down to a valley.”

“Here we go,” Marci claps her hands.
“There’s… a river which runs through it. The water’s not moving very fast, or if it is, you can’t really tell because the water’s so aqua. The water’s so sparkly and bright, it looks like slivers of gem stones strung in a line.”

As Foggy continues, Matt senses Foggy relaxing, peeling back from the frame, warming up. This all stops when Marci starts to crack up.

“Hey,” Foggy snips, “why don’t you do it then huh, Marci?”

She holds back laughter, “No, no, I don’t write the songs!”

“Dad?” Foggy pleads.

“Son, I never been a lyricist like you.”

Matt reaches for Foggy, finds his arm, his bicep, and grips it gently.

“Don’t – Don’t say anything Matt,” Foggy flinches away, “I’m done anyway.”

“Aw, come on, Foggy, I’m sorry,” Marci whines. “We like it when you describe shit.”

Foggy sighs, scratches his neck, then says, “Alright. Just quickly. The trees are white oaks, I think. The distant ones look like they’re dead against the rich green of the pines. From a distance, you can’t tell the white trunks are trunks at all. It looks like snow. But as we’re getting closer, the white slopes start to separate, like the snow is flaking, branching out, breaking apart like the glaciers up north.”

“I think the white branches look like cat whiskers,” Marci chuckles.

In all seriousness, Ed then asks, “Matthew, you ever seen a cat before?”

It’s comforting to Matt when he hears Foggy laugh freely.

“Yeah, I know what cats look like,” Matt grins.

“Hey, it’s an honest question!” Ed sounds defensive in response to the others’ laughter, “You can’t describe something with a thing he can’t imagine.”

After their laughter dies down, Marci says with a fading grin, “my turn to ask an honest question. Is it true you’ve never seen the sea?”

Matt feels the burning in Foggy’s throat, the known answer swollen there but he doesn’t voice it.

“Yeah,” Matt replies quietly.

“You’ve seen the Hudson River yeah? Looks just like that, only bigger,” Ed explains.

Matt has to laugh, “With less bridges and buildings and pollution, too, I imagine.”

“Oh no, there’s still that,” Marci says, “only bigger.”

Matt catches Foggy’s smile but it doesn’t last long. He must remember his current dislike for Matt.
Matt refuses to go farther south than Venice. Farther south means Rome, Vatican City, and Matt doesn’t feel like he deserves to set foot on pristine holy land. Not yet. Not until he’s proved himself worthy of God’s approval. In Venice, he only scratched the surface. The crime scene is so systematic, so ingrained, with trails leading to the capital, calling him to God’s heart. He wars within himself about going, or not going, guilt. He makes amends by promising he’ll pay a visit when he’s stronger, more sure of himself. If he goes, he’ll be asking for forgiveness for something which should not be forgiven. Half attempts, half-heartedness.

So they beeline north. Almighty’s change here. Pagan worship. He doesn’t quite understand it but he respects it, respects their choice to pray to a false collective. Still, there’s something about being up in the mountains of Sweden, the altitude, maybe. So far away from Hell’s Kitchen. The farthest North he’s ever been. It’s something about the way the wind currents taper through the cliffs, slipping down the man-made roads like a loud, dry river. The way the tall ice cliffs drop down into a cropped forest on the mountainside, the cries of people echoing against the rocks and clouding in a dense fog over the forest thickets.

“I don’t like being this high,” Matt mumbles as he tips his head back, his fingers pinching the bridge of his nose.

Blood drips backwards, he can taste it in the back of his throat. Whispers and screams instilled in the bark and the violently rustling leaves, woven into the atmosphere, the air he breathes. The voices are old and new, simultaneously verbatim and a remix of the mythologies, Thor beating his hammer in the thunderous clouds and his subjects below, their pain more real to him than anything.

“Well, maybe you shouldn’t have eaten so many mushrooms then,” Ed replies gruffly, his arms crossed.

Marci scoffs, “Matthew claims he hasn’t taken any drugs in six months.”

Matt swallows back a mouthful of blood, “All I meant was that I don’t like being this high above sea level.”

Ed sneers, “Sure you didn’t take anything.”

Matt exhales. This comment is coming from the guy who glorified the rock star lifestyle. Foggy’s silent on the matter. Foggy’s more quiet than usual, lately. Lurking against the wall while others speak his rage. Matt can hear it in him though, anger Foggy thinks he’s hiding. He can’t hide it from Matt, and in fact, Matt absorbs it. Soaks it up, not water but acid that he’ll use to fuel a fire when he can’t keep his cool in the back and forth between Ed. He sticks a hand out and feels for the chair which he knows is close by. His fingers make contact with the wooden frame and he collapses into it, slouching as he holds his head back again.

“I didn’t,” he insists after taking in a deep breath.

He hates the way Ed treats him like a kid. He hates the way Foggy and Marci are just standing there too, letting Ed rip into him. He misses their support but maybe he deserves the lack thereof.

“Care to explain to me where your head was during that show, kiddo?” Ed asks expectantly.

Matt squeezes the bridge of his nose, teeth grit.

“That was the worst show I’ve ever seen you kids play, and I’m putting it to you, buddy. Had your fucking head in the clouds the whole time, missing cues. Bet the music journo doesn’t even wanna
be on time because you were so off beat.”

“Hey lay off, Dad,” Foggy says, finally coming to his defence, “we did alright considering how windy it was.”

Matt frowns. There’s anger in Foggy but it is not reflected in the honesty of his words.

“I’m telling you, it’s the attitude messing with my body,” Matt drawls.

Matt can hear Ed’s heartbeat quicken, rage. He could get into it. He could very easily sit up straight, let the blood stream out of his nose and get into it with Ed Nelson. It’s been a tough few months. Returning to Hell’s Kitchen was, essentially, hell. He missed home. Always, and still now. Once he was in the throngs of his city he immersed himself in every problem. Tried to solve as much as he could, but the few big clues he found to do with the fundraiser only lead him to road blocks. One frustration leads to a worse frustration, headaches to migraines.

The biggest problem plagued him; where the leaders or even the underlings involved in the Better Tomorrow initiative even went. It’s like they never existed. They hid so well they melded back into society like a cult. Behind the scenes extras Matt wasn’t privy to. He went in the wrong circles. Found the right circles, but was barred from entrance. They could see it on him. That he didn’t fit at thousand dollar restaurants, at clubs or balls or any of that. And before he could delve into really infiltrating that scene, it was time for them to embark on their tour.

He almost gave up on music altogether. The thought of tearing himself away from Hell’s Kitchen was akin to tearing out his own heart. And yet the music is a part of his bloodstream. He serves justice and bleeds music, his food and water, bread and butter. Not one or the other, as much as he tries to break that bond. Besides, they had enough content for a follow up album. They had a fan base, too. And their careers will be harder to pick back up again if they remain in the shadows until their contract expires.

He’s trying to think positively about his situation. Find the light in it, the good in it. Hell’s Kitchen might always be far away but his journey is cyclical. He’ll always be able to return, pick up from where he left off. Doesn’t mean he’s happy about it. Time away means he’ll miss some things, means Stick will scorn him for his neglect. It took every part of his motivation and determination to get him to show up for practice, recording, and oh God, the departure flight... Every inch through the airspace away from Hell’s Kitchen made him want to vomit. He’d spent the whole flight with his head bowed over his lap, a paper bag between his thighs.

Ed disapproved of his absence at home, and of his mindlessness on stage. His attitude, the altitude. He bristles now, fuming. Foggy’s tentative. If Matt’s going to get into it with Ed, he’d rather not in front of Foggy, in the tent at this dumb festival with cliff walls so high they’ll crash down and demolish the valley beneath.

He swiftly corrects himself, “altitude, slip of the tongue. The altitude’s putting me off.”

Ed probably glares at him.

“You need to start thinking about how you’re a part of a team here, kiddo. It’s not Saint Matthew and his backup. It’s B.R.M.C. Bad shows, bad interviews. It all adds up and if you don’t play your cards right, no one’s going to want to sign you on after Virgin. I don’t want to see you ruining what we’ve all built here. Alright?”

Matt coughs as blood trickles down his throat.
“Alright?” Ed pressures.

“Dad, why don’t you go look for the interviewer?” Foggy suggests.

Again, Matt frowns in confusion. Words lost in translation. He’s expecting more vitriol than he’s getting and it only makes him feel more undeserving of Foggy’s affection. Ed huffs, but obliges in taking his leave. A chilly atmosphere cloaks the three of them as he exits. Matt hears Marci step over the grassy floor. She pulls out a chair beside Matt and fishes out her pill container, starts chewing on a tab. The blood stream subsides and Matt feels as if he can finally lift his head back up straight. He feels dizzy, momentarily, gravity meaningless.

After a while of listening to the festival music and crowd chatter carry on outside the tent, Marci taps the table with her long fingernails. She says conversationally, “I caught up with Naomi back in Hell.”

“Naomi?” Matt questions, clueless.

“She was telling me about this business she started up with Ashika. Doing very specific stuff. Can’t remember the exact word for it. Was it roofing? Or ceiling-ing,” she laughs, “that’s not right is it, ha! She says she gets these tiles and they’re ten bucks a tile, right? And she strings them up on these wires and makes those fibreglass ceilings that you see in Target and those places. Oh Matt, you probably wouldn’t know, they’re cheap as shit looking. For offices and such, too.”

“What is the point of this story?” Foggy sighs.

Marci waves a hand at him, “Shh, I’m passing the time. Anyway, Naoms was telling me Ashika got in a complete rage. Can you imagine that? Sweet little Ashi. She was picking up these tiles and smashing them to pieces and denting the plaster walls all over this bloody Simon or Simmon or fucking Subaru—whoever. He didn’t show up for work three days straight. Naoms was telling me she lost 800 bucks because of that fiasco. Suburban Subaru finally rocks up and says someone died in his family, but did he bother to contact anyone? No! I mean, Christ, could the guy not have given a quick call to Naoms or Ashi? They’ve got a business to run.”

She sits back in disgust, marvelling at her own story. Matt gives a wan smile in response, prompting Marci to pop open her pill case and force it shut again, repeatedly.

As if he had still been ruminating on Marci’s story, Foggy challenges her, “is the guy in the story actually you?”

“No! Jesus, why don’t you believe me just because I can’t remember the guy’s name?”

“I’m just saying,” Foggy begins flatly, “that sounds like something you would do.”

“Why don’t you shut up, Foggy? God, you’re so awful to me sometimes. Not as bad as some people…”

The bass from the stages beyond sounds dull and distorted behind the flesh and mesh barriers, people and canvases of tents. Amongst the noise from outside, disquiet builds between his friends. They must share looks, furrowed brows, pursed lips. Between them, annoyance builds into rage, a mutual understanding of shared hatred. He hears Marci stand down, inviting Foggy to stand up, to speak out.

Matt’s been waiting for this. Better with Ed gone. True deliverance.

He does not brace himself. He submits to what he deserves, hot light will shine on him and he
would witness Foggy’s ferocity—if it weren’t for the interviewer finally arriving.

Foggy backs down, slinks into a chair away from Matt. Marci spits on the muddy ground.

“I should’ve done it,” she whispers to Foggy.

She snaps her pill container shut again, a loud snap, the spit.

“Here you are,” the interviewer says as he dashes into their tent.

Loose pages of his notebook flip away in the wind. He quickly grabs them and folds them all in half without aligning them, then shoves them into his shoulder bag.

“Alright, I’m going to have to,” he pauses, gripping the face of a watch on his wrist, “skip most of it; Avenged Sevenfold are going to be done soon and I need to catch them.”

He pulls up a chair around the table and sets his notebook down. He’s turning to a blank page as he organises his bag around his waist, flattens his hair, and straightens his shirt.

He clears his throat, “So, Black Rebel Motorbike Club—“

“Motorcycle,” Marci corrects as she pops another pill.

“Yep, whatever,” the interviewer mutters, then looks up from his notebook to glance at the band members before him.

Marci leans over to Foggy and whispers, “this guy hasn’t apologised for anything.”

“Rude,” Foggy agrees, pointedly louder.

The interviewer ignores them, and instead looks over at Matt. One glance and he recoils, “Jesus, dude, you’re bleeding!”

Matt touches his nose, wipes away blood.

“It’s the altitude,” Marci explains sarcastically.

The interviewer keeps his focus on Matt, “You’re the blind one aren’t you?”

“Mmhmm.”

“I didn’t believe you were really blind. Many of your fans doubt it too. After that performance I am convinced that you fake it, don’t you? You have some kind of backing track that you mime to, right?”

“No,” Matt replies, folding his arms in disgust.

“Come on, a blind guy playing guitar as well as you do? With pedals? It’s impossible. I bet people ask you if you fake it all the time.”

“Nope, only you,” Matt replies.

The interviewer laughs as if the whole thing was a joke but no one else finds it funny.

“Let’s talk about the show. You had some sound problems…”

“Yes,” Matt says bluntly.
“He couldn’t hear the playback,” Foggy explains bluntly.

“Uh-huh… let’s move on,” the interviewer says, flipping through some pages with a dampened thumb, “okay, I’ll skip that, too… Are you enjoying Scandinavia?”

“It’s alright,” Marci comments.

“Good, good… Have you ever been to Sweden’s Rock Festival before?”

“No,” Matt says.

“First time. Yes, makes sense. Your music is very different, there are some songs that fit with the general style of the festival but the others you have are a little more country folk.”

“Country folk!” Marci scoffs.

“There is a bit of it in there, as I heard it. And also some… what is the English word for it, shoe grazing?”

“Shoegazing,” Foggy corrects.

“Yes, that. It is different. You must have noticed your audience did not enjoy it much. Do you think you will come back to the Sweden Rock Festival?”

“If we’re invited,” Marci drawls.

“Yes, that does affect things. Yes, yes. Well, what time is it? Not much time. Alright, are you going to see any other performances?”

“Probably not,” Matt says.

The interviewer sits back then, bony fingers on his watch, “I see why no one wanted to interview you. You do not say much. Look, I do not have time to flesh it out with you. I need to catch Avenged Sevenfold,” he starts to pack up his things.

“Is that it?” Matt questions.

“Do not worry. I will write something the magazine is going to like.”

The interviewer rushes out of the tent, and on his way out he brushes passed Ed.

“Woah, I was looking for that kid! Did he forget something?”

“No, it’s over,” Matt explains, annoyed.

What’s the point of even arranging an interview if he’s just going to make up the content anyway?

“What did you say to him?!?” Ed questions, aghast.

Matt snaps, “I answered his questions Ed, that’s what I said to him.”

“Well, why’d he leave so quick?”

“He had more important places to be,” Matt clenches his fists.

He heads out of the tent then, fingertips scraping passed Ed’s wall of fire, a hand reached out to stop him.
“Same as you, boy?”

Matt dodges the outstretched hand. Ed may as well be a sculpture engulfed in flames. A trail of gasoline spreading to Foggy and Marci, inviting the ignition.

“You better be chasing down that kid to start over,” Ed says pointedly.

“I’m done with interviewers who don’t give a shit about us or our music,” Matt spits, moving off again.

Ed’s hand is a flame licking the air but it does not burn him.

“Just let him go,” Foggy says coolly, the fire doused before it leaves his body.

Matt pushes his way around the rest of the backstage tents to the fencing. He follows the fence down to a corner away from the commotion behind him, then clings onto the wiring. He climbs over brusquely with the winter air kissing his lower back. His feet land on the pine needles outside the festival, the echoes of conversations and music and security rovers’ engines crackling in the woods.

“Ed shouldn’t have to do it for you, and I shouldn’t have to, either,” Matt can hear Marci saying.

Then, “he’s hurting you.”

“He’s hurting us,” Foggy insists.

Spikey branches stab his side and poke his flesh as Matt manoeuvres through the forest. There’s so much to listen to. So much to take into account. The pine needles beneath his feet, the roots woven through the frosted soil, the branches swaying stiffly in the wind, the noise of his friends travelling quietly, the speed of sound slower than the speed of light.

“If you keep shutting yourself up, it’ll continue on like this. Nothing will ever change.”

“It’s too hard to say it…”

Matt pushes on into the forest, the thickness of the tree trunks closing in around him, dampening the sounds from beyond. He feels blood trickling down his nostril, hot. Tastes like steel. Cries from the ancients seep out of the bark, out of the graveyard of bodies rotting beneath him. He lays himself down, or he trips, he can’t quite figure it out. Pointy leaves jab against his cheek, underneath his fingernails. He presses his cheek to the earth as the heavens hammer him down. His soul seeps through the soil, from Earth to Hell, compression depressed upon him by God.

“We just want you to be happy, Foggy.”

Despite having a huge sense of connection to his home city, the connection is lost when it comes to personal friendships. Everyone he’s friends with, he’s travelling overseas with right now. He wasn’t particularly close with Vlad, or with any of Marci’s ex band mates. And it’s not like Stick ever made himself readily contactable. He wasn’t even particularly fond of Mahoney, considering his past deeds, but the police officer is the one he’d ended up calling.
Mahoney couldn’t tell him much. Too far down on the food chain to get in on the juicy details. Plus, it’s not like Matt had any right to pry, being only a musician rather than a detective or a lawyer. Asking any heavier questions would only be suspicious until he’d made some ways with Mahoney, but building a friendship is kind of hard via distance. A good one anyway. And makes it even harder when he doesn’t have a solid base like Foggy and Marci do from having gone to school with the guy. Guess he never cared enough to establish something there, which is only bringing him strife in the present when he’s trying to keep tabs on what’s happening back home.

He doesn’t call that often, but half the time he does think to call at a reasonable hour, Mahoney’s out. Ends up having an awkward chat with Mahoney’s Ma. Tries to keep it short and sweet which isn’t hard with her. She’s an understanding woman. Very gracious. Can understand the similarities between shift working and touring, the inflexibility. And when he does get onto Mahoney he tries to be casual about getting updates. He hasn’t been able to decipher much. Just that there’s this notion layered into the middle to upper classes that something’s coming. Some big change, some big plan to clean up the streets and make Manhattan new.

He’d heard the term ‘green city’ thrown around once or twice by Mahoney. Matt had been confused about that term until Mahoney explained it to him. Didn’t literally mean the colour, but a philosophy. An ideology which meant being clean and eco-friendly. What that had to do with moving the lower classes out of their homes, Matt had yet to understand. Mahoney expressed a certain knowledge of it. Rental contracts deemed fraudulent, forceful removal of residents from their homes. It’s en masse but snail slow. Part of a bigger plan, baby steps. Where are the people meant to go? He can hear them, ghost whispers in the streets. He yearns for home, wishes he could be with them, help them, but what can he do from so far away?

“You didn’t have to come,” Foggy mutters as he sits on the bench beside Matt.

“Hm?”

“I said,” Foggy repeats flatly, “you didn’t have to come. You could have stayed in the van.”

Matt unclenches his hands and shoves them inside his jacket pockets. In the lining he can smell shreds of plastic wrap, traces of chemicals. He has his suspicions about Marci but he hasn’t outright asked her yet. Hasn’t really had any grounds to question her about it because she’s careful about covering her tracks. Doesn’t talk about taking smack in front of anyone else. Cleans up after herself. Only reason why Matt knows there’s something going on is because she can’t get the tiny fibres of plastic out of his pockets when she borrows his jacket. He can’t see them, but she can’t smell the fine traces of opium laced on the leather.

“You could’ve caught some Zs in the van,” Foggy’s saying.

“Huh?”

Foggy tentatively wraps his stiff fingers around Matt’s bicep and says, “Look, I could tell you weren’t too hot on Dad’s idea to take this little detour. I’ll take you back.”

“You want me gone that bad?”

Foggy stays quiet for a bit. Matt’s finding it hard to convince himself that Foggy’s coldness is a good thing.

“I’m just worried, you know. You don’t seem to be enjoying yourself.”

Matt straightens his back, stretches out his legs only to fold them back in again so as not to get in
Believe it or not Foggy, I like doing these things with you,” Matt says offhandedly.

He hears Foggy blush then, red hot flush. It’s good to know Matt can still catch him up with his words. Maybe he shouldn’t be, but it’s reassuring for him to know that Foggy’s hatred is more of an act than truth. In reality, Foggy’s always been a good friend to have. Easy to please. Easy to get on with. And in a way he understands that this easiness Foggy provides him doesn’t go both ways, that Matt doesn’t give as much as Foggy. It’s because he knows Foggy’s morals, what he thinks is right and wrong, and if Foggy knew how he was spending his free time… their friendship couldn’t work anymore. It would change everything. He won’t ever vocalise it, just as Foggy won’t ever vocalise his true feelings. They’re stuck in this dam, the floodways firmly shut because that’s how it’s always been.

“You must think I hate travelling but the thing is Foggy, I have never done anything like this before. My life was school and the orphanage and not much else. Before I picked up a guitar I hadn’t been farther than 116th Street. Music has enabled me to do new things, things I never dreamed of—

“What is this, some kind of origin story?” Foggy jokes.

“Could be,” Matt gives Foggy a small smile, “Point is, today’s new thing happens to be going to a theme park, and I like that. I like doing new things with you.”

These surges of affection are fleeting with Foggy’s doubt and fear but the moments when he can feel Foggy’s love swelling for him are the few times he feels valued. The times that really seize his muscle of a heart is when he’s Daredevil, and not just feeling the impact of his fist against flesh—that impact bursting through his veins running up his arms. It’s the gratitude from doing what he does. Those who give it don’t know who to give it to, but Matt hears it, every time, but maybe that shouldn’t come above his loved ones expressing their own gratitude to him. Maybe it’s easier for Matt to accept the momentary love of a stranger than from someone who naively thinks he knows his friend from the inside out.

“I’d like to go on a ride,” Matt says.

Foggy sounds hopeful, “you would?”

He smiles, “yeah, Foggy.”

“What do you want to go on?” Foggy asks, excitement overcoming his stony silence, “I’ve already been on the Swinging Ship twice now, but I could go for a third.”

“Sure, maybe Marci might feel like a fifth run, too,” Matt grins.

Foggy stands up from the bench and takes Matt over to the line.

“Fifth? More like fiftieth. She’s been on this ride for hours. Can’t really blame her, there doesn’t seem to be anything else moving as fast as this.”

“Isn’t there a rollercoaster? Ed said there was one when he read out the street sign.”

“There is… You can see the tracks,” Foggy points, then explains, “Over the water there, there’s a crop of trees with the coaster tracks curving through them. But… it looks like it’s out of order.”

“That’s disappointing,” Matt replies, “I would have liked to go on a rollercoaster.”
He notes Foggy’s heart fluttering, but before either of them can pick into their affection, a panicked scream comes from the Swinging Ship which is starting to slow down now.

“Let me off!” Matt hears Marci wailing.

As the Swinging Ship starts to slow, Matt listens to the reduction in velocity parallel with the diminishing rate of beating hearts, all except Marci’s, of course. Her heartbeat is a chaotic spike against the other riders. Finally the ride comes to a halt and she clambers off, latching onto the nearby railing. She vomits over the railing, straight on top of the bushes planted around the fencing.

“Maybe you should take a break,” Foggy calls over to her as they come over to the exit line.

Marci shakes her head vigorously despite her sick stomach, “No! I wanna go on all the rides.”

She vomits again, less this time, then stumbles down the steps toward her friends. The remaining riders file off the stage, making sure to steer clear of the sick tourist.

“Only if you feel up to it,” Matt says, instinctively reaching out to support her as she stumbles.

“I’m up to it bud, just let me get this taste out of my mouth.”

After purchasing something to eat, they wander over to a scenic float ride. The popular snack in the Netherlands seems to be hot fries dipped in peanut sauce and though it seems wild to Foggy and Marci, Matt enjoys the salty taste compared to the overpowering sweetness of cotton candy. The only good thing about the sugary treat being overpowering is that it masks the lingering scent of vomit around Marci’s mouth.

“Where’s your old man anyway?” Marci asks Foggy as she licks sugar crystals off the wooden stick before dropping it in a nearby trashcan.

“He’s in the bar, where’d you think he’d be?” Foggy says, disposing of the remainder of his cotton candy, too.

“He’s missing out on all the fun,” Matt says.

He doesn’t mean to sound sarcastic so he sends Foggy a reassuring smile. Foggy’s mood swings seem forced. Like he forgets and remembers he’s meant to be mad at Matt, for reasons unspoken, but for now, Foggy seems to be content enough.

His friend helps him into the float, and Marci sidles in next to him. This particular ride is indoors. It smells odd too, the air’s recycled, damp and humid. The scenes set up for viewing seem to be made of some kind of hard plastic, painted with a thick alloy paint solution. The scenery itself must be old, at least half a century. Other aspects of the ride are clearly modern. The advanced rail system beneath the boat shaped floats which pulls the boat through the course. Lights are warm and buzzing when they flash on and off, affected by motion. A tune plays when they enter a new ‘area’ and a new fragment of a story is sung in a recorded children’s chorus in Dutch. Neither of them knows the language but Foggy quietly describes to Matt what he sees, which is enough to grasp the story.

“Ed’s probably got the right idea,” Marci comments as the boat locks into the finishing track.

“I don’t know if getting hammered at likely the most expensive pub in the country is the right idea,” Foggy replies.
“It’s gotta be more fun than this. I don’t understand what’s happening.”

“You don’t have to know the language to understand the story Marci. You just have to watch what the characters are doing.”

“Well how’s Matt meant to enjoy it then huh?”

“He’s got me,” Foggy grins.

Matt waits for Marci to step off the boat before feigning trouble stepping off himself. He wishes he could say he has hope that one day he won’t have to fake it but in all honesty, he dreads it. His faux helplessness is practiced to perfection, displayed over and over again… he knows that if anyone found out how truly capable he actually is, all trust in him will be lost. So he happily pretends, happily plays off a calculated slip, happily allows his friends to worry about him despite his wishes for them not to.

Foggy keeps his hold tight around Matt’s arm as Matt is lead down to the exit. Letting Foggy in on his dark secrets might also mean Foggy would realize that his aid is not necessary. These close encounters, these tight grips and low whispers of visual inclusivity would be lost with the knowledge that Matt doesn’t need it. How much could he save face by then insisting on Foggy continuing years of this type of practice because Matt knows he doesn’t need it, but rather wants Foggy’s touch. And that’s a whole other story he’s happy to keep at bay if Foggy’s happy to stay silently mad at him, in all honesty.

“Should we go on the Teacups next?” Foggy suggests once they’re out in the open air again.

“No,” Marci huffs, “those tracks are tormenting me!”

“Tormenting you?” Foggy laughs.

“Yes! The only reason why I agreed to Ed taking us on this dumb detour was so we could go on a rollercoaster like the sign said!”

“When we go back home, we’ll go to Disneyland,” Foggy tells her.

“That’s months away.”

They decide to head back toward the bar. Night is closing in, the winter air becoming cooler as the sun fades. The mood of the other tourists in the park seems to change with the oncoming darkness. Adults huddle closer to each other in juxtaposition to the children becoming wilder, their muzzles snarling like wolves in the night. They’re halfway back to the bar now. It’s a pancake bar, located close to the start of the theme park. Matt can smell the maple syrup mixed in with alcohol on the air that shifts between people moving up and down the main path.

He stops in his tracks when he hears something being spoken about amongst the pack of people. He holds Foggy to his side, filtering through the conversations until he can pick it out distinctly.

“What is it, Matt?” Foggy asks.

“Do you have any weed?” Matt replies as a distraction.

“Yeah,” Foggy says hesitantly.

Marci bounces on her heels between the two of them, “Disneyland might be the best park ever, but it loses on the count of not being able to smoke pot out in the open.”
Foggy tugs Matt over to a bench and, once seated, pulls out his pack and starts to roll a blunt. Marci stands in front of them, still bouncing, and rubs her hands together.

“There’s nothing like Dutch weed, don’t you boys think? I’ve been getting some pretty high quality stuff.”

Matt tries to keep track of his point of interest. A pair, one young boy, and quite an old lady. They seem to be trying to catch the attention of individuals in the passing crowd. In English, they target people with particulars about them, calling out on individual’s clothes or their company. Once they have a tourist’s attention, they offer a discounted price to a circus. It’s the weighted lie in the price that first caught Matt’s attention, and then the lead on which keeps him hooked.

“It definitely feels illegal. I don’t want to smoke around kids,” Foggy says before licking the paper, “Will one do?”

“Roll me another,” Marci instructs, bumping her boot against Foggy’s.

“One is fine,” Matt says.

Foggy bites his lip, “…we should save it considering it’s good.”

Foggy folds away the worn plastic bag into the pocket of his coat, ignoring Marci’s grumbling. He then takes out a lighter from his opposite breast pocket and clicks it on. Every time Matt hears that ignition it reminds him of the click which wiped his friends memories back at the Virgin studios. Foggy performs the act without question, without hesitation, but with the ignition of the flame, an ice cold chill darts down Matt’s spine. He might have to confiscate Foggy’s lighter in favour of a box of matches. Wash his hands and mind of guilt.

Matt has a quick smoke first, then lets it waft between Foggy and Marci. They rise to their feet a few minutes later, Marci then hogging the diminishing end as they join the crowd on the main path again. It always goes like this. It’s like Goldilocks or something. Matt has a bit, Foggy has a little more, and then Marci has the most. He doesn’t mind so much. The drugs numb him. The more aware he is the better. The smoking culture in Europe does fascinate him though. Despite its legality, it seems to be a rare phenomenon to actually smoke in public. The concern is of course primarily about health, preceded by the health of passive smokers, particularly children. At that moment, some kids run passed them, weaving through the crowd, and Foggy bristles.

“Can’t you put that out now?” Foggy nudges Marci.

She scowls, “I’m not done.”

“Let me have the rest,” Matt requests.

Marci shrugs, “if you really want what’s left.”

Marci bumps the end over his knuckles and he takes it even though he doesn’t actually want to smoke. He only suggested it in the first place as a method of achieving a calculated result. Of moving his party to the desired position, as if it happened by chance rather than intention. He takes in a short breath of the drug then asks Foggy to lead him to a trash can.

The nearest one is conveniently adjacent to these beggars.

“Hey, you there, with the cane,” the woman shouts.

“-and the hairy human attached!” the little boy adds.
“Don’t listen to them Matt, they look like thieves,” Marci says, trying to herd Matt away from the pair.

Matt calls over her shoulder, “hello?”

“Well, would ya look at that? A blind fella,” the woman says, her voice still loud.

“Nan, no one who can’t see’s going to wanna see our show,” the little boy says.

“Nonsense, a customer’s a customer,” she shushes the boy, then calls for Matt’s attention again, “Blind guy, such a handsome man, come over! I’ll give a sneak peek of our tricks to impress your friends, get them interested,” the woman coos.

“They’re just a couple of freaks. Come on guys, Ed’s probably wondering where we are.”

Then, Matt cringes as he hears joints pop and dislocate, the woman’s limbs contorting in ways familiar to Matt but by her own free will, rather than by the hands of his vigilante counterpart.

“No way dude! No freaking way!” Foggy exclaims as he watches the woman twist her body in unthinkable ways.

“Want to see more of this? We’re offering exclusive tickets to Tiboldt’s Circus at a discounted price for you today!” the woman grins.

“Gross. If you guys want to stick around for this, be my guest. I’m going to get drunk off my tits and forget this place,” Marci says, starting to walk away from the group.

“Marci,” Matt warns a second before the anticipated following line.

The little boy fishes paper tickets out of his pockets and waves them in front of Matt and his friends, “You better stay to the last act. It’s a bit of a game, see. A special selection of the crowd will win a spot on the Pegasus.”

“The Pegasus?” Matt prompts, loud enough to catch Marci’s attention.

Marci spins on her heels and runs back up to them, “the rollercoaster? It’s running??”

“Yes, and the only way to grant access for yourselves is for you to attend our show,” the woman says slyly.

Matt’s not surprised when the others discover that the tickets to Tiboldt’s Circus are actually pricier than the entrance fee to the park itself. He notes the lie in the discounted price and the truth in the only method to be able to ride the rollercoaster. Consequently he convinces his friends he’d like to go, as a new experience. And that he’d love for them all to come too. They purchase a ticket for Ed, too. The show isn’t until later on in the evening, so they have a few overpriced beers in the bar before heading down to the show.

Snow is lightly falling in the cold night. On the crowded walk down to the Circus, Matt listens to a song played on a fairground organ. From a distance he can hear the pinned barrel roll, clicking gears and pins and pistons into place to automatically create a tune without a need for any human input. He finds the mechanism behind it fascinating. How decisive holes in paper are engineered to generate music, as the bumps in braille are designed to allow the sightless to read, the handless to play. Someday he’d like to have a hand at playing a real pipe organ. It would have to be something
biblical. The grandeur quality organs emit wouldn’t feel right on something modern.

“How do you think we win?” Marci asks as she skips through the snow.

Ed burps before replying, “It’s probably randomised.”

Marci ignores him, “I bet it’s a game. They’re going to play some game with the audience and whoever guesses right wins.”

“You’ve got this all figured out, don’t you?” Foggy smiles.

“Well they can’t give the tickets away to whoever, you know? Going on such an exciting ride is a privilege. Earn it to deserve it.”

“I’d be happy with a lucky dip,” Foggy says.

“Makes it fair,” Ed agrees.

“Exactly.”

“You just want good things to come your way but guess what Foggybear? The world doesn’t work like that. If you want something you have to take it,” Marci snatches the air for emphasis.

“It’s called being humble,” Ed points out, “and selfless, and righteous. All good qualities that mustn’t have come from me—or Rosalind.”

Foggy blushes, “I don’t know about that… If I somehow get the Pegasus tickets, there’s no way I’m giving them away. That makes me selfish doesn’t it?”

“You’re always selfless Foggy, you’re allowed a break sometimes,” Matt says.

The ticket master collects their Circus tickets as they enter the tent. The performer’s marketing of ‘exclusive’ tickets seems to mean nothing except a hiked up price because there seems to be no allocated seating or any type of benefits for that matter. They try and get as close as possible to the front ring, but the tent is filling up fast and all Foggy can manage to claim for his group is the third row. The organ music sounds hollow from inside the vinyl walls, the chatter from the crowd interrupts notes, making it into a sad kind of disjointed melody.

Available sitting space fills up rapidly. People talk both loudly and quietly, ruminating on their expectations of the show and on their assumptions about the rollercoaster tickets. Soon after the seats have all been filled, the entrance to the tent is rolled shut. Outside Matt can hear people complaining, the ticket master clearly states, ‘no refunds’.

There is something off about the atmosphere. Matt can’t quite pinpoint it. If it’s the hesitation around the audience regarding the truthfulness of the grand prize, or if it’s the anticipation building in the chests of the performers masked by curtains. As if something greater than a performance is about to happen. Matt can’t pass this unease off as nothing because that kind of radar doesn’t have an off switch for him. Even if he’s on vacation from being in a band or being a masked vigilante, he’s always going to be at the receiving end of good and bad vibes and everything in between. Just so happens that there’s something fishy about the circus, and it’s not the scaly scent of electric eels swarming in a fish tank backstage.

Matt feels the warmth of the lights dim, the crowd hushes and the curtain to the arena lifts. Upbeat music fills the tent as performers prance out, emaciated animals in tow. Big cats are dressed in jackets with tassels and bells and ribbons streaming behind their gait. Monkeys clap cymbals and
horses trot alongside performers as they circle the arena before the audience’s eyes. If only he could slink away at that moment to inspect their living conditions and interrogate Tiboldt himself about the specifics of the care of his animals. He’d have to find a way to do it after the show.

After the parade, a mime comes out and makes her performance with the help of a monkey. Foggy quietly explains the display to him, interrupted by his own laughter. The mime exits, and the contortionist they met earlier enters. A trapeze is lowered from the ceiling of the tent and she begins her performance alone. Soon she is joined by another two acrobats, and quickly after the fear stricken animals join in. Animal fear isn’t too different from human fear. It sounds almost the same. Different speeds mostly, the blood pumping a different way, but it almost smells worse in animals. Wet fur and snivelling nostrils and a quickening of breaths when the master’s whip comes into threatening sight.

Normally Matt can enjoy anything that is visually dependent through the crowd but he can’t stand this. He can’t outweigh the pain of the animals with the enjoyment of others. It’s making him sick. How can people look at how the animals are treated and think it’s amusing? He starts to stand up. Foggy catches his arm.

“I’m going to the bathroom,” Matt says faintly.

Foggy’s buzzed from the performance, beer light on his lips, weed light in his mind, “just wait til this part’s done, I’ll come with you.”

“I’ll be fine.”

Matt hears himself choke but for once in his life there’s something capturing Foggy’s attention more than his presence. He weaves his way past Marci and Ed, then clings to the rails of the stairs when he gets to them. He wanders down the steps and sneaks under the staircase, the audience applauding the act away behind him. He listens to the animals being steered back behind the curtains, the next performer waits patiently to the side. The circus can’t be more than halfway through. Surely he would have enough time to go investigate.

He sticks close to the back of the tent, shaded by the back rows of the stairs. He can hear clapping, collective breathing, anticipation, relief, amazement. Their joy resides in power over him as he creeps through the metallic jungle underneath their seats. Steel poles heaving with weight, creaking with movement, like the structure could collapse on him, crush him, blood seeping through like a garlic press.

He comes to the last set of bleachers folded out to maximum capacity. A breath of air licks out of a gap in the curtain. The faint yet strong scent of hay and animal shit and trash and cigarette buds. He takes his sunglasses off, folds them into his jacket pocket. He clambers out of the steel web and grips the edge of the canvas tent pegged down to the ground, hot with sweat and dirtied with amusement. He’s about to lift it and slip underneath when a silence overcomes the crowd that’s too uncanny to ignore.

An audience viewing a spectacle is something Matt is quite used to. People enjoy visuals and sounds to certain degrees. There’s often a strong collective with shared experiences, and a few anomalies who skew the average. It’s rare and probably nearly impossible for every single person to react the same way, and that’s what’s captured Matt’s attention. Every single person who’s seated up in the bleachers all suddenly sound the same way. As if they’ve been melded into one being, one hive mind across an amphitheatre of people. All breathing and beating in the same relaxed yet despondent manner.

A booming voice comes from the centre of the arena. His British accent is striking against the
previous performer’s accents, which had roots in Dutch, German, and a handful in Italian.

He speaks loudly through his belly, no need for a microphone, “thank you, everyone, for attending Tiboldt’s Circus. What a delight to have a full house!”

Everyone up top hangs on his every word. Maybe he’s a spectacle, but there’s no reason why every single audience member should be so enamoured by him in such an identical way.

“You can all see me, no? You can all see my…” the speaker takes a few steps backwards, then gestures to his head, “…gorgeous hat!”

Beyond the curtain, assistants start rubbing their hands together in excitement. Matt slinks back underneath the stairs and stays very still to listen. No hypnotism act can be so honest and powerful to capture so many people’s attention. There must be something bigger at work here.

“Now, as promised, we are giving away the only tickets to the Pegasus, the soaring rollercoaster feature of this park. Let me hear your excitement…”

The speaker grins as the crowd applauds and hollers in unison. He raises a hand, and says evenly, “cease. Good. You are all behaving very well. We will now commence the game. Yes, yes, come out my wonderful assistants. Do you all see my two friends? I address all of you on the end of the rows, yes, take the bags my assistants hand to you. Good. Now freely place inside your valuables…”

Matt’s ears are ringing now. There’s something about the speaker’s voice, so loud and dominating. It fills the tent, forces out the sound of anything else, making it hard for Matt to hear anything but the hypnotic voice coiling into him.

“… your jewellery, your watches, yes, yes, when you have put everything in, pass it on to the gentleman or gentle-lady beside you. Passports, driver’s licenses, money. Cash or coin or card. Anything of value.”

Without question. Without critical thought. They follow his direction, much to Matt’s surprise. Every single person.

Including his friends.

He could stop them but it would only draw attention to himself. He decides to wait it out, see what the hypnotist does with their belongings. Maybe this whole ruse is in fact part of a trick, or maybe it is what it sounds like. Theft. Then again, maybe Matt is jumping to conclusions. It’s a stretch enough that this English speaking circus is travelling through Europe successfully, it’s a whole other story to assume the performers have sinister intentions.

The assistants collect the bags full of the audience’s belongings and drag them along the ground backstage. Matt clammers over the railings underneath the stairs and presses one palm against the canvas tent. Under its wafting body, hung taut above the pointed ceiling and loose about the ground, Matt listens through the tightly woven fabric. Hollow sounds travel through the fibres, the voices of the assistants sound frustrated. Then, the collective breaks. The common breathing, listening, looking of the audience, all crumbles to a natural, true state. The hypnotist’s voice is still loud, but the clockwork whirring around his head seems to be covered under a portion of cloth.

The hypnotist calls out for volunteers for a show of his skill. It seems normal. People once a cohesive unit still seem somewhat at ease, pleasantly and contentedly participating in the rest of the hypnotist’s act. A side effect of subdued submission.
An irritated grumble ripples through the canvas, pulling Matt’s attention backstage.

“There’s so many!” a woman whines, exasperated, “It’s going to take ages to go through all this stuff.”

“Mr Tiboldt is waiting, Crystal!” the other woman warns.

“What if she’s not here? What if she didn’t have any ID on her?” Crystal cries.

“You need it for park entry, remember? Just hurry up and keep looking. You know how much Mr Tiboldt hates it when he has to wait.”

“What if she’s one of those people waiting to get in? Blossom, I told you not to shut the sail, she could’ve been out there. Or maybe she’s left already?!”

“Snap out of it,” Blossom barks, “Look, I’m as anxious as you to get this over and done with. We’re working with what we know which isn’t much is it? We know she’s a daughter so she’s a girl and we know she’s a blonde. What we don’t know is her name because it’s different to the diplomat’s official name for dumb security purposes. All we have to do to find her is isolate all the blondes and go from there, okay? Not that hard.”

Moments later, the man of the hour leaves the crowd engaged in a show of his spell on a volunteer as he steps back stage to speak to his assistants.

He hisses, “What’s taking you so long? Haven’t you identified her yet?”

“It’s just these Europeans,” Crystal whines, “sir, there are so many blondes!”

“Excuses!” he snaps, “Do I need to get Zandow in here?”

“No, no! We’re still looking!” Crystal yelps, starting to frantically sift through the separated pile.

Then Blossom bravely suggests, “I have an idea sir… We could give tickets away to every pretty blonde and then no one will be singled out.”

“That’s outrageous,” Tiboldt scorns, “I need to get back to my show. Shove that pile in the bag and follow me.”

The women obey, but only Blossom follows Tiboldt back into the arena. Before Matt can be seen, he slinks back under the seating. He can already predict what Tiboldt will do. The hypnotist may have shot down his assistant’s idea vocally but Matt could sense the lie. Tiboldt is going to award the coaster tickets to every blonde, which means Marci is in the running. It also means his friend’s possessions are still behind that curtain, and rather than returning the possessions to their rightful owners, it sounds like the remaining assistant is taking the sack away.

He needs to go after her but he can’t just go in plain sight. Previously, he’s made do with shredding his black clothes up which isn’t exactly cost effective. Plus, to remove his jacket or his undershirt is to expose him to further cold weather outside. Quickly he scans the audience members above him, looking for something that could help him. A scarf—too long, an overcoat—too heavy. He locates a beanie the third row from the back. Swiftly he threads his hand between the gaps in the staircase seating and plucks the beanie out from beside an audience member’s feet. He pulls it down over his eyes and nose. He’ll return it afterwards.

With a temporary disguise in place, Matt slips under the heavy canvas, the cold night air slapping his frame hard. Ahead of him is the exit to backstage, the curtain firmly pulled, and beyond that is
a large tent shading various tables and chairs where the performers wind down after their show. Crystal is dragging the weighted sack around the back of a trailer toward an open tented seating area. If he’s fast, he can quickly knock her out and retrieve the sack before she can make a fuss.

Matt puts the activity within the main tent aside as he attempts to climb on top of the closest trailer. He uses a fan lodged on the side of the trailer as a leg up and pulls himself onto the tin roof. Above the ground, he can smell the stink of the animals shifting around in their cages. Paws and claws scratching at brittle hay and muscles bumping against too tight enclosures. He’ll definitely be turning in the ringmaster for more than just petty theft. The plan is to take out the assistant and drop the sack, along with paperwork evidence of the Circus’ inventory, on the park security’s doorstep. If that doesn’t do the trick, he’ll have to find the local police, or a journalist. If only he were back home in Hell’s Kitchen where he already has some of these partnerships, or could easily find someone willing to expose criminal activity. He’ll just have to do his best, and quickly. After the effects of Tiboldt’s hypnotism wears off, his friends are going to wonder where he is.

From the roof of the first trailer, he dashes from rooftop to rooftop until he’s cutting into the path of the assistant. He drops down behind her, purposefully drawing her attention with a thud against the hard dirt in his landing.

She clutches the sack tight to her chest and squeals, “Is that you Zandow? You scared me!”

“Give me the sack,” Matt growls.

“An American?” She questions, “who are you—tourist?”

“I don’t want to hurt you,” Matt says as he steps closer, “just hand over the sack.”

Crystal steps backwards. Despite her heart in her throat, she sternly refuses.

Matt matches her steps and says calmly, “all you need to do is drop the sack right now, Crystal, and…”

He stops as he hears her heart racing, the bubble rise in her throat before she screams. He lunges forward then, latching his hand over her mouth and her breath is hot against his skin. He pulls her to the wall of the caravan, the sack falls from her clutches and the contents spill across the dusty ground. At that moment, people within the main tent start to roar with applause, clapping as they stand and stamping on the metal stairs. Animals encircled in their enclosures around the main tent rustle in alarm within their cages. Altogether, hearts hammer around him, causing his hand to slip from the woman’s lips.

“I’m not afraid,” she says with her heart beating out of control, “Tiboldt will come out any second now.”

A lie adjacent a counter truth. The sound of clapping is momentarily amplified as the curtain is drawn, then shut after two people exit the tent. Blossom drags her feet behind Tiboldt, who wanders out after his performance with a satisfied spring in his gait. Matt wrestles the wriggling woman in his arms, trying to take her further into the cold shadow cast by a nearby trailer, but he can tell when he is seen by Tiboldt.

“You there! What do you think you’re doing with my goodies--thief?” Tiboldt bellow at him.

“You’re the thief, Tiboldt,” Matt calls out.

Blossom mocks Matt's words as she leans against a closeby trailer.
Tiboldt cackles in his response, “A masked American? Who do you think you are?”

Matt dodges the question, “you can’t think you can take people’s belongings without there being consequences.”

Tiboldt laughs wholeheartedly, “consequences? Oh, this is going to be fun,” he wipes away tears.

Something clockwork ticks on. The woman goes lax in Matt’s clutch and he lowers her to the ground. He pulls the sack from her and positions it behind him, all the while the rotating gears and the ticking hand gets stronger, louder. As the coverage of sound expands, it begins to influence people further away, prompting Blossom to fall into a similar state as her fellow assistant.

“Stand down!” Tiboldt says to Matt.

Matt ignores him and starts to charge towards the hypnotist.

Alarmed, Tiboldt shouts orders in a voice loud enough to reach those in the sitting area, “Zandow! Get off your arse and deal with this tourist!”

Amongst the other numb circus folk who sit frozen at their tables, one man stands up and starts pelting towards Matt. He listens to the way the man moves, his feet falling heavy in the dirt, the air moving passed in a wide spectrum. He must be the circus’ strong man. Slow, but mighty. He has enough time to reach Tiboldt before Zandow meets him. Tiboldt tries to flee at that moment, but Matt launches on him, pulling the hypnotist to the ground.

Tiboldt’s hat falls off and the clockwork ticking becomes unbalanced, wonky. Matt cocks his head, listening to Zandow behind him slowing down in confusion, the other circus folk have a similar reaction, like they’re sobering up. That confirms Matt’s suspicions—that the man’s ability to take control of people’s actions is not due to any natural ability, but rather the help of technology. However, during Matt’s fascination with mechanics, he has overlooked Tiboldt unsheathing a knife from his belt. Matt reacts in time to kick himself away, but in doing so, Tiboldt slashes across Matt’s calf. Matt hisses in pain. Tiboldt snatches for his hat and secures it on his head as Matt clutches his calf, his fingers pressing in on the gouge.

The clockwork evens out again. Orders are sent to Zandow to charge again, before being clocked in the chin by Matt. This knocks the man back, but Tiboldt’s hat remains secure. He waves his blade around in an unskilled manner, unpredictable to Matt. At this point Zandow reaches him. Matt can hear a large fist pummel through the air and Matt tries to dodge but the weight of the punch grazes his shoulder blade as he turns.

Tiboldt scampers now, rubbing his smarting face. He retreats to his lax assistant by the opening to the main tent. Over his shoulder, he calls across the field, “Blackwing!”

There’s a minor rustle in a nearby trailer, and while Matt dodges more heavy throttles from the strong man, he hears Tiboldt’s fear and frustration rise.

“Blackwing! God damn it, Blackwing! Get out here!”

A trailer door opens. A lean man perches on the doorstep with half a cigarette between his fingers.

Exasperated, Tiboldt takes hold of Blossom’s numb shoulders and uses her like a shield, “don’t just stand there boy! Do something!”

Somehow this man is unaffected by Tiboldt’s mechanisms. Perhaps he is blind also. But instead of helping his presumed employer, he remains stationary, observing. He isn’t a threat at this moment
so Matt leaves him to his devices, and focuses on attempting to defeat the strong man. Zandow throws a heavy punch, hits Matt like his body is as dense as the ocean, muscles as heavy as the currents pushing deep into the depths. His punches force the air out of Matt’s lungs, bruise him to the bone.

Tiboldt seems to relax now, convinced the sight of Matt’s frequent dodging and occasional receiving is evidence enough that the round is in the strong man’s hands. Luckily for Matt, Zandow isn’t very creative. He’s predictable enough. Zandow uses too much of his upper body weight. Throws all of his strength into his fists and leaves his legs to his standing support. Everyone’s got a weak spot and Zandow’s is letting Matt hook an arm around the back of his knees. Matt trips him up, lets Zandow fall to the dust and he drives his elbow into the small of the guy’s back.

Battlin’ Jack Murdock never wanted him to be a fighter.

Zandow’s thick, not easily beat. He pushes up quick, Tiboldt’s gleeful cackle follows. The strong man is aware of his weakness but he goes for his strength again. Bad idea. Matt’s calf smarts but he sweeps low, a dodge and a kick and Zandow’s crashing to the ground again. Dust billows like the spray of sea foam, a glacier breaking off into the sea. He can’t punch as hard but he can punch faster. Around the back of his head, against the curve of the neck, the lip to the brain, a sensitive spot, too hard and too much and he’ll hurt him too bad. Blood flecks from Zandow’s mouth, droplets on his teeth, on the dry dirt. His breathing becomes resigned, his arms quiet. Matt stands, attention, facing Tiboldt triumphant over the opponent’s pawn.

“For God’s sake Joseph, he’s coming for me next!” Tiboldt cries.

The man in the doorway of the trailer seems to sigh. He retreats inside for a moment, then returns, casually leaning in the doorframe once again. In his hands he holds a metal box of some kind. Small gears clicking inside, springs and nuts and bolts, clacking and spinning and upon seeing the box, Tiboldt’s confidence rises.

He turns to Blossom with instructions, “you’re coming with me since Crystal’s out of action. You’re the lucky girl who’s going to initiate the time bomb.”

Matt freezes, “bomb?”

Tiboldt seems alarmed that Matt can hear him from a distance. Quickly, he pulls up his collar and flees with his assistant. Before Matt can stop him, the man Tiboldt had called Blackwing activates a mechanism in the box. One click of a button, one flick of a switch, one hit of flint against steel, and Matt’s clutching his ears. An amplification. His joints all jarred up, rickety, rendered useless. It sounds like the hypnotism Tiboldt uses through his hat, only on another frequency.

What frequency are you on?

It’s drilling into his mind. He tries to move but his brain isn’t sending the signals. All he can do is collapse on the dirt by the splotches of Zandow’s blood. He hears Blackwing dial it down, a moment of relief, of recollection. A bomb. A timed bomb. Beside him, Zandow peels himself off the ground, stiff like a robot.

Whispers, or not. Far, but close.

“Kick this fool out then help the others pack up. We need to be on the move by the time Blossom sets off the bomb.”

A familiar voice. From long ago. Matt can’t remember the face of his own Father, but he can
remember voices. Catalogues in history, moved across space and land and seas. This man, he’s American, what’s he doing here? What’s Matt doing here?

Zandow scoops him up and Matt can do nothing about it. Blackwing’s targeted paralysis renders him like death has come upon his soul. Zandow dumps him outside the circus, out by the wilderness banking the park. The singing of Blackwing’s technology still rings in his ears but less powerful now with distance. He claws at his ears, trying to block it out, trying to stay awake, trying not to bleed or to cry or to die. The bomb. The whir subsides but whirs on, low, and now the tick of a bomb that Matt can’t actually hear joins in. The time is ticking within him. Whoever this bizarre group of circus folk want to kill is going to die along with Foggy and Marci and everyone else on that rollercoaster. It’s a leap but it makes sense, why it was shut down the whole day, why the circus was the only method of gaining access. They were gatekeeping and they were herding for an ulterior motive Matt could not have suspected. But in a way, it’s his fault. He overheard the two beggars making the offer. He’d only wanted to make his friends happy. Make Foggy happy.

We just want you to be happy, Foggy.

I just want you to be happy, too.

He just needs to gather some strength. If Zandow hasn’t beaten him, it sure feels like it. Like Blackwing’s device has thrust him into that dense ocean, like he has to rise to the top without knowing which way is up. Breath running short, darkness, buoyancy is nil and he just has to find that warmth away from the cold. Find the softness away from the hardness. He doesn’t fall asleep, he doesn’t even close his eyes. He forces himself to stay conscious through the receding dial tone, until all of a sudden, it’s off, leaving only his imagined timer to count down to an indefinite, but inevitable end.

His father never wanted him to be a fighter. Wanted him to use his brains. Anton Newcombe wanted him to use his brains for music, use that creative side of his mind for instruments and that man, that man was a musical genius now history to the world. Now undead and unknown. Leaving Stick, who wanted him to fight in his war. Well, Matt makes his own wars. That’s right. He makes them and he’ll finish them. No TBC. He’ll finish them and protect his friends from a bomb. A bomb. It’s ticking and he has to get up, fight the fight that he created.

One breath at a time, one step at a time. People are like rivers washing through the park. There’s the circus folk packing up, running like wolves. Then there’s the crowds moving in collective excitement towards the rollercoaster. Presumably, only those with tickets are allowed on. Matt’s on his feet, his mind sloshing. There are hot spots on his radar but they’re jostled by the waves, he can’t see, he can’t see. He can hear though. He can hear people racing to get in line, people fighting each other to get hold of other people’s tickets. Hissing and chasing and Matt’s trying to catch the side of the current, use their movement to pull him on.

Where are his people? Where’s Foggy? And Marci? and Ed, too? Are they on the coaster yet? Have the steel bars lowered around their chests, locked them in. Blood and sweat and pain sheathes him as he moves around flesh and fence. Crowds mobilise in pockets around the coaster. Where is the bomb? Is it in the coaster car? Is it on the tracks? Is it in the line? What type of bomb is it? He doesn’t know enough. Only that it must be activated.

Priorities. Save the civilians, then ruin the bad guys.

Matt takes a breather on the outskirts of the crowd, and thinks. All rides have a manned ticket box. In the box there must be a telephone to contact the park offices. The Pegasus’ box is currently too crowded. Attempting to access the box would be impossible to achieve without being seen. In order to notify security, his best bet is to go to the nearest ride and access their emergency
telephone. It shouldn’t be hard since it’s quite late now. Most rides should be starting to close down. He heads to the nearest attraction, a haunted house. He fights against the wave of people to get to the box. He guesses just seeing the ride go is something of a spectacle if it’s only going to go around once. Every person he moves ahead of is another tick of the hand. He could have no time, or more time, or not enough time. His fingers shake. He still can’t hear Foggy.

He gets to the box finally, breaking through to a clearing in the entrance to the attraction. It’s not quite closed yet. An employee stamps in entry for a couple. Matt waits. The sea draining down the park paths to the Pegasus. The couple disappears within the haunted house and Matt leaps across the counter. He knocks the employee out easily as he’s sliding across the counter, one kick to his head causes a collapse. He can hear the phone. He fumbles for it, hasty. With the set in his palm, he quickly runs his fingers over the buttons. Has to hold his breath, repeat, because he’s not actually taking any information in if he’s anxious like this. The raised bumps on the buttons are in Dutch braille. He’s not looking for letters, for five letters and a double. Focus. He’s looking for numbers. Slight indents on used buttons. It doesn’t call security, but it calls the front desk.

A woman answers flirtatiously, the language a mix of German and not.

“Ma’am, you need to put out an emergency call.”

“Excuse me, who is this?” she demands.

“There’s a bomb planted on the Pegasus. People’s lives are in danger.”

“What?”

“Please,” Matt clutches the phone, his voice breaking, “this is not a hoax. The Pegasus has been rigged with a bomb and it’s going to go off.”

He hangs up. Best to leave the uncertainty about specifics to himself.

He waits again, time slipping, for a reaction. The alarms don’t go off fast enough, but when they do, he pelts back toward the Pegasus. Every step forward is painful. His calf weeps, his heart beeps, beeping, the bomb. A bomb threat, real or not, the park must take action. He gets closer and some people are doing the right thing – evacuating. Only some. The others are too excited to be on or viewing the Pegasus. Only a few people get off, and in their rising, Matt locates Foggy and Marci racing for the new spots in the car. Hands joint. Their lips touch. Marci tugging him into the seats.

Matt wants to scream. Why aren’t they listening to the alarms? Do they have a death wish?! He wants to scream, so he does. He takes off his borrowed beanie and he bellows Foggy’s name.

Ed notices him first, “Matt?!”

“FOGGY!” Matt shouts so loud that it’s all he can hear for two seconds, two syllables.

Matt’s body goes tense when he hears the ticking now. The real ticking. The bane of his existence. Incoming data. He hurts so much. He screams for Foggy again because the bars are going to lower and the cars are going to start up and somewhere along the line it’s going to explode and everyone will die and he can’t secure one single person responsible for all this.

“Matt!”

He hears Foggy notice. He shuts his eyes, shuts off everything except Foggy’s lifeline on his radar. Foggy pushing and kicking his way off the cart. Foggy’s shouting at Ed –
“There he is! There he is!”

And Ed’s shouting at Matt –

“Where have you been, boy?!”

“He looks hurt!” Foggy sounds pained, frightened.

And Marci’s sighing but she’s getting off the cart too, and they’re coming towards him and he’s crying. He’s crying because he can’t do anything. He can’t do anything except save his friends, how selfish is that? He smells it now, the C-4 laid into the dip of a rail as the cars set off without his friends. He’s stepping backwards, herding his friends away from the coaster. The alarms ring constant, the tick goes consistent. Chaos in waiting.

“Stop running away!” Foggy’s telling him.

He’s running away, making them chase him, pulling them away.

“It’s us, Matt! Don’t be afraid!” they tell him, but he’s afraid because what if they’re not far enough? What if he could have done something? What if he could have exposed himself, he should have exposed himself, sacrificed himself for saving others because now, now the explosion is going off. Exactly on schedule. And the cart’s being engulfed in chemical fire and he. Can. Hear. Them. He falls to his knees. He can hear them exploding, dying. Burnt and torn apart and shredded as easily as Matt tears cloth for his dumb disguises. Foggy’s got his hands on his shoulders. He’s got his forehead pressed against Matt’s forehead. All Matt can see is Foggy’s shaky breath and the flames of fury and fear and brashness and false bravery billowing in the darkness. Wood and steel splintering, sparking, screams tear through the atmosphere, tear through his heart.

Too close, too far.
Chapter Summary

Everyone's suffering after the disaster at the theme park, and everyone's coping in different ways. Some well, some badly, which causes tension to build between the three band members. Eventually everything's going to explode, again, and Foggy's trying his hardest to keep everyone happy.

Chapter Notes

sorry for the delay in the update! It's almost been three months since the last update - eek! I've been so so busy. But i'm trying to get back on track with my writing so hopefully by this time next month, the next chapter will be out. Please let me know what you think of the story :)

(beta read by the amazing wtchcool. Once again, I am so thrilled and grateful you take the time to edit my work. Thank you, thank you!)

Part vi

[2004]

[[Still no answer. I know you’re in there. And with this comes a sad state, a twisted state, sedated with sterilized tongue. We’re not welcome alone, or needed, and when was better?]]

He writhes under her grip but every countermove seems to tighten her stranglehold, like a Chinese finger trap, except to relax is to succumb. To breathe is to think thoughtfully about her words. To let go is to acknowledge that she’s right on a number of things. He let those people die. He didn’t do enough. He only saved his friends. Just. He holds his breath. The air around him becomes thin, distant, noises sound eerie like they’re falling short against thick glass.

xxix. generation

“There’s a boxing club up north,” Matt says, his hands curled over the frame of the open window. Foggy watches Matt’s skin whiten around the knuckles, tape frayed around his blistered fingers.

“Want me to come with you?” Foggy thinks he asks.
“I’ll call when I get there,” Matt continues, “but after that... I need to clear my head.”

“Don’t get lost,” Marci calls over Foggy’s lap from the driver’s seat.

Then Matt’s hands are gone from the van window.

“Wind that up will you? It’s cold,” Marci says.

He cranks the window up. Rain smears the glass.

“Let’s go bowling.”

Neon lights blur in the storm. Rain makes him nervous. Reminds him of years ago when Matt ran out in the middle of a thunderstorm. Marci had told him that Matt had turned up at her place drenched. Probably had hypothermia. Back then, everyone around him was telling him to wait. To let his friends come to him on their own. Best lesson he never should have learned.

Lights flicker, and soon the busy visuals blank out to darkness. The shape of a bowling pin in the distance disappears too, and the city looks empty, like nothing’s in front of them until suddenly something’s beside them, the van’s lights beaming only a few feet ahead.

“I can’t see shit,” Marci mutters.

“Pull over ‘til the rain subsides,” Foggy suggests.

She smirks, but obliges. In the stillness, the rain batters the van in liquid daggers. Wind knocks the frame around on the wheels.

Marci slouches in the chair, huffing, “I don’t know where I am.”

A car darts passed them, splashing water over their windows. Marci folds her arms over the steering wheel and presses her forehead against her wrists, taps the leather rhythmically.

After a while, Foggy comments, “see, that’s a good beat. Why couldn’t you have done that tonight?”

Marci scowls, “I told you, my hand was acting up.”

“You need to see a doctor,” Foggy says, gazing out into blackness.

“There’s nothing wrong with it. It’s all psychosomatic.”

“Still need to see a doctor.”

“I can’t afford it.”

“Maybe you could if you stopped spending all your money on blue.”

“Shut up Foggy. I was this close to letting you make out with me but now I don’t want to touch your filthy mouth.”

A shallowness divulges in his chest, a mirror of the black abyss in front of him. Water droplets create the illusion of depth against the glass, as if there’s something physical and real beyond the window pane. Tears create the illusion of feeling, of a capability to respond.

“Stop it,” she says firmly, “You’re ugly when you cry.”
She leans between the front seats, tossing garbage and dirty clothes around in the back until she finds her kit. She drops it in her lap as she gets comfy in her seat again.

“You should really try this,” she says as she pulls everything out one by one, “You like mushrooms, so I think you’ll really like this. It’s like mushies but better.”

Foggy doesn’t say anything, doesn’t even look at her. Since the accident, Marci doesn’t seem to care about hiding her bad habits. He hears her click the lighter, a burning bubble, needle flick.

“Here,” she offers the needle to him.

“No,” Foggy scowls.

“It’ll make you feel better,” she says, “it worked for Matt.”

Foggy’s voice sounds hollow, “Matt?”

“He told me he didn’t want to feel what he’s feeling anymore.”

Ed’s knee caps look swollen like the bump in Gregg’s lower lip where the old man kept his chewing tobacco. The skin’s all pink and raised at an unnatural angle, and despite how much it must hurt, he finds it kind of funny that the very look of the thing reminds him of the owner of his favourite record shop oceans away.

Ed makes a wrong guess at the quiz show and jabs the remote at the TV in frustration. The quiet hum of the heart monitor replaces the crackle of the TV. Ed stares out the window now, and Foggy can see a twitch in his Dad’s cheek, his jaw tight, like the words are all jumbling up in his mouth banging at his closed teeth.

Foggy supposes he finds the look of Ed’s knees so strange because he hasn’t thought about home in a long time. He hasn’t thought about Gregg and the music shop where this all began, or about useless Brett Mahoney or about anyone else from school. Most people he kept in contact with in Hell’s Kitchen he’s admittedly forgotten existed. He just has thought about them. He’d thought about his family here and there, sure. Kind of hard not to think about them every time Christmas rolled around. His grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins, all getting mad about them missing the big family get togethers. Knowing his family, they’re probably keeping a big record of how much he and his Dad owe the family. Stuff like overdue presents and alcohol and emotional damage repayments. It’ll be some kind of fortune to see them again without any kind of bitterness. Maybe that’s why he doesn’t like to think about them. Purposefully shutting away the bad thoughts. Same goes for his Mom really. Enough about that. There are much more important things to be remembered, and so many people so far away from him and his own problems who needn’t be thought of. So much that can easily be forgotten, and so much that Foggy won’t be able to forget.

“It’s not so bad, son,” Ed says finally.

His Dad’s only trying to convince him of something that Foggy won’t believe. Makes it harder to believe when Ed’s staring out the window instead of looking his son in the eye. Which leaves one option for Foggy to make eye contact with; Ed’s legs hoisted up on slings. He remembers too much of that day. It’s as if the one thing he actually doesn’t want to remember, his mind makes sure the
memory is scarred into his brain. Sure, there are some parts of the day he doesn’t remember too well, but the immediate before and after of the accident he can recall crystal clear.

Foggy remembers his Dad calling out Matt’s name. He remembers seeing the blind idiot himself, and he remembers, in that moment, he forgave Matt for disappearing. For, in the first place, leaving, and for not being in the bathroom when Foggy had gone to check. For not having the common courtesy to fill anyone in on where he’d decided on actually going because Matt could get lost or hurt or he could’ve been too close to the ride when it blew up and nobody would know because Matt’s body could not be a body at all…

“It could be worse,” Ed adds.

The knot in Ed’s cheek twitches.

He can’t think about it. He doesn’t want to think about it but he can’t shake the near death experience. He’d given up and forgiven in such a short period of time. The despair of a devout and the kindness of God. When he’d laid eyes on Matt he’d leapt out of the coaster seats and dashed over to see him. He’d looked so lost – Foggy knew it – Matt had looked so lost that he didn’t even recognise the voices of friends.

Of friends.

It’s us, don’t be afraid.

It gives him chills, looking back – and noticing or otherwise implanting things in that terrible memory. Realizing that the safety bars lowered and he hadn’t checked if Marci was with him or still on that ride. He hadn’t even checked. He could have lost her too but he couldn’t have known what was going to happen. A freak accident, they say. Local coverage said it was the fault of low maintenance. That the ride shouldn’t have been running in the first place. No one can reportedly remember who authorised its operation. Blame carried from worker to worker until some unlucky manager got stuck with wearing the responsibility.

Foggy doesn’t care so much about the whodunit but about the aftermath. He cares about the damage done to the people, to those tourists and locals alike who are so torn up that the police can’t identify who they are. Foggy was lucky they weren’t as close as they could have been. Lucky that Matt pulled them back. They still got hurt, one way or another. Matt got some wild idea in his head that he could help people out of the explosion. Foggy had tried to hold him back but Matt’s boxing evidently paid off. Took a secondary explosion to knock Matt back on his heels. That, and a scrap of shrapnel nicking the back of Ed’s thighs.

He’d tried to catch Ed, and found Matt there with him.

Marci was frozen, stammering things about her hand seizing up. The one she cut. But oh man, Foggy doesn’t think he’s ever heard his Dad cry like that.

“You make a good buck kid,” Ed starts, voice gruff and strained after days in hospital, “but I ain’t got the funds for surgery here. My insurance ain’t kind enough to cover it.”

He catches Foggy’s eyes then, knowing the generosity that would follow and warning his son against it. It sure does the trick, shuts Foggy right up because his Dad’s holding eye contact so sternly that he’s got to hear the guy out.

“I can sit here for months and wait for the thing to heal on its own, which wouldn’t be so bad in these fancy hospitals and these nice nurses dashing around,” he grins inwardly, “or I can book a
ticket back home and get this mess sorted there. Would be easier on my back and my buck if it worked out like that.”

“I’ll come with you,” Foggy says firmly.

“Think, boy. You’ve gotta finish off your tour,” There’s that twitch in Ed’s cheek again, then he adds, “Don’t be letting down your fans for me.”

“Dad,” Foggy says, gripping the bed frame tight.

“This ain’t like the time I hurt my back in ’98, alright? The docs say it ain’t that bad. It’s just about getting work done now or getting work done later. I’m not that old yet son but I don’t want problems later on in life because of not getting work done when I got the opportunity.”

“I won’t let you go without me.”

Foggy gives his Dad’s shoulder a squeeze. Ed returns the affection with a clasped hand, his fingertips rough on the top of Foggy’s hand.

“Look,” Ed sighs, “it’s really alright, son. I already booked my flight. Besides, Ben’s driving up to Hell’s Kitchen to meet me at the hospital as we speak.”

“Ben Ulrich?”

“That’s the guy. Now, now, I don’t want you to worry about me or nothing because there ain’t nothing to worry about. What you do gotta worry about is your fans. They’ve come a ways to see some music and you ain’t gonna let ‘em down. Especially not after this tragedy. You hear me? The people need a good time and you’re here to provide it.”

Foggy pauses before giving a half-hearted chuckle, “that’s some pep talk, Dad.”

“You’ve only heard the half of it,” Ed replies with a tense grin.

Foggy watches his Dad grimace as he tries to reposition himself in the bed, the straps holding up his legs creak with the movement.

Still wincing, his Dad says, “Now I suppose you’ll be dropping me off at the airport then.”

“Of course,” Foggy nods.

“Yeah, be mindful since I’m letting you have this one – so long as you don’t tear up, son.”

“Deal.”

The photographer wants a handful of timeless shots devoid of any hints of weather. That kind of stuff’s printable in magazines across the globe. It’s the sunniest day January’s had to offer so far. The magazine crew takes them to the train depot by the port. It’s warmer closer to the sea. Any snowfall has been cleared toward dirt mounds, ice mouldy and black. And the sun’s so bright that the steel tracks look like they’re just about ready to warp. Peel back like the tough skin of citrus.
Foggy’s messing around by the base of the old water stop. Kicking rocks and watching the dust kick up in the lazy afternoon breeze. A few strays bang against the iron tank making this hollowed out noise that gives him shivers. The magazine crew finish off with Matt and some grunt comes over to fetch Foggy. For these kinds of prints they need to make sure the hair’s perfect, the face is free of blemishes, and that the clothes are just right. They give him a trench coat which isn’t half bad. It’s black, at least. Marci’s a handful for them. Keeps running shaky fingers through her hair. Her white shirt’s a contradiction to the image, but some intern makes a correlation.

Marci can’t stop laughing, “d’ya hear that Matt? My shirt matches your buttons!”

The crew take a few shots of them standing around the tracks. The afternoon’s waning. Marci’s restless and Matt’s humble but there’s a tinge of annoyance in his voice Foggy doesn’t miss. It’s certainly subtle. Matt has this tendency to be friendly in front of others, but come later on, he’ll be like a used up battery if forced to stay with the group. It’s been like that a lot more since the accident. Faux civility maintained for a handful of hours before freedom permits the release of his natural personality. He guesses he’s not going to see much of Matt once the shoot’s wrapped up.

When the photographer is content, the crew set up for the next location. Foggy walks behind Matt and the photographer who’s intent on having an earnest conversation with Matt about the technical aspects of photography. The importance of setting up and manipulating light and the advanced technology of digital cameras over analogue and how much his lenses cost.

“It’s sort of like music in a way,” Matt says thoughtfully, “there’s only so much you can do with one instrument on its own, but with modifications you can do so much more.”

“That’s very true,” the photographer replies, “Would you say you’re more of a collector or a modder?”

“A bit of both, I think.”

“No, you’re a collector,” Marci inputs, “He insists on touring with six guitars on tour.”

“Six?” the photographer inhales.

“Yeah,” Matt cracks a small smile.

“I mean, I probably don’t need half the lenses I carry with me but they’re small. Why six guitars?”

“They’re in different tunings. A couple are the same Gibson models, just completely tuned in different ways, like your lenses. I use them for achieving different results. Ed – our manager – thinks I’m lazy using six guitars but it really does save time while we play, and lets us do a variety of songs live too. I like it.”

“It must be such a pain to travel with them all.”

“It can be,” Matt admits, then adds, “Foggy’s a modder. He’s got the one Epiphone Rivoli that he’s had for forever and pretty much only uses that. Sometimes I let him borrow my Gibsons but he works wonders making the bass sound like something else.”

“I like it when you compliment me, Matt, you should do it more often,” Foggy says.

Matt smiles before turning to face the staircase wrapped around the train station office. The photographer takes Matt up the stairs, continuing their conversation about the exact usefulness of a light meter, leaving Foggy to watch Matt climb the stairs. He doesn’t perve too obviously, or tries not to. There’s less pressure to appear completely disinterested in Matt romantically with his Dad
gone. Doesn’t mean there aren’t other eyes watching him.

Marci rushes up the stairs beside them, dashing for the billboard frame. She slips between it, going to climb the ladder but one glance at the distance to the ground keeps her feet rooted to the roof. Foggy always finds photoshoots awkward enough. He’s not fond of the preparation, least of all following the directions of the photographer. Doing poses and pouting his face a certain way. He tries his best, really. Matt’s good at making the atmosphere a little friendly, but as the afternoon wanes on, Foggy can see it on both his friends’ faces that they’re tired of the scenario.

The last shot has Foggy standing up on the frame of the billboard, with Marci and Matt to his right. The sun’s eclipsing the perimeter of the rooftop, the crew are packing away their equipment, zippers closing up and cigarettes coming out. Foggy gets this overwhelming feeling of finality, or of something else indescribable. Like things are coming to an end, the apocalypse, but it’s just on the tip of his tongue, just inches away from his fingertips, the end is nigh but not near enough. A sort of perpetual waiting for things to wrap up as if he’s going to miss something, as if he’s got something life threateningly important to attend to as soon as this is all over. Except he doesn’t. And all this feeling does is remind him of the day of the accident and how he’d felt like the night was endless and time was meaningless and that it didn’t matter at all that Matt had obviously been gone too long. In those moments, looking back, he hadn’t cared. He should never care but he has to, doesn’t he? He has to or he may as well abandon Matt and every person he loves. Live as a recluse because people hurt him too much and apparently Foggy can’t stop himself from caring too much.

And there’s that feeling again. Like something’s ending or coming to an end. An uneasiness, queasy, but somehow he looks down at Matt with his hands held behind his back, and Foggy feels alright. This is why he can’t cut people out of his life – for these moments that make him feel in love. Or is it just his mind conflating love with lust?

xxx. devil’s waiting

After sitting for hours on the town’s only bus station like a weary ghost tired of the chase, he makes a resigned decision that he can no longer wait; that something must be done. Whether that be attempting to walk back to Berlin or to simply trail back to that tiny chapel – and pray until God rips his soul out of him for being too loud and persistent. He leaves the rotted out bench behind him, leaves the frame scarred with signatures of love and gossip and lies, like the journey he’s been on to track down the circus. Somehow they’d gone quiet like the scandals in Hell’s Kitchen. Organised crime at its best and worst.

He steers himself away from the freeway and down to the main street of the little country town. He wonders if the chaplain won’t have him. Tired of accommodating one man’s mess in the empty pews. He grits his teeth with every step. His feet feel like they’ve been crushed to sand in his boots. Pins and needles have exacerbated from a gentle tingle to angels heaving their weight on sharp pins. The feeling slowly creeps up his shins, the angels pointing out his sins.

The paled sun fades behind clouds, sending a chill over his spine. His clothes crack around him, crisp from dried blood and spit, and to prevent more salt crusting over him, he decides he’ll go to the pub. Let the blood of Jesus wash away his sins. Or else, let the whiskey into his own bloodstream until he thinks he can see again.
As he crunches his way toward those heavy doors, he listens to the quiet town. Pockets of noise swell only inside the pub, then disperse across the farms surrounding the crop of houses and other small businesses. He's only been here a day and a half and yet it feels like he could truly live here. Cities have too much going on, so many distractions up for offer. Here, where the plains stretch out flat across the country and the rays of the sun sweep unhindered, the sounds that haunt him become amplified. The absence of noise forces him to listen. Allows for his bad memories to howl, to swarm into the gaps and fill him up, and Matt may not be fond of it but he sure as hell deserves to be bathed in that pain.

Amidst the screeches railing his spine, he hears another familiar screech tearing up the asphalt. He’s not even halfway to the pub. Couldn’t even get his body together to move far enough fast enough. He stops, his body aching, his wounds openly weeping. It’s easy to look exhausted but not easy to hide how much he hurts all over, that divide between tired and sore is a feat he has yet to achieve. The van’s moving fast, the engine rumbling out of its shell and at this rate Matt wonders if Marci won’t drive straight passed him, except that he can tell the exact moment she spots him. The van’s frame tilts forward, he can feel the momentum of the thing as if he’s got his hands on the hot belly of the engine.

She stops by him, rubber burning, and she cranks down the passenger window to yell at him, “Why’d you move?!”

Matt breathes, hoping the inhalation will act like a suction cup over his body to keep it all in place, “didn’t think you were coming.”

“Better late than never,” she snaps as she pushes open the door for him.

He resolutely climbs into the passenger seat, muscles screaming at him, fresh blood spotting through scabs. He pulls the door shut and then flops. He wishes he could just fade. Abandon this battered body and face Lucifer eye to eye.

Instead of moving off, Marci turns the ignition off. She doesn’t say anything at first, just pulls out her kit.

“Do you have to do that now?” Matt questions.

“I didn’t even want to come out here to get you,” Marci spits, “but I guess someone had to. Foggy’s too mad at you and he can’t drive when he’s hyped up like that.”

“Hyped up?”

“Furious. He’s smoked a bunch to calm himself down and boy, he can’t drive like I can,” she clicks her tongue, “Why the fuck were you out here anyway? Took me forever to find it on the maps.”

Marci huffs and fidgets with her kit. She listens intently for a response as she flips open the flap, then snaps the button shut again.

“You’re not going to say anything?” Marci growls, “What’s in this town anyway, huh? What’s so good about this speck that you have me driving out for hours to save you?”

Matt smirks, “has a good church.”

“A church. Figures. You know, there are plenty of churches in Berlin. Pretty nice cathedrals too.”

“This one’s quiet.”
Marci scoffs, her fingers tap the plastic of her pouch and Matt can hear her shaking her head. After a few minutes of raged fuelled silence, she snaps her pouch open and starts preparing her equipment.

“You shouldn’t do that now,” Matt presses.

Marci raises an eyebrow, “Don’t worry, after this I won’t be as mad at you anymore.”

She spoons out a portion of the powder and ponders loudly, “I wonder how many people died on that ride.”

There’s a twitch in her cheek. She doesn’t like talking about it herself, but she seems to be purposefully bringing it up because she knows it irritates him. In response, he remains silent, pointedly clicking his seatbelt into place.

“Children died,” she states as she cleans her tools.

Matt doesn’t know how the others are coping. Well, Marci’s halfway coping. And Foggy, he seems to have moved on. As for Matt, he can’t get their screams out of his head. Gargled and gnarled. Screams cut short as heat rips through their bodies instantaneously, the power of Mt. Vesuvius. He tries to sleep, but his dark nightmares are filled with the same thing over and over like a broken record. He wants to scream, scream over the top of the screams that fill his ears, except he won’t. He’ll let them deafen him.

“Ed reckoned they died instantly,” she says as she lights the flame beneath her heaped spoon and burns the opiate.

Matt tilts his head to the side, “can we not, Marci?”

“I always wonder when people say a quick death is painless, I mean, is that really true? They must have felt something–“

“Not helping,” Matt interrupts her, but she ignores him and pulls the drug into a syringe.

–getting ripped to pieces. There’s no one alive to contest it being the most painful experience ever.”

Matt flinches as he feels Marci breaching her skin, plunging the syringe into her veins. Her head lolls on her neck as the drug hits her bloodstream. He shivers then, the angel lifting out of Marci and breathing down his neck. There’s a misconception that angels are beautiful and benevolent, but in truth their faces are hideous and conniving. Tests against those who cannot fully submit to the will of God.

“Your debut single, Whatever Happened, reached number seven in the UK Indie Charts, that’s quite substantial for a fresh American band. Your following album saw your single, Spread Your Love, reach number 27 in the UK charts. That broke you into mainstream listeners. I want to talk about your style. Both these singles are very upbeat and true to the rock and roll sound. On average, you have been putting out albums every two years, which means next year in oh-five we’ll be expecting your third release. For your next record, assuming there is one,” the radio host
grins, “are you aiming for more of these rock and roll singles or are you moving towards a different direction?”

“A different direction…” Matt starts thoughtfully, “the fact that those songs in particular are hits is interesting because we don’t… we don’t set out to make singles. It’s true we were planning to make a rock and roll album when we were kids starting this whole thing, but in reality we make whatever music comes to us.”

“We do hope to write hits,” Foggy adds with a smile, “but as Matt said, we don’t try and force it. We…” he glances at Matt before continuing, “have been working on a few songs here and there, not enough for an album yet.”

“Your first two records contained songs you had written before B.R.M.C. became fully realized. Now you’ll be starting from scratch. Is that true?”

“It’s partially true,” Matt hums into the microphone, “We do have a handful of songs that never made it to either record, but we’ll have to wait and see if they’ll make it on to the next one. I think… in answer to your previous question, I think there will be a new direction because of just that. We don’t have a collection of songs all ready to go. We’re sort of taking inspiration from our never ending tour. I think that when we do build our next album it will be a lot about finding out what fits and what sounds good as a whole. We may end up having some potential songs that just don’t work with the others and then of course they won’t be heard until it’s their time.”

“I’ll tell you what, I’ve heard Foggy – Franklin – rap in the shower and I’m taking that as a hint that we’re going to be putting out a hip hop album as the next one,” Marci pitches in.

Foggy laughs, then says, “We’re definitely evolving as people and I think it’s safe to say you can expect something new on our next album.”

“From rock and roll to hip hop. That should definitely be interesting,” the radio host laughs, “Now, I want to know how you guys are feeling about being on the preliminary line up for Coachella.”

“What?” Marci exclaims, “That’s massive.”

“Yeah… is that, is that confirmed?” Foggy asks.

The host pauses, Matt hears him flip through his notes briefly, “Yeah, is this the first time you’ve heard?”

“We weren’t told,” Matt says.

“Hm, well you know, it is a big deal. You’re up there with Radiohead, The Pixies, The Rapture, The Verve, Dizzee Rascal – there’s your rap influence right there. You’re both playing Sunday according to the draft, maybe you should do a collaboration,” he laughs, then says, “sorry, my producer is telling me to wrap it up. There’s just one more thing I wanted to talk to you guys about, then we’ll move on to the next program.”

“Go ahead,” Foggy says.

“It took a bit of digging to find this…” he explains, “I’m sure at least some of our WRS listeners would have heard the news about the freak accident at the Efteling in the Netherlands…”

At the mention of the ‘accident’, Matt notices a change in the atmosphere in the room. Foggy seems weary whereas Marci withdraws. A freak accident… There were so many wounded, so many… torn. Flesh and hearts and wallets broken in two in trying to pay for damages. Matt barely
got away unscathed. Minor burns and scratches speckled his skin, searing over old wounds and scars in a physical retaliation. Thanks to Matt, Foggy was mostly untouched by the explosion, and no thanks to Matt’s preoccupation with the remaining living souls melting in the flames, Ed ended up getting hurt pretty bad. He could have stopped that if he was paying attention. An excess metal panelling propelled through the air, whacked Ed across the back of his knees. Matt can remember the sounds still, the sound of hot metal slashing through Ed’s skin, the sound of steel snapping like the crack of a whip, the sound of wood crackling in the flames as the ride crumbled under feeble support.

“…What you may not know is that these guys we have on the show today have actually been highly active in their charity and relief work helping people and their families who were involved in the accident…”

It’s not an accident, Matt wants to announce over the radio. It was targeted. It was planned assassination. It was genocide. It was preventable and he… he just didn’t think… didn’t think that something like that would happen. It was his day off, wasn’t it? Since Ed had to be moved to a different hospital, they couldn’t stay around the area. The media still labels it an accident even though Matt had tried to tip the police off in the right direction. He’d remembered all the names Tiboldt had read out. All of them. He’d taken pains to go to a library and get them typed up so he could get the police on the right track but all they’d used that information for was identifying bodies. No further suspicions that maybe, just maybe, the coaster had been rigged with explosives. Still, there was so much destruction surrounding the ruins of the coaster, spilling out into the immediate neighbourhood. Foggy had wanted to do as much as he could to help too, except that they had to move on with their tour. That’s why they’d decided that the best they could help was monetarily.

“…I want to ask about your motivations behind this particular charity work?”

Marci sits straight in her chair, her nails digging into her thighs, her toes curled in her shoes. After a moment, Foggy says quietly, “we uh, we felt for them…”

“Why wouldn’t we do anything?” Marci snaps, kicking out of her chair, “It’s a real tragedy, a real fucking tragedy.”

The assistant darts to press the profanity buzzer as Marci speaks.

“Well I was wondering if you were actually there…” the radio host prompts.

“Um,” Foggy scratches his head, “yeah, we were.”

Then, Marci gets up and leaves without a word.

“Marci,” Matt warns, trying to catch on to her, “we’re in the middle of an interview.”

“Shut up, Matt,” Marci hisses on her way out of the studio.

The door opens and slams shut, the soundproof windowpanes shudder at the impact. The assistant quickly transfers the audio to a prepared track and cuts off their microphones.

“Sorry about that,” Foggy says, the first of many apologies as they leave the room.

The host stands up with them and says, “I am also sorry, I only wanted to ask because it’s unusual for Americans to take an interest in European affairs.”
“We’re only human,” Matt replies as he goes after her.

On his way out of the studio, he hears the radio host talk to Foggy.

“I do apologise, it’s only fascinating to me considering the deep gentrification that is happening in your home city. I would think your activism would be more involved there rather than overseas.”

So he leaves Foggy to wrap up the last of the interview. He finds Marci leaning on the sidewalk railings outside of the radio block, aggressively smoking a cigarette.

When she sees him, she rolls her eyes, “I wish you hadn’t apologised for me. I am sorry I left like that, but don’t apologise for me like I’m some kind of basket case.”

She takes a heavy drag, hisses out the smoke.

“It’s like I’m not allowed to be emotional or–“

“That’s not true,” Matt interjects.

“No! I don’t know, you’re allowed to have breaks, when will I be allowed to do what I want, huh? I have to cart you boys around all over the place,” she rubs her forehead, ash drops in her hair, “I feel like I’m going crazy. I want to go home.”

“Let’s go home, then.”

“Not to the hotel, Matt. To Hell’s Kitchen. I miss that home. I miss my friends. I miss my stupid dumb parents.”

“We have half a tour to finish.”

“I know,” she moans as she scrunches the cigarette in her fingers.

He steps toward her, touches her shoulder. She doesn’t flinch away so he tells her softly, “you just need to stick it out.”

“I know,” she replies.

She straightens the cigarette, smokes, then offers some to Matt.

After a while of smoking in silence, the guest door of the radio building opens and Foggy comes out. They walk toward the parking lot. Matt cringes as he listens to Marci’s fingernails scratching against skin punctures across her arms.

She scratches almost the whole way home. She wouldn’t have stopped if she didn’t need two hands to drive. Before the elevator door dings open, Matt is as tense as her. Muscles tight and skin crawling and he can practically taste Marci’s thirst for a shot. When the door finally opens, she marches down the hall going straight for her room, except she stops in front of his own.

“Oh look!” she calls back, “you got a love letter!”

She chuckles then, wild and uncontrollable as she snatches the letter taped to Matt’s hotel room door. Matt finds it fascinating the lengths fans go to. Some admirable, others, not so much. There’s
some who want to try and befriend them, which isn’t fundamentally bad, but when these fans somehow meet up with them after every show or linger around their van or somehow find their hotel and their exact room number… it’s a little confronting, and exactly why no one can ever find out about what Matt does in his spare time. Still, he’s as gracious as he can be. He doesn’t want to be one of those uppity types who don’t care about their fans. He’s happy to have a chat with them, but he doesn’t go as far as Foggy and Marci go. Foggy lets some hang around if he’s in the mood for it. Likes hearing their stories. Marci beds more than she should. In a way, it’s an open invitation to invade their privacy.

Marci thumbs open the letter, pulls out three thinly cut cardboard squares and after a brief glance, lets them flutter to the carpeted floor.

“What is it?” Matt questions as he comes closer.

Foggy plucks one ticket from the ground and reads it out loud, “Special one night only show in Greece… Tiboldt’s Grand Carnival…”

Marci sways on her feet, falling back on the wall to catch her balance.

Foggy holds her waist with one hand and says, “Tiboldt… isn’t that the name of the circus at…”

Matt clenches his fists. Why now? There’s been no activity, no word about a circus touring under that name… perhaps he wasn’t far south enough…

“Does it say anything else?” Matt presses.

Foggy turns the tickets over, opens his mouth and is about to read it out when Marci tuts loudly.

“Stop, no, just thinking about that name makes me think about that day and I –“

Her hands start to shake. Foggy tucks the letter in his pocket and envelopes her hands in his, holding them still.

Marci drops her head, “guys, I think…. I think I can’t do interviews anymore. I know we’re helping people with Foggy’s idea but I can’t listen to another story from relatives. I can’t think about what they’ve lost anymore. It’s too hard.”

“It’s alright, Marci, it’s not your fault,” Foggy says softly.

She prattles on, “we both could have been on that thing Foggy… I should be happy that we’re both alive…”

Her breath hitches. She hugs Foggy then, nestling her face in the crook of his neck. For a while, Matt’s presence seems to become invisible to his friends. He quietens his own breathing, becoming a faint speck in his radar as he blends into the periphery off their vision. In turn, he monitors the stormy waters before him. The rising wave in Foggy, where he draws the ocean into a steep swell and strengthens over time. Versus Marci, where the wave crashes against the seashore, splintering foam against the stiff sand. Foggy is the eternal build and Marci is the inevitable crash. Hand in hand they create a sense of calm as the wave thins across the beach, fanning out and barely grazing Matt’s toes perched on the hot, dry sand.

Amidst their brewing tsunami, Matt remains painfully aware of the tickets burning a hole in Foggy’s pocket, as if the cause of the dangerous sea was the volcanic eruption deep below, unforeseen and unknown. Instead of becoming alerted by the incoming danger, Matt becomes obsessed with obtaining the tickets. Greedy for their worth, sinful for their meaning, so much so
that he’d be willing to snatch them out of Foggy’s hands and bolt to wherever, whenever, this circus is showing for lack of any other clues. For the thirst, the bloodlust, the need to thrust the culprits in the hands of justice.

Marci’s heartbeat stabilises, and she parts from Foggy, but Foggy’s heartbeat continues in its steady rise.

“Thanks Foggy, I needed that.”

“No problem.”

His friends stand poised, a perfect isosceles triangle. Marci shakes herself, then starts to move off down to her room, but Foggy calls after her, “Wait, what should we do with these?”

“Throw them out for all I care,” Marci replies.

Easy. No one would notice if he plucked the tickets out of the trash.

Foggy watches Marci return to her room and then turns to Matt.

He jokes, “We could give these to the staff, they might accept them in exchange for a real tip?”

Quickly, Matt suggests, “I’ll do it.”

Foggy frowns, “Really?”

Matt grits his teeth, “I’m happy to do it now,” then when Foggy seems unconvinced, he adds, “I want to have a word with the manager anyway, talk to them about how they could let their staff give away guest room numbers.”

Foggy yawns, “Let’s do it together in the morning.”

“I’m happy to do it now,” Matt repeats.

“It’s late, Matt. It can wait.”

Foggy turns to go to his room then, the first shred of a clue in his hands spiking in Matt’s radar like an inferno. His mind is running at a thousand miles an hour now, contemplating all the different ways he could obtain the tickets from Foggy. Possibilities pan out from simple ways like just asking for them, to elaborate ways like sneaking in to his room to get them. He just needs one. Only one. The other two Matt doesn’t care if they get thrown out or go to the staff, so long as he can save just one for himself.

Foggy opens the door to his room and Matt darts forward, briefly touching Foggy’s elbow.

“Can I talk to you for a minute?”

Foggy flickers, “um,” his heartbeat light and fast, “what is it?”

“Or, maybe you’re too tired to talk,” Matt muses.

Foggy shakes his head, and takes Matt’s arm in his, “you sound like you have something to say.”

His friend leads Matt toward his bed. He sits down while Foggy slips his shoes off. Foggy places the envelope on the little desk in the tiny hotel room and then folds his arms, waiting. His heart rate unchanged, tumultuous.
“What do you want to talk about, Matt?”

The tickets melt holes in the desk like they’re made of acid. Matt can taste it on his lips, can smell the burning too. He just needs one. He just needs one.

“I, uh, wanted to see how you were doing Foggy.”

“Me?” Foggy asks, “I’m fine.”

Don’t lie.

“I mean,” Matt takes a deep breath, trying to ignore the tickets for now, “the interview took a, uh, a different direction than what we were expecting… I suppose we shouldn’t be surprised that journalists can find out about anyone.”

The burning creeps down his throat, ensconces his heart.

Foggy bites his lip, “I think it’s time to put it up on our website.”

“Mm,” Matt breathes, then more calmly, “It might encourage fans to donate too.”

“We should have made it public before,” Foggy says quickly, “There’s no reason to separate our private lives from the band. There’s no real difference in identities anyway.”

Matt’s lips go thin, and after a long pause, Foggy adds, “I was thinking, Matt, that on our next record I’ll sign as Foggy, not Franklin.”

Matt smiles, “Getting tired of people calling you that?”

“Yeah,” Foggy laughs, “I think people figured out who I was anyway. No use in pretending,” he pauses again, “I think I wanted to be known as Franklin because no one knew me in the industry under that name. People know Foggy as Ed’s son, closely associated with The Call. I think signing as Foggy would be more respectful to my Dad.”

Foggy shrugs. He picks up his acoustic from the ground and plants himself beside Matt. He starts to play something which, to Matt, sounds melancholy under Foggy’s tired strumming, but at the same time wary and thoughtful. He listens to Foggy’s experimentation. It’s a tune that he’s heard variations of in the backseat of the van, driving along highways and stuck in traffic jams. It reminds Matt of a sort of feeling of limbo, of being stuck between here and there and that endless feeling of waiting.

He begins to sing.

Restless sinner rest in sin
He’s got no face to hold him in
He fills his days as dark as night
He’s been waiting with the blind
Just to find a place to hide his ghost
Unopen eyes no consequence

The door's been closed since he's walked in

The fight's been raging so many days

He'll greet you with a cross and a sickle

As he helps you in

You fall in waste

An open fire

You've got no taste for his desire

He brings you in to warm your bones

He's the reason why you came

And the reason why you ought to go

Foggy abruptly stops playing, leaving Matt to finish on a couplet.

Fool's gonna fall and raise

Another fallen child

As Foggy hugs his guitar, Matt gently touches Foggy’s bicep and says, “You can tell me if something’s upsetting you.”

Foggy bites his lip, hugs the guitar tighter, “yeah.”

“You can tell me anything.”

His friend doesn’t say anything for a while. They both sit on the cheap mattress in Foggy’s hotel room, slowly sinking against the springs. Beyond Foggy’s door, Matt can hear Marci down the hall flicking through TV channels. From three doors down he can feel the disturbance in his radar indicating her shaking hands, her restless feet.

“I suppose I’m the same as you, Matt. I feel like I just wanna run away from it…”

That’s not what I’m doing – then what are you doing?

“It’s just, I don’t know, shocking? I guess. I didn’t think I’d ever be involved in something like this, you know?” Foggy rests his chin on the body of his guitar, “You hear about people talking about this stuff… Terrorism and kidnapping and now bombs exploding?”

“I get it.”
Foggy looks at him like he’s searching for something that Matt can’t give, looks at him like Matt can’t really see it but he does, in his own way. Then, Foggy says, “I miss my Dad too,” he looks away, “It’s stupid. I was so happy on our first tour, do you remember? I was without him, I was,” he laughs, “I was liberated! I was a kid then, though.”

“Now you miss his support,” Matt says.

“Yeah,” Foggy sighs, “I want to be open with you, Matt. Like I used to, but you’re…”

_Gone – I’m sorry – are you?_

Foggy doesn’t deserve this. He doesn’t deserve the memory loss or the guilt or the pain and loneliness about his Dad having surgery on the other side of the world.

Through gritted teeth, Matt reveals, “I’m trying to find out who’s responsible for it.”

“Responsible for what?”

“The… accident,” Matt explains with a stone in his throat, “I don’t believe it was part of God’s plan. Sure, it happened for a reason but it happened at the hands of sinners. And I’m going to find them.”

“And what – crucify them?” Foggy scoffs, “Matt, it was an accident. Nobody caused it.”

_I wish I could believe that. I wish I could live in your innocence, your naivety._

“Anyway,” Foggy pushes off the mattress and leans his guitar on the wall by the desk. “I used to talk about stuff with Marci but she’s not easy to talk to these days,” he sighs, “We need to do something about that addiction of hers. Dope’s alright but blue’s going to ruin her.”

Foggy stands, scratching the back of his neck.

“Foggy,” Matt breathes.

“What?”

“Foggy…” Matt repeats.

He edges to the foot of the bed, his thighs taut, the divide between them gaping and hollow and he knew he was going to be burning bridges right from the start. No harm in trying to douse cold coals.

“There’s… something missing… something that was there and over time, has faded.”

“What are you talking about?” Foggy questions flatly.

Matt bristles. Coals crunch under his feet, disintegrate.

“Are we, uh, are we okay?”

“Us? Sure,” a lie, then more firm, but no more true, “yeah, buddy. We’re good.”

Matt smiles, empty. Lips set in a still line, a fermata against the rapid tempo of Foggy’s heartbeat.

Foggy drifts then, Matt’s warmth in the void of space between them. A forest fire burnt over and over, fuelled by regrowth and lifted by the wind, to burn for days and weeks and months. The Great
Fire, 1910. All fires can be tamed. All aftermaths of disasters can be cleaned up too, even if some destruction is left to fester, left to dry out in ash and ruin. Dust to dust. Someday, someone’s going to try and fix what was ruined, because there’s something worthy in the soil. Some man-made enrichment now ready to sow seeds in, to grow something new. Grow something better and more loved and cherished than before.

There’s always the risk, though, that someday beyond, that regrowth will be engulfed again. Burnt down again all from a little spark. Who knows if it will be worth the risk?

“So um, I was just going to put a movie on and go to sleep,” Foggy starts, “but, uh, if you want to stay, we could watch together?”

Matt lifts his head, searching through Foggy.

“Marci’s probably going to want to check out late, so I was just thinking, may as well stay up all night and make the most of it, right?”

At the sound of honesty, Matt’s face brightens, “I’d like that.”

Foggy tries to stifle a yawn as he goes over to the TV set and starts flipping through the video cases, “doubt I’m going to find anything good here though.”

“Anything’s fine.”

Foggy inserts a disc and brings a remote over with him as he sits back down beside Matt. The mattress dips. Their thighs touch. Without a hitch, Matt can trace the lightning bolting from that friction point up through Foggy’s veins, to his heart, then sparking through his mind in a deafening thunderstorm. Foggy flinches away, burnt by the electricity. He turns himself to lie down on the bed. From underneath his pillow he grabs his tobacco pouch and starts rolling a cigarette as the movie begins. Matt slips off his boots and sets them beside Foggy’s bed, then curls around to lay his stomach on the mattress too. Foggy offers him the blunt. A soft trace of skin as the rolled paper is transferred between fingers.

“I’m still quitting,” Matt laughs.

“Sure,” Foggy grins.

Matt smokes gingerly, lets Foggy hog it. He needs it. His heart needs the calm. Foggy laughs at a visual joke and their hips briefly touch on the dipping bed, a spark like the lighter on the cigarette, like the free flame that will churn through forests.

“This takes me back,” Matt coos.

Foggy pinches the cigarette, “when did we ever watch Pirates of the Caribbean?”

“No,” Matt laughs, “you know, being in the garage and watching movies until the sun came up. Couldn’t life be simple like that again?”

“Yeah,” Foggy teethes the cigarette, “being an adult sucks. Can’t wait til our contract expires and we can finally get someone else to do adult stuff for us.”

“Not having to organise our shows and transport would be a dream.”

“A new label would probably actually tell us about booking something like Coachella. And you know what, they’ll probably book our hotels too. And do everything else we always forget about.”
“And manage our website!” Matt adds.

“And do our laundry!” Foggy cries.

“Laundry??”

“Hey! It’s not easy being on the road and not having a washing machine. I know you buy more clothes when you run out of clean shit. I’ve seen the tags.”

“Rude,” Matt shakes his head, grinning.

“Seriously, dude?” he nudges Matt, “sometimes you wear things inside out. It’s hilarious.”

“Why don’t you tell me?”

“Because it’s funny.”

They laugh together, sinking into the mattress. Foggy’s shirt rides up over his belly and he doesn’t do a thing to stop it. Some things remain unchanged, and Matt needs to find solace in the knowledge that Foggy’s still mostly comfortable in his own skin around Matt, because there’s only a handful of things Foggy feels free doing in front of Matt. He guesses that around anyone else, Foggy would be conscious about showing skin. That’s something Matt’s always found interesting about his friend. Foggy’s not always careless just because Matt’s blind.

After laughter subsides, they return to concentrating on the movie again. Matt is honestly a little lost, and Foggy explains bits here and there. It doesn’t matter too much because he’s paying more attention to Foggy than the movie. Heat swells in the mere inches between them, soft heartbeats and hot blood pumping. Foggy jolts in fright from the film and bends into the open space, pressing his back against Matt’s side. Matt inhales, savours the feel of Foggy’s body against his. He lies his head down on the mattress as Foggy rolls back into his previous position.

All this time on the road. Touring, travelling, hunting. He doesn’t get much human contact. Not in this way. And that’s definitely on purpose, because it’s a sin to even think about it, of course. And Matt wants to keep Foggy out of his mess of a life as much as he can. It’s for the best, isn’t it? That Matt keeps Foggy apart with a jagged spear. The blunt end faces Foggy while he takes the blades in the palms of his hands, blood streaming down his wrists, dripping down his white sleeves. Still, it can be lonely. He sure as hell can keep himself busy, keep his mind off what he shouldn’t be thinking about, but then he gets himself into situations like these. His best friend curled beside him… every so often, don’t they both deserve a little bit of kindness? Or a good night’s sleep?

Foggy’s back rises and falls as he dozes on the top of the mattress. The movie continues. Matt ignores it. He reaches his hand up to Foggy’s long hair, starts to play with the knotty strands splaying over the bed. His friend doesn’t seem to register the touch, too deeply asleep, so Matt takes in thicker locks between his fingers, twists them down into spirals. Foggy remains unperturbed, so Matt continues to experiment. He loves how there’s so much of Foggy’s hair. Loves the feel of it, how feathery it glances across his skin.

Foggy shifts then, groaning as he seems to break through his sleep. Matt retracts his hand and holds his heart instead, taps a bruise underneath his arms to try and redirect the blood from his dick, half hard.

“You can’t let me fall asleep before the movie’s done,” Foggy tells Matt in a drawl.
“Sorry,” Matt breathes.

He presses into the mattress, ducking his head. He drums his bruise again, keeps his mind off the pleasure and on the pain.

Foggy groans, “I’ve gotta say, I don’t think I’ll be able to sleep right anyway. I’m in the same boat as Marci. Just seeing those tickets over there makes me ill.”

Just as Matt’s stomach drops at the reminder of why he’s even having a prolonged visit in Foggy’s room, his friend suddenly, yet clumsily, leaps off the bed and snatches up the tickets. Trust the most important person in the world to Matt to be enough to distract him from his goal.

“We screw giving the staff anything. You’re right Matt, they shouldn’t be giving out room numbers to anyone. What an invasion of privacy, huh?” He tosses the tickets in the paper bin outside the bathroom, then calls over his shoulder, “Pause the movie, will ya?”

The bathroom door slides shut and it’s now or never, pal. He jabs his thumb against the volume button, the action scene playing out in the film rising up as his dick deflates completely. As he darts over to the bin, he hears Foggy shout through the door, “You think you pressed the wrong button, buddy!”

Matt’s heart is beating as fast as Foggy’s was earlier. He uses the raised volume as a cover so that he can fish out the envelope without the noise of the rustling plastic bag causing any unwanted attention. With hungry fingers, he plucks out one ticket and shoves it deep into his jeans pocket. A healing wound beneath the fabric painfully monitors the presence for him. Then, the absence of taps flushing on causes a flash of panic, and he turns to dart toward the mattress when Foggy slides the door open.

“What are you doing up?” Foggy asks casually.

“I… was going to rewind the tape,” Matt stammers.

Foggy smirks, drifting passed him, “It’s a DVD remember? You can rewind it with the remote.”

Matt carefully drops the envelope back in the bin while Foggy has his back turned, and straightens just in time for when Foggy turns to aim the remote at the TV.

“Hey, Foggy, I’m going to go,” Matt says as he slinks toward the door to the hallway.

“What, now? Don’t you want to see the end?” Foggy asks, dropping the remote on the bed and coming towards him.

Matt fumbles for the handle and manages to get the door halfway open before Foggy reaches him.

“I’ll um, no, I need to pack. I’ll uh, see you in the morning.”

“Afternoon,” Foggy corrects, placing his hand gently on Matt’s bicep, “we’re checking out late, remember?”

Matt nods and slips out of Foggy’s touch. “Right. I’ll be ready, Foggy.”

“Alright,” he sighs.

Foggy’s door closes behind him, and he thrusts his hand into his pocket to fish out the ticket. He runs his fingers over the cardboard, already thinking about how he can get himself to Greece in
time for the circus three days from now. Any wrong moves now and he might waste the opportunity. As for leaving his friend like that, well, Foggy said it himself. He’s used to it being this way.

xxxi. sympathetic noose

Foggy closes the door behind Matt and leans his forehead against the treated wood. That interview honestly did take it out of him. He’d planned on just putting on a movie, maybe smoking a bit, then getting some much needed sleep. Except after Matt’s visit, he’s left feeling raw and empty like a carved avocado. All that’s left is the indigestible stone. Matt always does this, doesn’t he? Takes and takes, and doesn’t give back what he takes. And Foggy’s a sucker for it because he’s hungry for any attention Matt is willing to give him.

How sad is that?

He presses off the door and flops down on his soft bed. Despite feeling so exhausted earlier, he’s wide awake now. The shape Matt left in the blankets ripples and folds away. After all this time and everything they’ve gone through together, Matt still makes Foggy feel safe. Still makes him laugh, too. But there’s nothing like dozing off beside your best friend. He paws at the blankets. Remnants of Matt’s heat lingers over the fabric, a scent of him that dominates the starchy smell of hotel linen.

He shouldn’t.

He smothers his face in the blankets, sucks in all the air around his mouth and holds it until he needs fresh air. He knows that Marci’s been around. Mostly fans. Lets boys in after shows who are more often more interested in talking to him or Matt about their techniques than about getting in the drummer’s pants. She’s learnt how to pick them now. Sure, Foggy’s been tempted. There are a lot of nice looking people in all places of the world. A lot of people who think Foggy’s pretty nice looking too. But he hasn’t ever invited someone around just for fun like Marci does. He doesn’t even have anyone around all too often. Only when he’s having an off day with Marci and he can’t stand the loneliness. And he feels like he’s getting closer to that point now that Marci’s on smack.

As for Matt… if there’s anyone, he hasn’t shared anything. Foggy’s not sure if he wants to know. He doesn’t go online a lot because of that, too. Too tempted to type in some key search terms and find out some things that should’ve been shared with him, but haven’t. Maybe he’s better off living in the fantasy that Matt’s being the dutiful virgin waiting for marriage. Can’t stop Foggy from fantasising when he’s not the one fearing God’s wrath.

He rolls on his back and shimmies down his jeans. Sometimes Matt slips and it takes everything Foggy has not to go crazy over it. Sometimes Matt lets himself say the wrong – or the right – things, lets himself get too close, lets himself touch and breathe in Foggy’s scent and yeah, maybe Foggy’s imagining all this but it’s his fantasy, alright? Call it self-punishment or whatever, but he’s gotta live his life, doesn’t he?

Foggy lifts his waistband and grabs his cock. It’s getting hard quick. Thinking about Matt always gets him this way. He starts slowly lifting his foreskin over his shaft, letting the sensitive skin tighten as he hardens. He closes his eyes, tilts his head to the side so he can take in the smell of Matt slowly dissolving over the blankets. What if Matt had stayed? What if Matt had still been
with him now, lying side by side on this crummy mattress and Foggy would find Matt’s hand and sneak it under his shirt. He would snake his arm around Matt’s waist, cup his tight ass and pull their bodies together. Matt’s chest would feel so firm against Foggy’s tubby torso, and it would be real nice to feel Matt’s blistered fingers graze against his nipples. Foggy teethes the blankets, pumping himself harder. He would be able to kiss Matt, then, take his bruised lips in his, press his tongue into Matt’s hot mouth and what a dream it would be to feel Matt’s hard dick press against his abdomen. Foggy’s breathing hastens and he comes too quickly. The second half of the fantasy hasn’t even begun.

He rides it out, lets his come pool over his hand and onto the blankets. His head’s spinning. Panting. The sheet beneath his mouth damp and scarred with teeth marks. While he’s catching his breath, reality crashes down upon him like he’s being pummelled with a hundred fruit stones. Carcasses rot around his feet. The bright hotel light above him burns like the sun, cooking the mess below. This is what his life’s come to. Frantically jerking off the moment his best friend leaves his hotel room.

Foggy gets up. Cleans himself up. He doesn’t feel good, feels outright gross to be honest, but at least he’s spent. At least he can get straight to sleep now. The sooner the better, so he can put what he just did behind him.

“So, Athens, huh? You know, I could go for a 20 hour drive from Bucharest down south. I heard it’s a nice drive,” Marci says.

“Anywhere in Europe’s a nice drive,” Foggy replies.

“You aren’t coming with me,” Matt says flatly.

“I’ll just need to stock up on Redbull for the drive. Does Eastern Europe have Redbull?”

“I booked this flight for myself only.”

“I get it, I get it,” Marci reassures him, “Why Athens, though? Boxing a big thing there? Guess it is, historically.”

“Just leave him alone, Marci.”

“No come on,” Marci glares at him, “don’t you want us to all go together? We have a night to kill, you booked it that way, remember Matt? What do you expect me and Foggy to do? Sit around fucking each other until you get back?”

Foggy flushes, his eyes darting to the road and becoming increasingly alarmed by Marci’s lack of focus on her driving. He starts to bite his nails.

“I’ve always wanted to go to Greece. Those beautiful white houses. I’m a big fan of Greek too, the food and the people.”

“The answer is no,” Matt says, folding his arms and leaning in the crook of the backseat and the van frame, “wake me up when we get there.”
“Fine,” Marci sings with a scowl.

Foggy takes his fingers away from his chapped lips and observes the blood quickly drying over his jagged nails. He scratches off the blood, letting flakes of it fall onto his jeans. The space between the passing street lights starts to blur so that the yellow bulbs blend into a long light stream. Two day’s drive and they’ve arrived in Bucharest in time to meet Matt’s flight to his boxing club meet in Athens. It’s their only night off for the next month and Foggy shouldn’t be surprised that Matt’s organised something else but that doesn’t mean he’s not hurt by it. He’s still getting used to it, he supposes. Night after is their show booked in a bar deep in Bucharest city and then the next day they’re straight off to Istanbul.

They’re getting further and further south, places Foggy’s never dreamed of going before, places he thought were capital cities which are actually the country, and vice versa. They’re all learning about geography, alright? And the further south they go, fans never fail to show up. The Budapest show last night was completely sold out. Packed so full Foggy could see people staring in from windows set in to look down into the basement they were playing in. Their faces all pressed up against the glass, feeling the vibrations. That kind of eagerness puts him in a good mood. Doesn’t help his mood when Marci can’t keep her hands from shaking and has to leave close to the end of their set. Happened last night, couldn’t get to the heavier encore without her, so Foggy had switched over to acoustics.

The venue supplied a techy to help Matt, but he was slow and Matt seemed out of it by that point anyway. Lucky the venue was quite small, made it more intimate to play raw. He’d played that song he and Matt had discovered in Vienna, then Foggy’d tweaked the chords a bit and started experimenting. Matt barely contributed to it. Strummed the same chord lightly. And sure, he nodded and tapped the body of the guitar to provide a beat for Foggy, but he could tell Matt’s mind was elsewhere. Only made his lyrics more pointed.

Matt’s been like this ever since the accident. He’s always kept to himself, but maybe that journalist got to him. If it’s privacy Matt’s concerned about, Foggy’s learnt the hard way that there’s no point in concerning yourself with it because in their line of work, privacy isn’t going to happen. Someone out there is somehow going to learn everything they can about you. Just gotta keep your head up and let yourself get through it.

“Is that a phone?” Marci questions.

She starts shuffling through the mess between the front seats. Foggy watches Matt in the rearview mirror, sees him start to wake up from his nap in response to the polyphonic ringtone. Marci finds the phone and flips it open.

“Let me, you’re driving,” Foggy offers.

“That’s mine,” Matt mumbles, trying to reach into the front of the van.

Marci reels away from him causing her to steer into the adjacent lane. Cars around her honk, and as she realigns the wheel, Foggy strains to hear the conversation on the mobile. Something about the late booking, a card declining. Matt snatches for the phone and is able to peel it out of Marci’s hold.

“Hello, I’m Matthew Murdock…. What? How… Alright, please hold my reservation. I’ll be there with payment in thirty minutes.”

“Foggy,” Matt sighs as he hangs up and shoves the phone into his pocket. “I need to borrow your card.”
Foggy looks down at his shoes, “I’m sorry Matt, but I cut it up so Marci couldn’t use it anymore.”

Marci slaps the steering wheel, “That’s why I couldn’t find it! What do you do, write checks now?”

Matt grunts, “Let me use yours then, Marci.”

“I told you guys, my card’s maxed out from sending money back to my family.”

Foggy starts, “That doesn’t mean you can go around-“

“Usually I use your card, Foggy. I wish I memorised all the digits now. It was so easy memorising both your pins. You know, you really shouldn’t set your pins as each other’s birthdays. Makes you guys easy targets for theft.”

Foggy holds his breath as Matt punches the seat beside him, “How much did you spend, Marci?!”

“Don’t worry! I withdrew cash and there’s plenty left over! I’m not an idiot.”

She flashes Foggy a grin but her eyes are alight from the neon reflections.

“How much…” Matt hisses through grit teeth, “Do you have left?”

She raps the steering wheel with her fingers, and tuts, “I don’t have it with me.”

Matt punches the window, causing Marci and him to jump. Marci’s foot shakes over the accelerator, propelling the van faster. In the rearview, Foggy watches as condensation collects around the spot where Matt’s fist met the glass.

“You’re lying,” he grunts.

“I’m serious,” Marci screeches, “I don’t have it! God, why are you being like this? It’s not such a big deal!”

“You stole money-“

“Oh, shut up Matthew. You know what? I’m glad you’re so easy to steal from because it’s one step closer to me figuring you out. Seeing you like this...”

“Let me out.”

She glares at him through the rearview, “God, you really do have some nasty secret, don’t you? You’re not going down there for boxing. Something else is happening and you’re so wrapped up in covering it up that you’re letting yourself get like this.”

Matt attacks the van door handle, “Let me out, now!”

“Marci!” Foggy cries as he hears the door slide open.

She dangerously pulls into a parking lot, her foot skating brush strokes against the brakes as she spins the wheel to a stop. Matt’s already half out of the van by the time it becomes completely stationary. He slams the door shut and Foggy jumps in fright, clutching onto his seat.

Marci leans over Foggy and yells at Matt through the window, “what are you gonna do?! Walk to the airport from here?”
“It’s not far,” Matt mutters.

“Don’t expect us to be waiting for you when you decide to come back from wherever the fuck you really are going!”

“Matt, wait!” Foggy cries.

He tries to exit the van but Marci punches down the locks on all doors.

“What are you doing?!”

She starts the van up again, engine roaring, tires spinning. “Here, your money’s in there,” she shouts, pitching her handbag out the window, “Asshole!”

Surprisingly, Matt catches the bag. Marci kicks the van into reverse and Foggy’s still so shocked about Matt being able to catch Marci’s handbag that it takes him a few seconds to register the fact that Marci’s just rammed the front of a parked car. She gears into drive again and speeds off, the smell of burning rubber smears his nose. He hangs his head out the window, his hair dangling out with the wind, and he stares back at the car she just hit. The fender’s pushed in, the hood’s buckled too. Foggy only gets a brief glance at Matt before he turns his back. Catches a broken look on Matt’s face, then the spokes of the Basarab Overpass starts to crack his vision.

“Aren’t you going to go back?” Foggy asks, turning back to glare at Marci.

Marci laughs, “Can you believe that guy?”

She starts wringing the steering wheel like it’s made of cloth.

“We can’t leave him there,” he goes for the gearbox but Marci swats his hand away, “and you just rear ended someone!”

“No one saw!” Marci says shrilly.

She swings her thick hair over her shoulders. She throttles the accelerator, revving the van down the streets of Bucharest city.

“I’m not going back,” Marci murmurs.

Foggy crunches on his nails again, “You shouldn’t have left him there. He probably has no idea where he is.”

“I’m not going back.”

“And he doesn’t know the language! Please,” Foggy tries to grab onto the steering wheel this time but fails, “You’re making something out of nothing, whereas Matt and I? We actually have something to be mad at you for.”

She glances at him, then glares at the road.

“Marci, I need you to turn around.”

“You know he’ll be alright,” she snaps, “he always is. It’s like,” she clicks her tongue, “it’s like he’s not even blind!”

Suddenly her eyes go wide and she reverses the momentum, pulling over.
“You need to drive! You need to drive,” she stammers as she kicks the van into park and starts clambering out.

“What, what is it?”

She holds the driver’s door and speaks through gritted teeth, “my international driver’s license is in my handbag.”

Foggy reels, “oh so now you’re afraid of being pulled over?”

Cars stream passed their van wedged on the side of the road, horns blaring down the asphalt. Marci jumps around the front of the van and opens up Foggy’s door.

He only looks at her.

Marci puts one hand on his thigh and gives him a small shake, “come on, get out.”

He doesn’t move. The inside of her arm looks pink and swollen.

“Look,” she sighs, “I’m sorry, okay? I know you want to go back and get him but think about it! He’s going to be long gone by now. Going back and not being able to find him will only make you more nervous.”

“This is your fault,” Foggy says as he unbuckles his seatbelt.

Marci crosses her arms, “I’m going to fix it.”

Foggy slides out of the chair, “how?”

“I don’t know. Be less mad?” she laughs, “Don’t worry, I do have a plan. Now get your fat ass over there.”

Marci slaps his ass as he jumps out of the van in front of her. She takes his spot and he goes around the back instead to get a look at the damage she’s done to the rental. The bumper’s pushed in a little, not as bad as the other person’s car, but enough damage that they’re not going to be able to get their deposit back when they return the van. Might even get blacklisted. That’ll be a pain for the rest of their tour.

Admittedly he was a little shaken still. Hands kept slipping off the leather wheel because he kept sweating too much. He also kept thinking his fingers were bleeding still, so thought it best to keep at a low speed until he got them to the hotel. He could tell Marci was getting restless. Saw her itching at her arms. He hopes part of her plan is to quit. If she doesn’t quit…

After checking in at the hotel, Foggy goes down to the bar with the intention of smoking half a pack of cigarettes, until he has an idea. He calls up the airport to check if Matt had boarded the plane he was meant to board. Took a bit of lying and encouraging to get the employee to tell him the information he needed to hear. Didn’t help that he had no idea what flight number Matt had actually booked. He only knew the time. That’s all Matt’s willing to part with, and it’s almost not enough information this time. With a bit of convincing, he’s able to find out that Matthew Murdock did indeed depart Bucharest airport at 6.25pm. That’s something, at least.

He hangs up the telephone and lights up another cigarette. Foggy’s been in a lot of hotel bars and he always finds something about them so fascinating. One common theme is the colouring. Earthly
tones, browns and greens. Heavy glassware glinting below pale lights. The historic scent of cigarettes, and the occasional smell of an oriental breakfast being prepared behind doors for the morning. The patrons are perhaps the most interesting. People staying the night for business, backpackers, big families, estranged families, couples on a high of fleeting love. The space within the bar exists as a sort of limbo. A peaceful offering to tourists, the wayside between high speed travel and stationary sleep in a dubiously comfortable bed. The bar offers an atmosphere of haughty welcome, inextricably tied to holding down tourists whilst being estranged from the city beyond glass doors. A sort of acknowledgement that life and activity exist outside of the hotel but an indignity that to have a fulfilling time, one does not need to leave the hotel. A heavy snowstorm turns the selfish and insomniacs to killers.

And that’s just the thing. Identity within the liminal space of the bar is forgotten. Inside, anyone can be anyone. No one can know for sure that the couple draped over themselves by the jukebox aren’t husband and wife. Nor if the sole man perched on a stool isn’t destined to inherit his million dollar family business, but drinking away the concept. No one can know for sure that Foggy’s a musician either, arguably a famous one at that. One’s identity is stripped here because the image is distorted from travel, overcome from exhaustion and uncleanness, which is coupled with the lack of care for another’s presence in this limbo. No one’s reason to enter a bar at a hotel is to meet someone or learn about culture. That’s not the intended purpose of the bar either. And so here, who you are doesn’t matter. It may be impersonal, but it’s a safe haven for the known.

Foggy sighs, kicking his boots up against the panelled wall of the little alcove housing the payphones. The impact of his boots makes a thud but no one pays attention. He lights up another cigarette. Who knows how much more of this he can take? Marci’s on the verge of going off the deep end. Matt’s swinging more toward being absent than present. And Foggy can’t take being stuck in the middle of all of this. He’s tired of being other people’s anchors when he’s finding it hard enough to keep his own two feet on the ground. It’s like his friends are telling him that they’re done with the band but they’re too afraid to actually say it. Like it’s easier for them to avoid him and fuck up than it is to tell Foggy straight up they don’t want in anymore. Well how would it be if Foggy made that call first? He was the one to start it all, he could be the one to end it all too. Drop everything and return to his Dad’s. Pull the very thoughtless action his friends are content to pull. That’s the dream isn’t it? Going out in a puff of smoke. A big dramatic exit.

It’s going to be expensive, and he currently has no idea what time it is anywhere in the world but he needs his anchor.

The payphone rings out once, so he tries again. The second time, the line gets picked up on the first ring.

“Dad, I’m quitting.”

Ed yawns, “Son, there’s no point in giving up pot, it’s better for you than tobacco, you know that.”

“First thing, I’m going to book the soonest flight to New York.”

“Oh, no you’re not,” Ed warns him.

“I can’t do it,” Foggy insists, “I’m burnt out.”

“Is this about the music or the people?”

“What do you think, Dad?”

“You want a career in music or not, son?” Ed questions him, “As your manager, I’m telling you
that you need to push on. You need to focus on the music because if you haven’t realised it yet, it’s the success of the music that’s gotten you this far, not that your bandmates aren’t as tight as a knot. That’s everyone’s and no one’s problem. What’s working for you is the music, and I saw what’s happening to you now when you boys were first making music in the garage. You’re worrying about longevity, about time being finite and all that jazz.

“Listen, you kids have released a good two albums, solid pieces of work, but now you’ve run out of material you had from the start. That’s why you’re feeling this way, I’m telling you from experience. Now it’s time to be thinking about the direction your music’s taking you. When you’re up there on the stage next, in Berlin, in Vienna, wherever next, you need to start letting the music form into something new. Your contract with Virgin is going to expire soon and that means you have the freedom to produce what you want, but you can’t expect it to come rushing to you once you’re free. It’s not gonna happen son. You’ve gotta work for it, open doors and such. Opportunities don’t fall in people’s laps.”

“Dad, what are you talking about?”

“I’m saying that you can’t let these kinds of disasters ruin you or your bandmates. You need to make peace with this accident and come out of it with something creative to work on.”

Foggy coils the phone line around one finger, “So you’re admitting it’s a disaster?”

“It is a disaster. It is, son. Theme parks don’t explode on a regular basis. Crowds of people don’t die or otherwise have their knees almost torn to pieces on a normal day. And that’s what I’m saying. It’s an outlier, get it? This happens once in a blue moon and you’ve gotta keep going. Gotta keep making music because you love it and you’re good at it, and people love you for it too. I love you son, because you push on. You’re always moving forward, always got some goal in your mind that you’re striving to achieve. Maybe you’ve forgotten but your goal’s always been to release music. To release good albums. That’s what you need to be working towards now, son. Your third album. Don’t care if you don’t have another record company deal lined up for you. Don’t care if you don’t got no idea if any company’s looking at what you boys do. What you’re going to do is you’re going to have it all ready for them. You’re going to have a solid amount of tracks and I know you will because you boys are always making music. I hear it on your lips before shows. The music’s there, ready for you. All you’ve gotta do is work on it and let it take shape. I know you won’t have any problems making that happen.”

Foggy closes his eyes, “I miss you, Dad.”

“I miss you too, son,” Ed says quietly, “Now, don’t make me fly out to you just to tell it to your face not to give up.”

“Thanks, I think… I needed to hear your voice.”

“Any time, son,” Ed pauses, “It’s funny. I had an inkling this call was coming. Just next time, don’t expect me to answer at 4am.”

Foggy hangs up the phone and the machine spits out his change. He’s scratching out the smallest coin when he feels a hand on his waist causing him to jump.

“He talked you out of it?” Marci whispers.

“Jesus Christ!” Foggy cries, jumping back, “Were you there the whole time?”

Briefly he feels eyes on him, then in a blink the weight of the gaze dissipates and he becomes
invisible to uncaring eyes again. Since settling in to the hotel, Marci’s obviously had some time to get herself dressed up. A nice blouse tucked into a short blue skirt. Her lips full and smudged already.

Marci cuts into his space and cups his chin with her good hand, “You weren’t really going to abandon me were you? I don’t want you to quit something you love because of me…”

Foggy removes her hand, his fingers grazing over dented skin.

He finishes collecting the last of his change as he replies, “maybe I will if you don’t stop injecting yourself with that shit.”

Marci folds her arms. Clicking her tongue, she says, “You can’t talk when you haven’t tried it.”

“It’s trash, Marci,” he says flatly as he drops the coins in his pockets.

“What, you’ll take caps with me but you won’t do heroin?” she coos.

He shakes his head, but she coils an arm around his waist and starts leading him out of the bar. She leads him down the long corridor towards their rooms.

“You know, they won’t let you back in the country looking the way you do. One look in your eyes…”

“We aren’t going back home until the end of the year,” she drops her head briefly on Foggy’s shoulder, then in place gives it a squeeze with her hand, “I’m not worried. Besides, Matt’s truly set on never returning.”

“Anywhere out of Europe, they’ll check you. Repeated attempts and they’ll deport you.”

“I’ll wear sunglasses.”

Marci’s room is right next to his. A smoking room on the bottom level of the hotel. They’re the cheaper ones, and usually they’re not that bad, but these ones… The stench is stronger in these rooms than any other they’ve stayed in on the continent. Matt thinks it’s because people chain smoke inside and it gets into the ventilation. Soaks into the bedding, seeps into the walls and floors and Foggy had tried cycling the air conditioner through, airing out the room too. Nothing had made it feel less like walking into a half burnt down building. Better let it burn than spend an eternity on an impossible task. Destroy it and start afresh.

Marci leads him to her bed and sits him down, slides her legs over his thighs.

“Marci,” Foggy warns, but he runs his palms over Marci’s thighs anyway, watches the way the skin goes pink under his touch, until his fingers disappear under her skirt.

She pulls her platinum blonde hair out and it falls in messy knots over her shoulders. She tilts her head, kisses him. He closes his eyes to cut out that sense. Tastes only her sloppy lips on his, feels her tight thighs shivering around his waist, hears the way her breathing sounds ravenous. She parts and nudges Foggy until he lies down on the bed. He imagines smoke plumes from the movement, rises like in those cartoons depicting that something’s broken. Well, the bed’s not the broken thing. Far from it.

“Is this why you snuck up on me, for a booty call?”

“So what if I did?”
The sound of cotton being pulled over skin, the crumple, the slight wince when she tugs on her own hair. He runs his hands from her waist up her chest, muscles tight from drumming. He fondles her breasts between two hands, flicks his thumbs across her exposed tits. She grinds on him as she reaches for a condom from her purse. The rip of solid plastic, the unfold of thin. She unbuckles his jeans. It’s a half-assed job but Foggy’s out and she rolls the condom over his dick even though the band of his jeans is squeezing his legs together.

Then she plants her knees either side of him and sits on him, her warmth ensconcing his length and it’s just sex, it doesn’t meant anything. Does anything mean anything? He scrunches his closed eyes, keeps them closed, feels her and sees her in another dimension, another person, a shimmer of white and blur of pink, of heat, white hot heat. She fucks him and in his sightlessness he sees Matt, so he opens his eyes. Takes the full view of Marci writhing on top of him, mouth parted and boobs bouncing and her bush only just disfiguring his dick pushing into her.

She splies her bad hand over his abomen. He feels it tremble, then feels it shake and jolt and the sweetest clench around his dick, the scowl and scrunch of her face, the same he’s making, probably, as he comes too soon after she does. She pants over him for a moment, then stands up and folds down her skirt.

At the doorway, she’s tying up her hair again and she says, “sleep here tonight, make my bed warm for me.”

“Marci, w-“

“Look,” she snaps, “I wanted to make it up to you.”

Foggy holds her stern gaze, his tender dick laying braised on his abdomen, “It’s only a temporary fix.”

“Better than nothing,” she tells him before she leaves.

xxxii. still suspicions hold you tight

Matt starts to regret catching the taxi to the airport when he’s belted into the plane seats. The propulsion isn’t enough to ground his fury in Bucharest, where a good run would’ve helped him clear his thoughts. At least he’s on the right plane and headed in the right direction.

Once off the plane it’s straight to the Athens Concert Hall in time for the circus. He clutches Marci’s leather purse the whole way, his nails digging into the skin of the thing. He would never have to be in a situation like this if he wasn’t bogged down by other people. Time constricted, having to carry around all the cash to his name, and worried about meeting up with his friends again. Worrying about whether they’ll be at the decided meeting place or not. Maybe he should just skip it all, skip finding out the truth that they’re sick of his shit and don’t want anything to do with him anymore. It would be for the best.

Matt wonders how long he can push people away until they’ve got nothing left to hold on to, until the micro aggressions become too much and the single thread his friends are connected to him with finally rots free.

Even though it’s way after sunset, many shops are still open, warm and noisy. He finds a cluttered tourist shop around the corner from the Hall. Shuffles through the contents slowly, running his
fingers out over the displays because the merchandise are as loud as the patrons. He purchases a shirt wrapped in thin plastic, a cap with ATHENS woven into the front, and a canvas backpack. A little ways down the street he stops in a miniature three by three park where people sip from cans on benches and smoke. He shoves Marci’s purse into the canvas backpack along with his sweaty hoodie, he’s going to need it later. Then he peels off his shirt and chucks it in the trash before pulling on his new plastic pressed shirt and cap. Lastly, he holds his walking stick in his hands, contemplating whether to ditch it for his disguise or keep it.

Why is it that Matt can easily discard material objects but not people? Where is the definitive line between cutting off that emotional tie, or is the that he’s having difficulty with abandoning his friends a sign that he’s still human, still capable of feeling as he is capable of inflicting pain.

The ticketer doesn’t bat an eye letting Matt into the Hall. The tiered seating is arranged in a semi-circle in front of the stage. He picks the corner set of seats, crunches up the sturdy steps to the middle row and sits close to the end. This way he can easily merge with the crowd, if needed, or jump the small fencing to the technician box if he needs to grant himself some cover. The seats around him begin to fill up quite quickly. There’s just as many children as there are adults, just like a couple of months ago at the Efteling.

Meanwhile, people don’t seem to recognise him. It’s funny working on his various levels of visibility. He’s associated with visuals, personalities and roles like his true name but in different ways. As Matthew Murdock in leather jackets and jeans, he’s associated with Black Rebel Motorcycle Club. A musician. And thusly associated with Franklin Nelson, and in turn with Ed Nelson of The Call. As his alternative identity, he’s been labelled ‘Daredevil’, with skin tight black clothing, exceptional fighting skills and with serving justice. And the order in which these aspects of him become most identifiable is fascinating. Which parts of himself do people place more importance on? Where do people place actions over appearance, or vice versa, as the most weighted meaning to one’s identity? He’d like to hope his actions are more valued than what he looks like but today, his bland appearance is more important. Today, he’s no one but a tourist. All that matters to the Greeks around him is how many of the Euros in his bag is he going to sink back into the economy. That’s his role.

He pulls his cap down over his brows as he listens to what’s happening on the stage. The curtains are firmly drawn, and at this time, there’s very little movement behind them. With further concentration, Matt recognises the frames of equipment arranged behind the curtains, but nothing mechanical of yet. During his surveillance, he would barely notice a petite woman striding up the stairs if not for her stilettos practically making sparks against the stone. She seems to be making her way toward his row, so he sits up to let her passed, only in an attempt not to have his foot trodden on, she somehow still manages to stomp on the toe of his boot.

“Oh, I’m sorry darling,” she hushes, squeezing Matt’s knee.

The touch surprises him, and surprises him even more when she shimmies herself beside Matt. She gives his knee a quick pat again and comments, “They’re nice shoes, too.”

“What?” Matt asks blankly, his toes smarting.

“Doc Martens,” she states, then crosses her legs, “I do love the yellow stitching, such a unique German design.”

“Looks aren’t everything,” Matt quips.

She hums a smile, and with nothing to take note of on stage, Matt decides to turn his attention to
this woman. She sits with a wealthy posture, complimenting her neck heavy with jewels. Her long hair curtains over her shoulders, mingling with the fine threads of a silk dress which drapes around her small frame. There’s a fearless aspect in her slender figure, toned, trained muscles. Perhaps ballet or fencing to suit.

“Did you purchase the Docs for the aesthetic?” the woman queries him.

He smiles, “How’d you know?”

“You’re not exactly a tough read.”

Matt smirks, “I could surprise you.”

“I doubt it.”

Her heart beats at a slightly quickened rate, flirtatious but expectant. He quickly checks on the preparations. This time he hears shuffling, movement, the arrangement of objects and people. He leaves the rich bachelorette to her devices and focuses on analysing the very reason why he’s here in the first place. Searching for clues. For familiar voices, sounds, for that slicking, and the whine of the circus master. Then, the woman begins to tap her heels, distracting him.

“This is quite boring, I must say,” she says airily.

“They’re just setting up,” Matt replies, holding his chin in his hand in concentration.

“What’s someone as handsome as you doing in a boring old place like this? Don’t tell me it’s schoolboy nostalgia.”

Matt frowns. There’s a sense of haste in her voice, a sloppy quickness, like she’s paving the way for something. Or setting up for the punchline of a joke and Matt’s not saying the right things for her to get there the way she wants him to.

“Memories…” Matt grimaces, “something like that.”

He notices hesitation in her throat, that haste again, like he’s meant to say something more.

“What’s a pretty lady like you doing here?” he adds.

The calm charm in her voice seems false, “I was invited. I don’t turn down invitations, no matter who they’re from. Wouldn’t you agree?”

Perhaps the way she structures her sentences is a Greek thing.

She groans, crossing her legs the opposite way, “I want to play a game.”

Matt runs his hands over his thighs, then folds his fingers together between his legs. What happened to laying low and getting the job done? Then again, better to indulge her than make a scene.

“We have time.”

“I’m going to guess who you are, and you’re going to tell me I’m right.”

His heart catches in his throat, but there’s no way, there’s no way she would know who he is.

“Go ahead.”
She looks him over, a quick sharp nod of her head, then says, “You desperately want to belong somewhere. With someone. Which is the real reason why you have come to this circus by yourself. Look around you, cutie. There are only three kinds of people who come to circuses. Families with young children or rowdy delinquents. And couples. And that’s what you’re here for. Not because you’re sick of your ramen and video games routine so you embark on a whimsical tour around the world. You’re wondering,” she curls her tongue, “…what you can possibly say or do to keep me on the line. Because the last thing you want is to spend the rest of the evening alone in your hotel room.”

Matt raises an eyebrow. This is one hell of a disguise.

“You know what your problem is?” She continues, “You’re pretty. You even work the whole happy go lucky American tourist look. But you’re dumb. You lost before you even stepped to the plate.”

Matt tilts his head and quips, “you get all that from a pair of old Docs?”

“Quick study,” she states.

She pulls her dress over her knees, heels ready to push off.

Matt straightens, “You wanna know what I think?”

She pauses, “tell me.”

“I think the game’s just beginning, because despite your beauty and charm-school manners… despite being richer than God and having the whole world at your fingertips… you’re just bored.”

She turns to look at him, “really?”

“Bored enough to spend your time studying a stranger’s shoes. See, I think you were dying on the vine of this children infested family fun-a-palooza because Daddy’s money can’t buy you the one thing you really need.”

She rolls her eyes, “and what’s that? A trip for daughters and daddies to see what’s inside the big tent?”

“No. No, you haven’t talked to your father in years. The only reason he’s in the picture is his name signed at the bottom of the checks. What you’re truly here for is the unexpected.”

At that moment, the curtains begin to rise.

“Maybe you’re not so dumb,” she hums, sidling closer to Matt, “Elektra Natchios.”

Matt hesitates, “Jack Batlin.”

“Oh sweetie,” she coos, squeezing Matt’s bicep, “it sounds like you should be the one performing with a name like that.”

A man emerges on the stage and commands the crowd to be silent over a microphone. Matt recognises the voice of Tiboldt milliseconds before the sound meets the mic. From there, his voice is amplified through speakers situated around the hall, as if speaking to Matt individually from all angles. Months searching and here he is. All Matt would have to do now is wait until Tiboldt takes the stage for his own act and Matt can expose him.
The show commences in a series of acts consisting of mimes, clowns and acrobats. Crystal the contortionist and Zandow the Strongman also make an appearance. All the while, Matt sits forward, palms together and the rim of his cap firm against his frown. He only has to pay more attention to his own appearance because of his newfound acquaintance. If Elektra wasn’t beside him, perhaps he could focus more on the behind the scenes than he currently can, however, maintaining the illusion of seeing is quite easy with his acute hearing. His illusion becomes complete when he ohs and ahs in unison with the audience. This is achieved simply by listening to their building heartbeats when observing acrobats take great leaps or clowns performing disappearing acts, or by analysing the changes in the guest beside him. She edges closer to him during particularly exciting moments, her silky legs flush against his jeans, the curve of her hips by his, and during the breaks between acts, she expresses her thrills or woes about what has just been shown.

And, surprisingly, Matt doesn’t mind it.

In fact, he likes it. Likes being treated as if he’s not handicapped. Likes being spoken to without that frosting layer of worry. If only it meant he could truly see the colours and shapes before him. The sparkling on the synthetic material of costumes, the flitter of confetti, the tops of heads along the crowd below him and the face of his companion.

After roaring applause, Tiboldt waltzes onto the stage to introduce his next act. The crowd continues to clap uproariously as he waves them to subdue. During these moments, Elektra leans into him, one hand curling over his shoulder, the other around his thigh, and she speaks in a quiet, even voice, one that could not be heard by anyone except himself.

“Tiboldt!” she says, giving Matt’s thigh a squeeze.

The clapping subsides, and Elektra continues, “You are dumb. You’re dumb enough to think that I’ve fallen for your whole seeing act, Matthew Murdock.”

Matt freezes.

She removes herself from him, the world around him a dull, empty quiet, except for Elektra. Her voice is a beacon in the darkness.

“Such a shame that your other two eyes couldn’t come. I was so looking forward to meeting them, especially the hairy one.”

“A grim smile creeps on Elektra’s face, but before Matt can demand any answers from her, he suddenly hears a familiar whirring. The real show has begun. Elektra, along with the entirety of the audience falls under a trance as soon as they look at Tiboldt. All bodies become lax. Tiboldt commences with his speech and Matt doesn’t have any time to waste on trying to get Elektra to snap out of her daze.

He grabs his bag and darts out of his seat the moment he is sure that Tiboldt has eyes elsewhere. He jumps the small fencing to the technician box. The technicians, too, are lax in their seats, hands limp over sound switches. He crouches there, hidden by the rise in the switchboard and quickly changes. He pulls off his cap and yanks out his hoodie still stinking of sweat from his stressful plane trip over. He wriggles into the slightly damp hoodie and makes sure the hood covers his face plenty. Before moving off, he fits his bag in the leg room of the switchboard.

With the hypnotism at full throttle, Tiboldt calls Crystal and Zandow out from behind the curtains.
and promptly enlists them in helping him collect items from the crowd. Similar situation as before. Crystal and Zandow hold sacks in front of audience members who don’t bat an eyelid when asked to remove wallets, jewellery, and other valuable items. Tiboldt himself still seems to be putting effort into being a charming entertainer despite the fact that his audience will not be able to remember this particular performance. He stands before the crowd engaging them in some kind of self-praising tirade, and Matt notes Tiboldt’s secured footing, his careful sweep across the crowd which webs all onlookers in his trance.

Matt crouches and takes a deep breath. The game plan – manoeuvre his way to Tiboldt without being seen by him. Zandow and Crystal are under his influence, they should not be a problem. Take down Tiboldt and remove his hat to expose him in front of the audience that he has desired. Ready Tiboldt for arrest after making him admit to his crimes and allow for escape before police arrive. He’ll have to return later for his bag.

Matt inhales. Before him, the switchboard houses hundreds of tracks of electricity buzzing through the system. A hot spot collects around one large main switch, which he reaches over to flick off. The moment he hears confusion and anger rile up in his rivals, he knows the lights have been turned off. He exhales. The soles of his boots turn on an angle against the floor and he pushes off. A quick jump over the fencing, quiet landing. Hug the wall lining the stairs until it ends feet before the stage.

Tiboldt orders Zandow to get the lights back on, and Crystal seems to continue to weave through the rows in a mechanical fashion, despite the darkness. Halfway down the wall, Crystal comes out at the end of the row beside him and, momentarily, all is fine. Then, upon registering Matt’s presence, her heartbeat quickens.

“Hey!” she shouts at him.

Matt hesitates. Seconds away from the edge of the stage, seconds away from one of them being caught.

“Tiboldt! This guy’s out of his seat!”

The ringmaster turns in their direction and orders, “sit down.”

The hypnotism has no effect on either Matt or Crystal, indicating either that the dimness has reduced the effectiveness, or that the strength of the device is lower than what it was. However, Matt quickly scans the audience and, minutes having passed since he turned the lights off, they still seem to be captured under Tiboldt’s trance. Good eyes adjust to change of light quickly.

No point in playing the pretender, a single unaffected audience member is suspicious enough to wrap up quickly. Tiboldt needs to be stopped now.

Adrenalin rushes in Matt’s veins. Crystal is inches away, the stage not too far off, he bolts at full speed down the remainder of the stairs.

“Stop, I tell you!” Tiboldt demands.

Crystal instantly begins to chase after him, cutting the distance between them. Matt feels the hard movement of air as Crystal snatches at his ankles before he jumps up on the stage. In avoiding her claws, he misjudges the distance of objects behind the long draping curtains and accidentally slams himself into some equipment held there. Pins, hoops, batons and other various equipment topple out behind the thick fabric. Matt stumbles on the end of the curtain which strains under his weight, but he quickly finds his footing again in time to ward off Crystal who has breached the raised stage.
now too.

A light turns on now, not the full set from the switchboard, but a spotlight switched on from behind
the stage.

“I want all the lights, Zandow! Not one!” Tiboldt howls.

The light sweeps across the stage, then highlights portions of the crowd and circles back again in a
figure 8 shape.

Crystal corners him.

“It’s you, isn’t it?” She scowls as she stretches her muscles and flexes.

Matt edges around the mess of equipment clothed by the curtains, intending on curving around to
the centre of the stage, but Crystal matches his movement in opposition.

“You killed Blossom,” she snarls, taking a step forward.

“Tiboldt killed her,” Matt replies, undeterred by her threats.

She ignores his words and makes her move. She leaps over to him in one jump. In an instant, she
entangles her body around his waist and legs in a vice grip and Matt, caught off guard by the move,
does nothing when she begins to squeeze him. She harshly constricts her limbs around him in a
strangulating motion, pulling Matt to the ground. She cycles her constriction to Matt’s upper body
now, pressurising him against the stage and herself. She pins Matt’s hands down with her bare feet,
and she is positioned in such a way that Matt cannot kick her off. The only thing he can succeed in
is covering his face with his hoodie.

“If it wasn’t for you, Blossom would still be alive right now,” she scowls, her breath hot with an
ancient fire.

“If it wasn’t for me,” Matt chokes out, “you and many others would have died too.”

She throws her head back and laughs. Even the sound of it is chilling compared to the timid Crystal
he observed just months ago. How loss can change people.

“The only death you stopped was mine,” she says, wrapping her hands around Matt’s neck, “and
you’ll pay for it!”

He writhes under her grip but every countermove seems to tighten her stranglehold, like a Chinese
finger trap, except to relax is to succumb. To breathe is to think thoughtfully about her words. To
let go is to acknowledge that she’s right on a number of things. He let those people die. He didn’t
do enough. He only saved his friends. Just. He holds his breath. The air around him becomes thin,
distant, noises sound eerie like they’re falling short against thick glass.

And yet, breathing is inherent in living. To allow himself to breathe, he must accept that God
allows all people, even sinners, to repent. To right what they made wrong when given the
opportunity.

The pressure around his neck suddenly loosens when a boot steps on Crystal’s bare foot, causing
her to reel in pain.

"Watch where you are going, idiot!” Crystal screeches.
“I’m trying to find the lights!” Zandow protests.

Thick glass begins to melt into hot sand, the fading barrier enough to let Matt receive sound once more. With one unpinned hand, he turns his fingers into a fist and punches Crystal in the jaw. The spotlight flashes over them, spreading a chilling warmth as Matt is able to untangle the contortionist from him and push her light body to the side. As he gets to his feet, he stamps on a stray limb of hers attempting to latch onto his ankle, and Crystal howls in pain.

To his right, he feels movement propelling toward him. The hot flare skims around him once more, he trusts in the darkness and lets the light blind his opponent, misdirect his charge. Zandow barrels into the curtains and rips the material off the hooks, tearing the fabric around the equipment stored at the hem.

“Imbeciles!” Tiboldt cries from the center of the stage, “Crystal! You go turn on the lights. Zandow, you deal with the masked man. And when I say deal I don’t mean dump him outside the circus I mean kill the man!”

Zandow grunts in response and thrashes around the equipment, balls and pins rolling across the boards towards Matt. A baton curves around his feet and Matt collects it. Crystal gathers herself from the edge of the stage and instead of following her orders, she poises herself to leap toward Matt again.

The light swathes around the three of them now, glints passed Matt and illuminates his two opponents in heat. Simultaneously they begin their attacks on him. Crystal gliding through the air, Zandow making another aimed charge. Matt easily dodges Zandow’s barrelling movement and he can hear the rubber soles of Zandow’s boots screeching along the edge of the stage, pulling the man to a halt. Crystal, the more elegant but lighter of the two, glides inches away from Matt. Before she can entangle herself around him once more, Matt flicks the baton from his wrist and hears the satisfying clack when the metal rod snaps against the joint in her knee. The baton ricochets off the cap of Crystal’s knee, popping it out of place, and sings back to Matt like a boomerang.

Crystal crashes against the floorboards, howling.

“Girl! Stop now and get the lights! I am losing them!” Tiboldt demands.

Crystal snorts, but the pain in her knee, foot and head submits to her master’s words. She slinks off the stage and lets Zandow take over the fight. This time, Zandow’s aim is more refined. His barrelling only misses Matt by a length of hair. Matt remembers only too well how easily Zandow was able to defeat him. His strength is far more compacted than his own, and what Matt’s going to have to do is use his lack of speed as an advantage.

As Zandow lines himself up again, Matt can hear Crystal entering the technician box via the access door near the stairwell. Soon she’ll emerge on the raised platform and return power to Tiboldt. He just needs to keep Zandow going a little longer – only he gets hit. In concentrating on tracking Crystal, he opens himself up for a clear attack. Zandow almost knocks all the air out of him faster than Crystal was able to strangle it out. Zandow locks his arms around Matt in the process and knocks him to the ground. If the stage wasn’t made out of wood before it felt like it’s made out of the heaviest, roughest stone now when Zandow drives Matt’s body into the surface of it like he’s grating a block of cheese.

Zandow’s momentum begins to slow and Matt grapples with the baton until he can position it like a knife, driving it through the air to jab at Zandow’s neck. Upon connection, he instantly realizes that the skin there is thick with muscle too, so in the few moments he has before Zandow can
reverse his own momentum and try to deflect Matt’s attacks, he makes a side swing against the back of Zandow’s skull. This time, pain takes effect and Matt is able to slide out from underneath the Strong Man and jump back before Zandow can throw any punches.

Matt’s back aches, his throat still heaving, and he darts back a couple more feet to avoid Zandow. The door to the topside of the technician box opens and Crystal approaches the switchboard. Zandow snarls, readying his attack, and just as Crystal switches on the main lights again, Matt throws the baton in his own calculated aim. Lights bathe them. The restless audience subdues. Matt’s baton flies through the air and ricochets against the distant wall, off a beam and spins with such speed that when it connects with Crystal’s forehead as she turns from the switchboard, it is more than enough to knock her out completely. As for activity on the stage, Zandow, now with full sight, gleefully barrels toward Matt.

All Matt has to do is step aside.

Wrapped up in great speed, Zandow skims passed his target and instead charges into Tiboldt, lifting his master off his feet. Tiboldt’s hat flies off his head and rolls along the stage as Tiboldt grunts in airless rage. Matt listens to Tiboldt’s helplessness in Zandow’s hold, and upon realising what he has done, all Zandow can do is curve around his master and push him out of the way so that Zandow takes the brunt of the force slamming off stage. He barrels into the first three rows of audience members, who are just now starting to wake up from their trance. Bones are breaking, chairs are snapping and people scream in confusion.

Matt briefly notes the sudden absence of Elektra, but focuses on the task at hand. He dashes over and captures Tiboldt in his grip.

“Where’s Blackwing?!” he demands.

Tiboldt quivers under Matt’s hold, straining to escape or to see where his Strong Man is. Matt slaps Tiboldt hard and repeats himself.

“He’s – he’s back stage! I’ll summon him if you don’t stop right now!” Tiboldt lies.

Matt grips the man beneath him by the collar and slams him against the stage, and Matt can’t help but grin, like all he needed was a rival.

“Tell me,” Matt begins evenly, “where he is. You are clearly not the man behind the plan, or responsible for that pathetic device. Don’t make me ask again, where is Blackwing?”

Tiboldt swallows, head twitching as he hears people in the audience noticing the sacks of their stolen possessions.

“Zandow!” Tiboldt commands, “Zandow! Remove this man from me!”

Matt’s grin widens when he hears Zandow get out of the crowd swarming him and instead of following his directives, he bolts toward the emergency exit.

“You fool! Don’t abandon me!”

Tiboldt writhes under Matt, and in response, Matt kicks him in the chest until the man goes limp. Tiboldt’s head lolls around on his neck and he can barely move now, his speech a dribbling drawl.

“Manfredi abandoned me too… after killing that politician’s daughter… that’s all he wanted from me and left me with that half wrecked hat. I had to fix it myself, I tried my best!”
Matt picks up on a telephone line opening up from the technician box. One of the techies there having dialled the Greek Police number starts to report what is happening. Matt steps off Tiboldt and picks up the hat. He holds it before the audience as he speaks loudly.

“This man here, Fitz Tiboldt, is not only responsible for the petty theft of your valuables, or the injuries of your friends and family by his henchmen. He is responsible for a disaster you may have heard about in Holland, where an explosion at a theme park killed hundreds of innocent people. As you have just heard, this was a targeted attack. If you allow your police to arrest this man, you will learn that not only is he a thief and responsible for animal cruelty, you will discover he is also a murderer, an assassin, and perhaps more."

After finishing his speech, Matt throws the hat on the ground and crushes it under his boot so that no one else can be manipulated by its powers. The crowd begins to erupt in a bubble of panic and fear and during this, Matt leaves Tiboldt’s now unconscious body and snatches up another baton which he throws towards a similar spot as before. This time, the baton follows the route but the end point connects the metal rod to the main light switch, the force of it scraping the plastic switch clean off in achieving to switching the lights off again.

The crowd’s panic intensifies, guards from the hall begin to enter from outside and subdue the panic. Matt uses the darkness to quickly slip up the stairs undetected, jump the railing, retrieve his backpack and exit out of an open window situated high in the back wall. As he jumps down into the garden below, he feels indents in the surface of the grass like that of heels, but the confusing thought is discarded when he hears sirens closing in on the hall.
(Cute af fanart by iwannabeadino. Visit here for high res)
Howl Era

Chapter Summary

Matt and Marci come to a head at Coachella, which leads to inevitable endings and new beginnings.

Chapter Notes

Back on schedule, woohoo!

This one's very Foggy central, so we get to see what Matt's dealing with through his eyes. Anyway, hope you guys like it :) i'd love to read your comments if you have something to say :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Part vii

[Howl era.]

xxxiv. we’re all in love

He spends a good couple of hours cleaning out the rental at a car wash. He had to make the inside presentable to make up for the damage on the outside, but months of travel has wrecked up the interior worse than he’d initially imagined. Still, it keeps his mind busy from thinking about meeting up with Matt again. One of these days he’s sure Matt’s not going to turn up and he usually doesn’t think beyond that point because he’s never been able to decide what he would do in that situation.

Most of the content in the back is junk. Old dirty clothes, garbage, empty bottles and tobacco bags and so much dirt. The latter of which is stunning to Foggy considering they barely have done any sightseeing at all, and yet it must get tracked in on their boots somehow. Once he’s cleared out all the garbage, he vacuums and even drives it through the machines to get the grime off the outsides.

Except he doesn’t get the deposit back. Not that he was expecting it all back. Getting just a small percentage of it would have made the cleaning worthwhile, but as it is, he may as well not have spent the time cleaning it out in the first place. He’ll add this to Marci’s debt to him, since she was the one to put the massive dent in the back anyway.

And because of the damage, the clerks aren’t very helpful in pointing Foggy in the right direction. Lucky the Athens airport isn’t too complex. He hoists bags over his shoulders and pushes the trolley packed with their instruments and equipment into the main airport. He’s early, but at least this way he can sit in the McDonald’s with a cheeseburger or something and his eyes on the door.
He wonders when he’ll get used to people staring at him at airports. If it wasn’t for his interesting baggage, maybe he’d be able to pass through unnoticed. Sometimes he’s jealous of Matt being unable to see how other people see. How blissful it must be to be unaware of judgement.

Foggy doesn’t spot his friend straight away. Matt’s clothed in all black which blends in with the rest of the bustling people in the airport. Makes it hard to discern between a cast shadow and a flesh figure. Foggy leaves the trolley out the front in the holding area and walks in. As he gets closer, Matt perks up and sits up straight, making it easier for Foggy to spot him. Pretty surprising that Matt’s earlier than him to their scheduled meeting spot.

Foggy approaches Matt who’s sitting on a red couch and he heaves the bags off his shoulders, placing them on the table in front of his friend. The chime attached to Matt’s travel bag dingles.

“Why’ve you got my bag?” Matt questions him.

Foggy frowns, “Hello, nice to see you’re alive and well.”

Matt bites his lip, “Sorry.”

Then, he extends a hand and Foggy takes hold of Matt’s forearm, pulls him in for a brief hug. He lets go and watches the way Matt cringers, or winces, he can’t tell the difference, but he is starting to suspect that Matt only goes to these boxing meet ups so he can get the shit beat out of him. How’s that for judgement?

He slides onto the seat beside Matt and sighs as he kicks his boots up on the opposite chair. People around him glare at him but he’s simultaneously too exhausted/relieved to be with Matt again to care now. He glances over at Matt, watches him pull his hoodie down around his neck. Looks like the kid’s stayed up all night too, the way his eyes are sullen and shoulders drooping now like he can’t hold his own head up.

“Are you alright?” Foggy asks, gently touching Matt’s shoulder.

Matt remains still for a moment, then nods and changes the subject, “Is Marci with you?”

Foggy grits his teeth, “About that… I’ve got good and bad news.”

“Give me the bad first,” Matt says quickly.

“Sure,” Foggy takes his feet off the chair as he sits up straight, turning in toward Matt. “The bad news is that the Coachella organisers want to know if we’re going to accept their invitation or not. I mean, never in the history of Coachella has any band rejected an invitation. Now, I know you’re not ready to go back to the United States yet, but if we don’t accept soon we’ll be letting down our fans who have already bought tickets to see us, and Coachella will fill our spot with some other band and we may as well be banned from playing the festival ever again, let alone any other festival the organisers are connected to ever again.”

Matt clasps his hands between his thighs, “I’m not done here yet.”

“Foggy,” Matt starts, tapping the table with his hand just once, “I think you’re overreacting. It’s just one show. We’ll be able to play other festivals, I’m sure.”
“But they’re all connected! I think we should give them an answer. They pay good too.”

Matt’s still, thinking, then says, “I’m extending our tour here.”

Foggy scowls, “you don’t get to decide everything for us. You’re not the self-appointed leader of the band, you know.”

Matt cocks his head to the side, his brow furrowed, as if shocked at Foggy’s words.

Foggy folds his arms across his chest and slumps in the seat, “We’ll talk about this later with Marci too. Anyway, the good news is that NME has asked us to give a speech at this year’s round of awards. The thing is, Marci and I only found about it by chance. We just happened to catch the announcement on TV. Marci’s on a flight to London as we speak.”

“That’s meant to be good news?”

“We were asked to speak about the garage rock revival scene, or something. I’m not entirely sure what but we had to be there by 6pm and that wasn’t possible with the time we had arranged to met you.”

“So you let Marci go alone?”

“You’re asking me that like I had some kind of choice. Besides, it’s better her go than me, and have her pick you up. She’s got eyes to kill you, you know. And to think I used to be the one who she wanted nothing to do with.”

“Well, then we’re flying to London too, right?”

“That’s why I brought everything,” Foggy breathes deeply, “We might be able to join her before she does anything we’ll all regret. Look on the bright side. We haven’t played in shows in the UK yet and they love us there. What’s a better excuse to go and spread some love with our fans?”

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Their flight’s delayed which means that by the time they arrive in London, it’s far too late to join Marci on stage. In fact, the staff won’t let them in even though they’re on the guest list. Instead they get shuffled outside the exit of the venue and the two end up smoking half a pack between them as they wait for the awards to be over.

Foggy had thought smoking might make Matt less restless. Doesn’t seem to do much. Matt’s never been an easy flier. Can’t sleep. Always fidgeting. Any slight noise seems to disturb him. Foggy wouldn’t blame the guy if he’s afraid of the plane plummeting mid-flight. Taking off and landing is scary enough as it is, seeing everyone strapped in, the way their heads vibrate in the seats when the momentum peaks. It’s why Foggy doesn’t mind Matt’s preference to renting vans than flying all over the place.

As for Matt’s boxing meet, he doesn’t say much on the topic. Must have been itching too much from two flights in one day to speak on it. Not that he ever says anything about his meet ups anyway. Foggy’s hoping that one day Matt’s going to divulge the whole happenings to him, if not mention something about it in passing. He doesn’t even care of it’s boring, he’s just curious. He’s not going to push Matt for answers if he doesn’t want to give them though. He doesn’t want to be
that guy. Still, travel exhaustion doesn’t give Matt the right to be a jerk.

So the aggressive smoking isn’t all to service Matt’s nerves.

“Hey, weren’t you meant to be quitting?” he quips.

Matt shakes his head, “Tobacco’s okay, for now. Especially now.”

He gives Foggy a shy smile and Foggy rolls his eyes at himself because God damn it, this guy can get away with anything by just showing a bit of teeth.

They’re sitting on the ground near the exit of the venue. Cage fencing acts as barriers which line the exit all the way to the pickup bay. On either side of these barriers, fans and reporters mingle in restless disquiet, waiting for the show to end in the hopes of catching the attention of their favoured stars. Matt offers the cigarette to Foggy and he takes it between his fingers. There’s enough in the pack still that they could have one each, but he likes to share. Likes that Matt doesn’t mind it this way. Likes that there’s that small bit of connection between them still, when their lips taste the ghost of lips before.

Foggy passes the cigarette back and starts to tie up his hair. He combs his fingers through unsuccessfully, gets stuck on knots at every angle.

“I’m sure she’ll be fine,” Foggy says offhandedly, “I made sure she as clean before she went on the plane,” he chuckles, “I actually owe her money for betting that she wouldn’t be allowed on.”

“Hm. That may be true, but doesn’t mean she wasn’t high when she went in there,” Matt replies. “It’s going to be broadcast live. She’s not an idiot.”

“She is an addict, though,” Matt points out. “And she’s also our friend,” Foggy reminds Matt, “and we need to help her out, not vilify her.”

Suddenly, Matt gets to his feet. Foggy slowly follows, and moments later, he hears a commotion from inside. Two guards burst through the swinging glass doors and throw Marci out onto the ground. Foggy rushes over to her and tries to help her to her feet. The fans and reporters squash themselves against the barriers, faces imprinted by the grid fencing.

“Marci! Are you okay? What happened?” Foggy’s asking Marci.

She only laughs hysterically. Laughs, and laughs, and can’t stop laughing even when she gets on her feet.

“We need to get out of here,” Matt says almost inaudibly.

Foggy nods, then hooks his arms between both his friends and leads them down the narrow pathway to the pickup bay. There, the fencing ends, enabling reporters and fans to crowd around the taxis. This makes it difficult for them to get into the taxi without being bombarded by people shoving music paraphernalia and mics into their faces. When the taxi doors are securely shut, it begins to move off. Even so, Marci does not cease to laugh, wedged between Foggy and Matt.

“What’s so funny? What did you do?” Foggy insists.

He tries to hold her chin to look into her eyes, see if she’s taken anything, but she wriggles free.

“I didn’t do anything!” She replies.
“You must have! What did you say?” Matt grouches.

“I didn’t say anything, either!” She cries, wiping away tears of laughter.

“What do you mean?” Foggy presses.

“For seven whole minutes,” she explains, “I didn’t say a fucking thing! Oh man, oh Foggy, you would’ve loved this guy. He looked like Jesus. Might be more down Matt’s alley than yours,” she slaps Matt’s thigh and pulls at her sore cheeks, “God, you should’ve seen their faces! They didn’t know what to do. I can’t believe I lasted that long!”

“Why’d you do that?!” Foggy questions.

Marci shrugs, still holding her cheeks, “I didn’t know what to say! Take it as a political statement or some shit. The press is gonna love it.”

“The press is going to hate us,” Matt says, and Foggy positively swears Matt glares at him, “And we’re helpless to spin it the way we want to.”

“Let them interpret it the way they want! Guys, I’ve just performed an art piece.”

“Did you take anything?” Foggy questions.

He pushes up the sleeves of Marci’s jacket to inspect her arms, but she pulls away.

“Let go of me!”

“Are you high?!”

“I’m not! Quit accusing me!”

“I can’t think of any other reason why you would have done that,” Foggy says.

Marci inhales and closes her eyes, “Listen,” then exhales, “I can’t believe I have to explain this shit… I didn’t know what to say. It wasn’t like I was up there to accept an award or anything. I was just meant to say something prolific about the scene but it was obvious that they wanted one of you guys up there, not the drummer. Nobody cares about the drummer. Let alone if I’m a lady drummer. So I decided to fuck ‘em and say nothing.”

She turns her head slowly to Matt and adds, “thought you might appreciate what I did, Matthew. Or are you still mad about the money, because I promise you, I will pay you back.”

Matt pauses, “I don’t know Marci, doesn’t sound like it was much of a, uh, statement.”

Marci blinks, then bursts out laughing. Matt smiles and Foggy can’t help but laugh too. It’s moments like these he thinks everything’s going to be okay. Moments when everyone pretends they’re okay with each other…

After their laughter subsides, Foggy notices the volume of the radio turned up, presumable so that the driver could drown out their conversation. A strange look overcomes Matt’s face, one of deep concentration mixed with confusion.

“I guess we should start booking some venues while we’re here,” he says more to Matt than to himself.

He expects some kind of response, but Matt’s face doesn’t alter.
“Matt?”

Matt tilts his head, “hm, sorry?”

Foggy pauses, “I said, we should-“

Marci interrupts him, “did you hear that? They’re playing in Oxford tomorrow night.”

“Who are?” Matt asks quickly.

Marci exclaims, “we should go see them!”

“See who, what? I wasn’t listening to the radio,” Foggy admits.

“The Yeah Yeah Yeahs,” Marci explains, “They’re a rock band, and the lead’s a woman! Haven’t you heard of them? I guess they are pretty new.”

“You want to go?” Foggy asks.

“Yeah, so long as this guy’s not coming,” she says, pointing her thumb at Matt, “don’t worry! I’m joking! We’ll all go together. How long has it been since we’ve had a night off all together huh?”

“I’m in love with her!” Marci announces.

Reds and yellows and orange, the singer was a lion on stage, a flurry of colour in costume and an orgasmic voice that sent Marci writhing and Foggy wishing Matt had ended up going with them just to hear the way she sang.

“Dance with me, Foggybear,” Marci coos, entangling her hands in his.

She sways and lifts their hands high, forming a triangle space between them. She lets go and instead wraps her arms around Foggy’s neck, giving him a wicked smile.

Foggy places his hands on her waist as she begins to cut the space between them and he says, “I thought you needed to pee.”

She grins, “I do! But I can’t stand still in this line.”

Her silvery white hair is illuminated in the club lights. A sea of blue and red, like a siren emerging from the ocean, her eyes glistening with purpose. The dance music is an odd juxtaposition to the rock music that had just been playing. It reminds him of back in their earlier days when they had to set up and unpack their own equipment, during which time the venue would play loud music over the speakers. Sometimes they’d only have fifteen minutes tops to get it all done before the club shuffled on the next act.

They’ve been pretty lucky on their European tour. Booking small venues and being the headliner of the night. After their encores finish, it’s usually time for the clubs or bars or little corner shops to close, so after their set it’s just this grouping silence as the chattering crowd disperses out of the venue. As for seeing shows himself, he hasn’t had the chance to catch them really. Sure, he’s been able to watch a few openers for his band, but he hasn’t bought tickets to see a popular band is what
he’s saying. Which also means he’s quite unused to music that isn’t their own filling the space after a show. Guess you get that from a bigger venue. People want to stay longer when there’s music playing still. Even if it isn’t live.

He feels Marci’s rough thumb on his forehead. She traces his eyebrows, like she’s flattening out the creases. Then she presses a chaste kiss on his lips.

“I’m sorry he didn’t come,” She says softly.

Foggy looks above him. Fog from the machines still pumps through the club. A blue light fans over the dense crowd like an alien scan. One wide sweep, down, then up again. A red light counters the movement in waves, short bursts of colour like firing a laser.

“He was tired,” Foggy says.

“I can only fix so much without him meeting us halfway.”

“Hey, are you guys in the line or what?” A woman asks from behind them.

Foggy looks down and sees the blue and red lights flash over a large gap between him and the bathroom. He apologises and takes Marci’s hand, leading her toward the passageway which leads to the stalls.

She snatches her hand away, “you’re not coming in with me.”

“Why not?”

She looks pained, “Can’t you trust me?”

Foggy nods, but he watches her enter the bathroom until the glint off her hair disappears behind a closed stall door. He waits for a couple of minutes in the entrance to the bathroom. From here he can glare at the large mirror on the wall and see all the stalls lining the room. Except he doesn’t get to stay long. A group of women push past him and force him back out into the club. He leans by the wall, agitated by each person who leaves in case it’s Marci.

She shouldn’t be much longer. If she is, he’ll go back in and kick down the stall door himself and she better not be trying anything. They might have dumped her stash in Greece but Marci’s thrifty. If she wants something, she’ll easily be able to get it, even without any cash. That’s why, Foggy’s decided, he’s going to be with Marci as much as he can. Best way to keep her out of trouble. Best way for him not to feel dead inside if the feeling seems to be mutual with Marci. He needs to call his Dad. He wonders what time it is. He’s had a bit to drink but maybe the bartender would let him borrow the phone. Wonder if he wouldn’t mind making an international call.

He scans the bar for a space, an opening between bodies, and as he’s looking, he thinks he spots the lead singer of the Yeah Yeah Yeahs perched on a bar stool. His vision blurs, blue and red fanning into his eyes and he closes and opens his eyes again before he squints to look at her better. She’s quite pretty, not his type though. She’s little, that’s the thing, and Foggy likes a bit more meat on the body. Undeniably, she’d looked grand up on the stage dressed up in a sequined body suit with wings made of wool. And there she sits now in a plain black dress and she’s almost unrecognisable, if not for her distinct red makeup plastered over her face.

Foggy thinks that if there’s any musician he’d like to meet it would obviously be The Rolling Stones. Second, Bobbie Gillespie. Third, Neil Young tied with Bob Dylan. But if he ever met them… there’s so much he would want to ask them that he’d be worried about alienating them. It’s
such an odd business, being famous. Being a celebrity. He doesn’t much like talking to other musicians about anything but the music. He doesn’t want to know about their personal lives or what they do in their spare time. He just wants to talk music. The how’s, the why’s. It reminds him of something his Dad told him long ago. That to be a good musician you’ve got to be involved in the scene. Know other musicians. Jam with other musicians. Expand your horizon, etcetera. And he’s right. Foggy’s so out of the loop with current bands, at this rate he’ll end up making something completely unoriginal for their next record. Or be unable to find the influence to write anything at all.

Too much time spent moving from one place to another. Not enough time breathing. Or living.

He decides he’ll go and introduce himself. She might even know who he is. Who knows? She might even let him use her telephone to call his Dad. That would be nice. He is a little drunk but he can be charming sometimes, right? It’s not that hard, is it?

He pushes off the wall and is about to wander over when he notices she’s engaged in a conversation with someone already. His vision sways again and it’s not because he’s drunk this time, it’s because he can’t believe what he’s seeing. Familiar face, familiar jacket. Familiar glasses flashing a red reflection.

What’s he doing here?

Why’s he talking to her?

Why did he say he wasn’t coming, only to come and end up flirting with her?

Foggy grits his teeth, and he almost bites his tongue when Marci jumps up behind him and throws her arms around him. She kisses the back of his neck and in one split second there’s a gaping hole in his chest because for that millisecond he dreamt it was Matt giving him sweet affection. But no, his liar of a friend is sitting over at the bar he said he wouldn’t come to, with a ten out of ten girl and no, she’s touching his thigh now. Is this what’s been truly happening? Matt’s been following her around the world. Everything’s starting to make sense now. The sudden bookings of shows in random cities. The nights or days off to travel by himself, when actually he has been meeting up with her. He doesn’t even want to know what the sex is like considering how Matt looks when he comes back from those visits. Must be part of the secret. But why does it have to be a secret? Why can’t Matt just tell him straight up he’s in a relationship with a woman and oh yeah, they happen to have some heavy bdsm sex on the regular. Why is it so hard for Matt to be honest with Foggy?

Marci slips around his front and even though she smells like burning plastic, he’s willing to pretend it smells sweet just so he can ignore the overwhelming sense of betrayal swelling in that gaping hole within him. He’s mad but he’s more alone and he’s madder at Matt than Marci because everyone’s finding an out except him, and at least Marci’s unabashedly honest about hers. So he kisses her, and pulls her close, and feels her breasts against his empty chest and feels the dip in her waist and the curve of her ass. And he wishes Matt would happen to look over and see, but of course he can’t see, and Foggy feels stupid for being petty and jealous but Matt being silent on what’s inside his heart is killing Foggy. It’s killing him with subtle hints and suggestions and nothing straight out, stringing him along.

Marci’s teeth are sharp in tiny craters across the enamel and her brittle lips are layered with gloss that tastes how the meth smells on her. He slithers a hand under her shirt and slips his fingers between the cup of her bra and when he massages her nipple she moans hot heat into his mouth. The heat skims over his jawline and neck as she hooks her chin over his shoulder, bending into Foggy’s touch.
“I’m so into this Foggybear,” she whispers into his ear, “but let’s get out of here.”

He kisses her head and then presses his forehead into her hair, “the hotel’s too far.”

He moves his hand down to the hem of Marci’s jeans and she chuckles as she takes hold of his wrist.

“Let’s go to the nearest. Give Matt a taste of his own medicine for skipping out on us.”

Foggy doesn’t dare look back at the bar to see if Matt’s still there, or if he’s run off with that woman already. He takes Marci’s hand and walks top speed out of the bar. They catch a taxi, ask for the nearest hotel and the room for a night’s expensive as hell but Marci’s practically grinding against him as he’s filling in the paper work and he’s beyond half hard anyway.

The room’s three times the size of any of the hotels they’ve stayed in before. He’s got room enough to pack in all his luggage and still find the room to lie down on the ground if he wants to. Tonight the room’s just for him and Marci. No one else. No baggage physical or mental permitted. So he tries to put aside his anger toward Matt and focus on what’s good for him. What’s making him feel okay for once.

As soon as their door shuts, Marci leaps on top of the bed and starts pulling her clothes off. Foggy takes off his boots and by the time he’s finished, Marci’s splayed out on top of the bed completely naked. She coaxes Foggy over with a beckoning finger and Foggy shrugs off his leather jacket as he chases after her, chucking the jacket behind him. He climbs over Marci and kisses her shoulders, her neck, her lips.

His nose bumps against hers, “Where’s your septum ring?”

She holds his gaze firm, and says evenly, “I traded it.”

Foggy sets his lips in a line, then moves down to kiss her throat to feel her pulse under his lips.

“Are you mad?”

He runs a hand down her sternum and moves to kiss the swell of her breasts.

“Mmmmm,” he replies between kisses.

“You’re still going to eat me out though, right?”

“Mmmmm.”

He sucks on one nipple and massages the other, then trails kisses down to her stomach. He spreads out the skin with his fingers and watches the skin pale under his touch. With his pinkie fingers he tickles the sensitive skin just above her bush and gleefully watches the way her muscles twitch and shudder at the touch.

“Foggy…”

He moves his hands down to her thighs squeezed tight and coaxes them open. Fingers creeping up inner thighs, massaging, slipping down hot skin. He kneels between her legs and starts to spread her labia.

“Foggybear wait…”

He immediately finds her clitoris and starts with giving it a soft kiss. Before he can start to apply
any tongue pressure there, Marci half sits up.

“I’m not your solution.”

Foggy turns to kiss Marci’s thigh and glances up at her. He thinks that if he stops concentrating he’ll start thinking about other things and start remembered how furious he is and wait, what did she say?

“…don’t think I want to be with you. I do love you, but I also know you. You’re doing this because you’re mad at Matt for being the selfish dick he is. And Foggy, I’m happy to be here for you, and I’m ecstatic that you’re mad enough to wanna eat me out you big bear, but I’m not a solution. You can’t rely on me in the same way I can’t rely on you to meet my needs.”

Foggy thumbs her clitoris and asks, “are you done?”

“Y-yeah…”

“Then let me finish eating you out already.”

“Okay.”

As the night wanes into early morning, the orange hues of the lights outside the window are slowly replaced by the natural rays of the sun. For hours Foggy is arrested by the sight of Marci in his arms. Her ghost skin glows in the morning light, then the purple bruises that speckle her arms begin to look like holes, like shadows are cast in craters along her sickly skin.

He removes himself from her sticky hold and goes to shower. He stands under the stream until his fingers start to wrinkle. He changes into his dirty clothes. There’s nothing to read except the bible in the bedside drawer, so he stands by the window, opens it a jar, and smokes with his cold fattened fingers. He knows Marci’s ready to get moving when he hears snorting.

They check out and call a taxi so they can check out of their original hotel. After collecting their luggage from their rooms, they’re just handing over the keys when Matt comes out of the elevator.

He looks relieved.

“Foggy?”

“We’re here,” Foggy replies.

“Are you checking out?” Matt asks.

His walking stick taps along the linoleum floor towards Foggy.

“Yeah.”

“Good, because we’re playing in Leeds tonight.”

Foggy sets up their show all by himself in front of about 200 people seated. 300 tops. The stage lights are pretty blinding, but every so often they flash around the hall. It’s such a strange venue. Leeds Town Hall. It irks Foggy that Matt would ever have chosen such a place. First off, it’s a seated venue. Second, it’s as decorative as a cathedral. Even the ceiling is magnificent. It feels
more like the kind of venue an opera or a ballet would be held in, rather than a rock concert. And on top of all that, Foggy’s wracking his brain trying to piece the scraps of information together.

He knows that Matt’s been chasing someone across the globe. Well, it’s a guess, but it makes sense so it must be the truth, right? So Matt’s been chasing a girl and has been booking shows close to her. But the thing that’s debunking that whole theory is that inside the foyer, he hadn’t seen a single advertisement for the Yeah Yeah Yeahs playing in the Hall itself or around Leeds. According to Marci, the radio announcement had only declared three shows in the UK. The one in Oxford, one in Edinburgh and one extra in Dublin. In fact, the only kind of advertisements he’d seen were for political balls, fundraisers for various charities and plays. So why this place? Foggy thought he’d finally come to understand the mysterious workings of Matt’s brain, but in just under 24 hours he’s back to square one.

Their opener is a classical performance over the speakers. Foggy steps behind the stage and goes down to the foyer to use the pay phone. He calls his Dad. Ed doesn’t pick up. The usher glares at him as she holds the door ajar for him. Foggy tries calling three more times. Wrong time zone. He hangs up the phone and as he opens the door of the booth, a flier flits in front of him. He glances at it only briefly. A picture of some smarmy man with a slogan promoting the war on drugs. Even stranger that Matt would pick a place that supports this kind of stuff.

The usher hurries him in and he returns back stage shivering with anticipation. He doesn’t feel ready for the show at all. Marci runs through the set list with him and he ends up changing it to the same as three night’s previous because he can’t get his mind to fixate on a new order. When the lights dim and the classical music ceases, Foggy picks up his bass. He has to bite his nails so that he doesn’t start to fidget with the strings as he takes his spot on the stage.

Foggy would like to believe that if Matt can’t see Foggy, at least he’ll be able to see Foggy’s anger searing through Matt’s darkness. The walls Foggy’s built around himself are getting taller but thinner, rolling paper thin and Marci thinks he’s too good for her, and Matt thinks he’s too good for Foggy. He’s left trapped in this tapering tower, the heavy smoke room, inescapable stench that reminds him of a wealth of good times outside the walls. But inside, inside he’s forced to be alone. Abandoned.

He doesn’t entirely mean to but he can’t help playing aggressively in the end. His fingers are too fidgety, mind too busy with running around and around again. He just wants to be consulted. He wants to understand too. Understand why Matt does the things that he does. Why Matt thought he had to keep her a secret. If keeping that secret meant that the something between he and Matt is still somehow salvageable, if that spark ever existed at all.

There isn’t much of a break between each song. Foggy doesn’t let Matt talk to the crowd. Keeps fuming, strumming. And for some reason, Matt seems to encourage it. Maybe Matt misinterprets it as jamming because he’s trying to match Foggy’s playing. Dials up the amps and pedals the reverb and Foggy’s playing his bass like it’s not a bass at all. It reminds him of back when he was a teenager, when he would listen to metal with Mahoney in his Ma’s living room. That scene was about playing as fast as you could and still managing to sound good. Still having distinguishable riffs and a distinct sound apart from all the noise. But that’s kind of what Foggy’s trying to achieve. Noise. Loud, deafening noise and who cares about the crowd because he never wanted to play this show in the first place. All that would help the most is if Marci could keep up with the beat.

His fingers start to chap and bleed and that’s a sign he should slow down but he doesn’t. The only reason he does is because he’s forced to. About halfway through their set, which is going faster than anyone had anticipated, a flock of techies start spilling out onto the sides of the stage. They’re frantically waving their arms in the air and trying to mouth words at Foggy and Marci. Others start
unplugging cords right from the wall socket until he and Matt are playing dry and the techies can be heard telling them to evacuate.

**xxxv. complicated situation**

The scaffolding shudders from the wind, shakes the very structure that grounds the equipment to the grassy field. Matt suspects that if the wind gets any stronger, it’ll sweep up the whole stage like some sort of musical ascension. Despite the poor weather conditions, the crowd seems unperturbed by it. They’re tightly knit together in the mosh pit, glued together by their damp raincoats. Matt can hear their impatience though. Some express understanding, but most complain about the time it’s taking to set up. Matt can’t blame them. The longer it takes Foggy and the Coachella techies to set up, the less time BRMC will have to play and even more likely that the following bands will be pushed out of schedule because of them.

“No, you can’t put the pedals there because the amps have to go there,” Foggy’s arguing with the festival provided techies.

Matt sighs. He leans against the railing of the ramp down to the back stage area. He can hear Marci’s shrill voice down on the lawn, her voice heightened by adrenalin and silicon drugs. Glasses clink and alcohol spills out over a plastic covered table but no one makes a hurried attempt to clean it. Another waft of wind passes through the grounds. Not as strong as the last, but due to previous irritation, a massive poster hooks free from the side scaffolding and folds out over half the crowd. Security guards are in a fuss over pulling the large sheet off alarmed heads.

“He’s blind, do you realize? You need to let me put the pedals here because he’s used to that.”

If it was up to Matt, they’d be coasting along in the UK making money off the slogan music journalists gave them. Sure, it might’ve taken a lot longer to pay off their $11,000 debt but ‘the band who broke the floor’ works a lot better than ‘the band who was silent for seven minutes’, or in this case, seven minutes and counting.

The reason why they have such a large debt is kind of his fault anyway. He hadn’t meant to break the 150 year old floorboards. He’d just meant to mess up Manfredi’s equipment stored underneath but with every success there’s a consequence whether it’s intentional or not. And here they are having accepted a gig that will pay off their debt straight away. If only Foggy hadn’t been so adamant about clearing their debts instantly… Matt could have pursued Manfredi and analysed the aftermath. Not only that, he could have investigated more about why Manfredi used the Blackwing alias. And, more importantly, how the mind control device he equipped Fitz Tiboldt with is connected to the device he encountered during the Better Tomorrow initiative gig way back in Hell’s Kitchen. It all seems like years ago, but these similar mind controlling events keep popping up and they have to be connected somehow. Someone out there is planning something sinister and Matt’s only standing at the periphery of it all.

Still, Matt couldn’t ignore how furious Foggy was. Something had changed in the twenty-four hours since Matt made Foggy and Marci go to the Yeah Yeah Yeahs gig without him. Perhaps Matt had let slip his presence and Foggy had seen him there. Or something else was going on. Whatever it was, Matt hadn’t seen Foggy like this before. On one hand, he can’t bear to fight with Foggy. Foggy’s his best friend in the entire world. Everything needs to be okay between them. And yet, he had this tickling feeling within him that kept encouraging him to push Foggy. Push him down on the dusty ground and see if he gets up to fight back, so Matt can test if Foggy can actually
get something out of him. Make Matt say things that he can’t say on his own free will. Make him do things that he won’t do unless he’s broken…

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- Mission: make the devil pale -

“The problem with trying to steer Matthew in the right direction is that he’s far too unpredictable. You may put this to his drug lifestyle but I believe Matthew is smarter than that. He never stays in one place for longer than a day. Perhaps he knows he is being followed, even if there are no signs of it. Instead, his speed illustrates not messiness – of your derision – but eagerness. An eagerness which takes him across countries lifting only the lightest pebbles and misses the boulders buried deep. Secrets cold in stone but warmed by the molten rock beneath the Earth’s crust.”

“The trail is waiting for Matthew. You must guide him toward his destiny.”

“Further, the problem with Matthew is that he zigzags. We know that the Efteling was not the beginning and yet he kicked up dust where his feet should not yet have landed.”

“An entry point is an entry point.”

“This is true, but because of his untimely interference, predicting what would follow became difficult. Manfredi was spooked and left Tiboldt to carry on his mission alone which could not be completed without functioning equipment. Tiboldt then became a loose end which needed to be tied off. Here is when Matthew’s commitment was to be tested.

“Determining his place of stay has always been an easily discernable pattern. His preference relates to two factors. (1) The cheapest hotel and, (2) the closest hotel to the airport or otherwise main public transport interchange such as train or bus depot. The booking is always under Stahl’s name, the least known of the three. Such information can be discovered easily. Face to face contact is not necessary for this basic information. However, for making contact and luring Matthew into place, in person contact was necessary. After determining possible places of stay, wooing the hotel staff for specific room number details proved simple and effective. Matthew’s presence was discovered, the lure was placed and analysis of possible routes commenced.”

“And?”

“Matthew’s commitment to his destiny was illustrated when he attended Tiboldt’s secret Circus sans band mates. I am confident that we can now move on to the next phase. I have since analysed his travel pattern and have isolated that a Southern European pathway is most likely, taking in consideration the recent activity in Greece. Next point of contact is due in Croatia where he will be lured to the Vatican City as requested.”

“Good. You have done well, child, which is fortunate due to your disclosure of incorrect personal coordinates.”

A pause.

“I keep track of all of my students, child. Don’t think that because my focus is on Matthew, that I
am not also aware of your own movements. He will not follow you.”

“He will not. He does not know who I am, nor does he have any reason to travel to England. Admittedly, there is a chance but a slim one. His band has been requested to speak at an awards show but our embargo on his label representatives ban them from communicating. He will not be aware of the arrangement, and thus will not be in the country.”

“He better not. Now, remember child, you are under cover. This lifestyle I have permitted for you is not your destiny, nor is it Matthew’s. Do not lie to me again.”

He hangs up. Then she throws the disposable phone at the bathroom wall and watches it shatter against the tiles.

_I got a man who makes me want to kill_

_I got a man who makes me want to kill_

_I got a man who makes me wanna…_

_There he is_

- she chokes. There. He. Is.

Her target.

Front row, wedged up against the barrier.

There’s a smile on his face and she knows it’s because he’s read her. Read her reaction.

Her voice strains on the line:

_There he is_

For the sake of her cover, she has to continue as if nothing is wrong. Lucky for her, this is the best mission disguise she’s ever had the fortune of taking on.

_We’re all gonna burn in hell_

_I said we’re all gonna burn in hell_

_Because we do what we gotta do real well_

_Yeah, well and we got a fever to tell_

_I said we got the fever to tell_
I got a man who makes it for me

I got a man who makes the devil pale

I got a man who makes me want to kill

Stick wants her to kill the man called Matthew Murdock and let Daredevil rise from the remains. And yet, she is conflicted in herself about following orders when she’s up on the stage, doing what she wants to do. Yes, being in a band may be a disguise but Stick was the one who encouraged her to use her skills to reel Matthew in. Yes, she has been trained since a young age to fight in Stick’s war, but she’s always been writing songs when she wasn’t fighting. She loves this identity because it’s her own. She had always wondered if Stick ever listened to her music. Really listened to it. To the core of the lyrics, but of course he hasn’t or he’d realized that it isn’t just a cover for her. Just like playing guitar was never just Matthew’s hobby.

Part of it’s because she knows she’s good. She knows the songs she’s written over the years are raw and sexy and having confidence in her work is paying off in her band’s popularity. She gets to prance around on a stage singing and screaming in ridiculous costumes, with sweat rolling off her skin and the only person she’s fighting when she does all this is Stick. Except even if she does interact with her target, Stick is going to find out one way or another. May as well have some fun with it.

After her encore she heads to the dressing room. Her touring stylist helps her out of her costume, then she changes into a plain black dress. She leaves her makeup on, too hasty to see if Matthew is still around. She feels giddy thinking about how he found her. Where had she gone wrong? She was certain she’d left the Circus long before Matthew finished the job. Then how did he know where she was when it takes so long for her to find him every few days?

She comes out into the club. The crowd is still slowly dispersing, some kick empty cans and rubbish which scatters the floor. She scans the room. Lights flash over to the beat of electronic music. She’s sure she’ll find him. She’s sure he’s going to wait for her. After a minute of looking, she spots him sitting lazily at the bar.

She crosses the floor. It’s impossible not to step on rubbish but even if she had managed to tip toe around them, that wouldn’t stop Matthew from detecting her presence. She slides onto a stool beside him.

“Elektra?” he questions.

Oh, it’s so believable, she thinks. How people would treat him if they knew what he could do.

“Matthew,” she replies.

“Fancy seeing you here,” Matthew says to her.

“Hm, that’s my line.”

It’s a lie to say that she didn’t think this was a possibility. It was just at such a low percentage that she didn’t entertain it to the slightest degree. And yet, here he is, right beside her in Oxford, England. He’s not meant to be here, and she’s definitely not meant to talk to him, and since Stick has eyes everywhere she has to make sure she does the right thing. Maybe in the future there will
come a time where she can tell him all the she knows, and they can talk on a level of mutual understanding. She can dream, right?

Matthew’s presence now means she can direct him to the next point of interest, even if it is partially too early. She thinks it will work out better this way. Even if Matthew somehow discovers he and his band have been invited to play at one of the most famous music festivals in the world, he’ll want to stay in England after she puts him on course. She can’t help but grin in excitement. She’s looking forward to seeing how Matthew deals with the situation. All she has to do now is lead him up to it.

“You didn’t tell me you were a musician,” Matthew addresses her.

“Would it have made you more attracted to me?” She quips.

She watches him smirk, “I thought you were just a crazy fan.”

She laughs and brushes her fingers along his thigh. A tinge of red flushes over his cheeks and she coos, “I thought I was making that obvious.”

She retracts her fingers and rests her elbow on the bar, her chin in her palm as she gazes at Matthew. She has spent so much time tracking him, learning about him, listening to his music, that getting to talk to him now outside the constraints of a mission is quite profound to her. Stick would certainly overlook her slip up if she is successful.

Matthew raises his hand and asks the bartender, “Macallan, neat. And, a uh, vodka martini for the lady.”

Elektra arches her back, “perceptive, Matthew.”

“Thank you, I try,” Matthew replies.

“But I can order my own drinks,” she hails the bartender, “Tequila. Mescal if you have it.”

The bartender nods. She watches him attend to her drink first, then slides it across. He waits for payment form Matthew before starting working on his.

“Do all musicians receive free drinks or only the ones playing?” Matthew asks more to her than to the bartender.

“Hm, depends if you tell me how you discovered me,” she retorts.

Matthew smiles. He has a nice face, a face that she’s seen in a thousand pictures but which is incomparable in person. A nice round nose over full lips, fluffy brown hair, a bit of stubble. She likes that look. And his eyes are most certainly dead. They stare directly forward, like he’s looking into the future at the lives he will surely take.

“Where’s the fun in that?” He says before taking a sip of his drink.

Elektra drinks too. All that she’s confirmed so far is that Matthew has identified her as the front woman of the Yeah Yeah Yeahs. So long as it remains this way, she will be safe. Although it will take a lot of digging for Matthew to discover their true ties.

“The circus… you left halfway through,” Matthew starts.

“Again, Matthew, that’s my line.”
“Why did you invite me?” he asks quickly.

“I didn’t invite just you, Matthew. I invited your friends too, but they must not like entertainment. They’re not here tonight?”

“But you were counting on at least one of us to attend,” Matthew presses.

She eyes him, then leans in to whisper in his ear, “I’ll let you in on a secret. I’m not lying when I say I’m a fan.”

She leans back and observes him. The frown in his brow. He’s reading her. Now for the words she needs Matthew to take as gospel.

“The truth is quite banal, darling, but I shall explain myself. The simple reason why I was in the audience of such a distasteful display in the first place was all because of a suitor of mine. I am rich, but in my Father’s opinion, a lady can never be wealthy enough. He arranged Joseph for me, who, naturally, fell in love with me. Who wouldn’t?”

Elektra winks at the bartender. She has been told that Matthew’s hearing is so acute that he can hear the heartbeats of people buildings away from him. She wonders if he can hear the delicate flutter of her lashes against her skin, if the minute movements in her facial expressions are detectable by him. She leaves the blushing bartender alone and focuses on Matthew again, who is waiting for a follow up.

“Of course, Joseph was far more interested in his toys than in me or my passion for music. However, our marriage means he will be partnered with my wealth, and thus can do much more with his silly little gadgets. See, Matthew, he was the one who invited me to the circus. He had envisioned to wow me with the power of his inventions,” she says in a mocking tone.

Matthew’s eyebrows raise.

Good.

“Now Matthew, won’t you believe me that I’m a fan? I heard you were touring close by, so I thought I’d make a gamble and invite you all.”

“I would hardly call Bucharest being close to Athens,” Matthew points out.

Time to throw in some fan gimmicks.

“I know that we hadn’t met before, darling,” she coos, tracing the top of his hand with her fingers lightly, “but going from interviews you all seem very lovely, and very willing to meet fans. I knew that at least one of you, if not all of you, would come. And I could show you off to Joseph as my handsome partners of the night. Surely he would take the hint that I am blatantly uninterested in him, and highlight how truly ignorant he is in the music scene, all in one fell swoop.”

“You’re right, it was quite a gamble,” Matthew says.

“You came, didn’t you? My whole plan would have worked too if Joseph had shown up to his own date. The moment I realized he was never coming, I decided it was time to leave. I had, rather embarrassingly, been abandoned by both men…”

Matthew creases his lips, but before he can say anything, Elektra drops the next lure.

“I’ll tell you what, Matthew. You are a true blessing to see. Fate, I should think, because I travelled
all the way to England just to get away from Joseph, only to discover he has invited me to another one of his shows. Manfredi’s invention extravaganza! He’s insisted he would be positively present this time around…”

“Did you say Manfredi?”

She knots her lips in a tight smile. That useless Tiboldt couldn’t keep the name to himself in the end. Surely Matthew is connecting the dots now.

“Poor man just won’t take a hint,” Elektra continues, “Funny little machines are only going to interest me if they’re musical instruments."

“Is it a, uh, another circus?”

She laughs, “No, no. He’s quite done with that childish act. He’s holding some kind of event to show off his creations at the Leeds Town Hall. Lots of wealthy people are meant to be attending. People who all know who I am and whom I’d rather not go through the pains of having conversations with. On the contrary, I’d much rather attend another circus than be ground to dust from boredom at such an unentertaining event as that. Oh darling, wouldn’t it be lovely if you could be my plus one! What a laugh we would have!”

It’s obvious Matthew is already thinking about his next course of action, his brows furrowed, lips pursed. Fantastic.

“Sweetie, don’t give me that look. It was only a silly suggestion. I know you’re a very busy man.”

She touches his wrist, folds her fingers around and thumbs underneath his arm. And now for a bit of murder.

“Enough of the story of my excruciating life. I want to talk about you. Do you find it hard to juggle your alternate identities?”

She watches his fingers grip the glass, his back stiffening.

“You must know what I mean. Don’t you ever hear about celebrities complaining that they can’t walk down the street without being recognised?”

“I’m not at that point yet,” Matthew smiles wanly.

“And who knows if you ever will be,” She replies slyly, “Whereas I, Elektra Natchios of Athens, have shot to fame and I am forced to embrace the idea of everyone knowing everything about me. But that’s alright. I can only be one person and the one person I show the world has to be the truest element of myself. The less secrets I have to hide, the less journalists will care and instead focus on the music. And that’s what matters most to me.”

“Who I am as a musician and who I am as… not… are not the same people.”

“Oh, Matthew. You cannot conflate the two, can you? It must be hard living that way... When there’s silence on a topic, people are naturally curious. They want to know what you’re not saying. I say, be honest with yourself and with others. That way I have nothing to hide and nothing else to tell.”

“That’s not true.”

Her heart catches in her throat, “oh?”
“Everyone has secrets they won’t share, no matter who’s asking.”

She removes her hand from Matthew’s and says, “the issue is not about what the secrets are, darling. It’s why they are secrets. If you’re hiding some part of yourself, you aren’t your true self. And if you live like that Matthew, you must live a very difficult and taxing life.”

“Sometimes it can’t be helped.”

“People are going to find out about you even if you don’t want them to,” Elektra says, “Just look at us.”

“God has a plan for each of us that we don’t always understand or agree with.”

Elektra slides off her stool and leans into Matthew’s side, “So you really are a Christian rock band.”

She dances her fingers across Matthew’s chest.

“We’re not.”

“God’s plan… what part don’t you agree with?” Matthew’s muscles feel firm under her touch. She watches his Adam’s apple hitch as she sculpts the shape of his neck with her hand. “Don’t tell me you don’t see truth in my philosophy…”

She lifts her fingers over his stubbled chin and runs her thumb over his plump lips. She pulls in close and whispers in his ear, “do you want to get out of here?”

Matthew swallows, then says, “No.”

She smiles in defeat and backs off, “There’s the truth.”

“No, I mean, uh, I should get back. My f-friends are probably wondering where I am.”

She shrugs, “suit yourself, Matthew.”

Honestly she’s a little disappointed. She would have loved to have some fun with him. She could finally see what’s underneath his clothes. Instead, she plants a kiss on Matthew’s cheek before sauntering away from the bar.

“I heard you,” Matthew calls out.

She turns stiff, “Pardon?”

“I heard you on the radio.”

“You really do have good ears, don’t you?”

[Hold >> to return to original position]
“Hey, are you Matthew?” the man asks as he climbs up the ramp.

Matt stands up straight, hands still wrapped around the rail, “Uh, yeah. Who are you?”

The man holds out his hand, “Anatoly Ranskahov. I’ve heard a lot of great things about BRMC from my kid brother, Vladimir.”

Anatoly retracts his hand and shakes his head.

“Your… Vladimir’s brother? Of course,” Matt nods, “The Verve are headlining.”

“My brother would be here today if he wasn’t, er…” he trails off, a sense of panic within, then says, “I’ll be honest with you pal. Even though my brother has told me about your band, I haven’t gotten around to listening to your stuff. You know what it’s like.”

Matt nods, “no one ever warns you how little time you have when you tour.”

“That’s right. It’s just playing, travelling, sleeping, shitting,” Anatoly laughs, “well, it’s been a long time coming, our meeting. Mind if I sit in on your gig? I heard you have a pretty good drummer too.”

A techie rushes off the stage and nudges Matt’s forearm, “It’s ready. Need some help?”

Matt flinches away from the techie, “I’m good. Go get Marci.”

“Let’s have a drink after,” Anatoly suggests as he takes Matt’s position on the rail.

Matt flicks out his stick and taps his way on stage until Foggy helps him to his spot. He can feel the audience rile up now. A mixture of annoyance and excitement. He folds back his stick and reaches for his guitar, slings the strap over his shoulder. Behind him, Marci traipses onto the stage, swinging her drumsticks around in the air. She drops one as she fails to catch it and it clatters across the stage. She giggles trying to collect it.

He and Foggy have to wait until Marci settles and starts a beat before they can start. Marci kicks the bass three times, then stops.

“What’s first?” she shouts at Foggy.

Foggy half covers the mic and grunts over his shoulder, “Spread Your Love.”

The crowd erupts with cheers at the mention of the song title. Below that noise, Matt hears Marci nod and sits at the ready. Foggy then begins the bass intro, except Matt misses his cue by no fault of his own. He realizes that his guitar hasn’t been plugged into the right amp. He trails the cord with his fingers and plugs it into the right box.

“Sorry, let’s try that again,” Matt says into the mic.

The crowd screams at them. Hoarse shouts of glee and anger and Foggy pointedly plays the intro again. This time Matt makes his cue, and it’s Marci to miss hers. Foggy and Matt loop around again and Foggy calls out her name.

“Come on, Marci.”

“I got it.”
Once the drums start, Matt gets into the groove of it. He’s glad Foggy organised the first three songs to be his. Matt’s head hasn’t caught up with the new time zone just yet. It’s like his mind has been left in Leeds, ungrounded in a state of timelessness. The warmth of the stage lights feel like the rays of the sun feeding artificial vitamin D into his skin. People can tell him it’s 3pm and his body will tell him it’s the opposite. Not sure when he should be asleep or awake.

The rising sea of events in Europe have formed a wave and crashed in England. A drain’s opened up there. A whirlpool trapping lives, sucking stories and lies down the lead pipes. And over here, in the US, it’s low tide. The dry sands stretch out for miles before the rich seawater begins to dampen the shore. The whirlpool’s getting stronger, taking more people, drowning more information, and he’s in the wrong place. He’s in the wrong place.

A machine could do the work of his playing, would do a better job of keeping time too. He bites his lip to bring his focus to the present. The crowd’s still restless. He suspects that even if they perform well, the audience is not going to be 100% satisfied. It’s not helping that he keeps falling behind Foggy. He must still be mad. He’s playing faster than usual and it’s showing in Marci’s inability to keep up.

Matt hears her hand seizing. She screams into the mic, a blood curdling scream that makes Foggy stop playing altogether and slam his hands against his ears. Marci’s drumsticks clatter to the ground.

“What the hell, Marci?!” Foggy cringes.

Marci huffs and kicks off her stool. She marches straight off the stage and snatches up her purse. Matt knows what she’s going for.

“Marci, get back here,” he warns her.

She flips him off, thinking he wouldn’t be able to see it, and then continues rummaging through her bag. As she’s searching, Matt slides off his guitar and dashes over to her, but before he can get to her, she’s found her baggie and shoved her pinkie into the powder. Matt feigns a trip to avoid looking suspicious, but by the time Matt’s snatched her arms, she’s already snorted the powder.

“Let go of me,” she snarls.

“Are you kidding me, Marci?”

She shakes him loose, “it’s fine, Matt. It’s a music festival, people take drugs, it’s what you do.”

“Not in front of everyone!” Foggy shouts from the stage.

Foggy stays in position, playing a loop in an attempt to keep the crowd interested. The audience starts to divide now, most having given up on the performance entirely and others sticking around to see the drama. Booing begins, burns his spine. Matt notices Anatoly observing from the rail, frozen in place.

“Why do you care anyway?” Marci spits.

She starts marching back onto the stage, accidentally kicking her sticks along the ground again. She scrambles for them, then starts hammering the snare. She leans over to her mic and says, “this is your cue, boys!”

Foggy tears his eyes away from the crowd. He grits his teeth as he says to Matt, “what are we going to do?”
Marci stops drumming and shouts, “You guys are fucking hypocrites considering you both smoke weed. Just because you don’t go for the better stuff doesn’t mean you can take some kind of moral high ground.”

“Marci, calm down,” Foggy says, then to Matt, “we need this gig.”

Foggy smells of fear and tension, and he may as well be saying help me. Foggy starts keying into *Spread Your Love* again, but the wind is messing with the output, making it sound eerie and broken. Marci takes the seat at her kit and starts smashing the bass out of time to Foggy’s playing. She wails and gets up again. She seems to be headed for her purse again, and so Matt reaches out to stop her in the passageway made by speakers.

“Stop, Marci, you’re making a scene,” he grips her arm tight, “We need to finish this.”

“I just need another hit,” Marci whines, trying to wriggle out of Matt’s hold.

“You’re going to make yourself ill,” Matt hisses, holding her firm.

“I’m already ill!” She snaps. She jabs a finger against her temple. “I’m so fucked up in the head that I need it to get through this shit. That’s what you want, right? The money’s all you care about. I’m sick to death of pretending I care about you when you treat me and Foggy like dirt.”

Matt lets her go, “What?”

Marci rubs her hands over her forehead, “Fuck, don’t come any closer. I didn’t get into this to end up hating it.”

“Marci! We can talk about this later, just play something simple and we can get our cheques and walk away from this thing.”

Marci shoves him square in the middle of his chest, “The fuck if I’m getting back there! Quit trying to grab me! You’re like an itch that won’t go away, Matt, and scratching it over and over feels better than just ignoring it,” then she shouts over at Foggy, “You’re going to regret not listening to my advice Franklin!”

Matt can hear security guards starting to pull themselves up on the stage to escort Marci away. She drops to the ground now, covering her head with her arms like a bomb is about to go off.

“Stop looking at me! I wish people would stop looking at me!”

The security guards are flowing up the ramp now. She hears them and starts to dart to the other side of the stage, but the security who were guarding the barriers have climbed up on the stage now and corner her. Technicians start carelessly shovelling their equipment off to the side.

Anatoly pushes past the security and bars the technicians from packing away any more things.

“Hey now, no need for that. I’ll play,” Anatoly offers.

Security are escorting Marci off the other side of the stage now, and Matt can taste how tense Foggy is, can hear the slight chatter in his teeth, the clenched fists, the firmness of his footing.

“Foggy, let’s finish this,” Matt says.

Foggy grits his teeth, but nods. Anatoly climbs over the mess on the stage toward the drum kit and takes up a simple beat.
“We’re here for you today!” Foggy’s voice sounds strained over the mic, “what do you wanna hear?”

The crowd is a lot smaller now, so it’s not hard to hear what the majority answer is.

“Spread Your Love? No, no, we just played that. What’s that? Love Burns? Yeah, we can do that one. Matt, what do you think?”

Matt strums in the first chord as his answer, quickly followed by Foggy. It shows that Anatoly hasn’t ever listened to their music, but also shows that he’s a good drummer through the way he works on making the beats fit with the music. He certainly has a different style to Marci. They finish what they can in the time that they have left, ending up playing only five songs. At least they can contest that the on stage drama wasn’t the only thing that kept them from playing a good set. That, and a combination of bad weather conditions and fault equipment set up by people who don’t know how to set it up for them.

Soon enough, the usher starts speaking in their earpieces about wrapping up. Matt’s happy to finish up, not wanting to impinge on the next band’s schedule, but Foggy extends their play a little, for the crowd. Immediately after coming off stage, Anatoly shakes both their hands vigorously like they’ve just played a good game.

With a warm smile, he says, “You two look like you need a drink.”

xxxvi. shuffle your feet

Foggy sits on a milk crate, the plastic lines pressing indents on his butt. He stares at the crowd coiling in the field beyond the fence which divides the general population area from the VIP area while he listens to the hold music singing loud in his ear. He watches the sea of noisy colours swirling along the grass. The bass from the nearest set sounds like a collective heartbeat, but hollowed out and numb as if some gigantic godly being being tore out its heart and left it still beating furiously on the Earth’s crust.

An hour’s wait on the line only to be told what he already knows. Marci was escorted to the security building, and fled from there. He just wants to know where she is so he can talk some sense in her, or else have her talk some sense into him.

He rolls Anatoly’s cell over in his hand. There’s something fishy about that guy, and it not’s just because he’s Russian. But he said he was Vladimir’s brother, and if Matt’s comfortable enough to drink with him then maybe Foggy’s on edge for no reason. He turns to peer into the trailer. Matt’s smiling, laughing. How can he be happy at a time like this? Everything’s gone to shit. They’re in debt. The Coachella organisers will never book them again. And Marci’s disappeared. Again. And it’s not like Matt is absolved from any crimes here.

He supposes he should call his Dad and let him know what happened. Warn him that if Marci comes poking around, that he’s got to make her stay put somehow.

“Hey Dad, it’s me,” Foggy says, relieved that Ed picked up the phone.

Ed sounds out of breath when he answers, “Foggy! Don’t you know I’ve been calling you off the hook?”
“Sorry,” Foggy bites his lip, “My cell got fried in Leeds… something at our last show messed up all our tech… and the floorboards.”

“Leeds? You were in the UK?” Ed says, “Look, we’ll talk about that later, son. I’ve been trying to get on to you about something.”

Foggy frowns, “There’s… I need to tell you something too.”

A car horn blares into his ear.

“Argh! Dad, are you driving?!”

“Learn to drive, asshole!” Ed shouts away from the phone, then says, “I’m on my way to Philly.”

“Why? Is… is Ben okay?”

“That’s the thing, son. Ben’s been evicted from his home, and worse, Doris has been kicked out of the hospital. I’m driving down to get the both of them. Ben’s going to live with us for a while. Crap! A cop. Call me later, okay son?”

“Okay…”

The phone line beeps and Foggy closes the flip phone. At the sound of the lid snapping shut, Foggy suddenly feels deflated. Like everything is over. Like the world is ending and he can’t breathe and all he wants is to be home and for everyone to be okay and happy and safe.

He flinches when he feels a hand on his shoulder. He looks up and sees Matt, a concerned look on his face.

“Who was that?” he sounds hopeful, “Marci?”

Foggy shakes his head, “No, it was Ed. There’s stuff happening at home.”

“What… stuff?”

“It doesn’t matter. We need to find her.”

He watches Matt nod with a blank look on his face.

“I hate saying that,” Foggy continues, “I have to find Marci or find you. Why do you both have to disappear on me so often? It’s fucking annoying and it’s the coward’s way out too, isn’t it? You’re both just running away from your problems rather than facing up to them.”

Matt takes his hand away, “Foggy…”

Foggy shudders, “No, you know what? This is your fault. If you hadn’t pushed her-“

“My fault? There’s nothing in the world I could have said that wouldn’t have rubbed her the wrong way.”

“You were in her face! You wouldn’t let her go!”

Matt steps back as Foggy stands up.

Matt ignores the accusation, “This is unfair, Foggy. I didn’t want to be here. I only agreed to this gig for you. We had other options.”
Foggy sneers, “Other options? What, living like rats for the next few months until we got back on our feet? If you actually believe you could live like that, you obviously don’t know yourself like I do.”

“We could have asked your Dad for help.”

Foggy scoffs, “Are you kidding? God, it’s like… all these years, and you still don’t know me,” he shakes his head, “Marcy’s right. You use people and you don’t give a fuck. It’s sick, Matt.”

He steps away, but his friend reaches out for him and catches his arm. Foggy glares at the smoky sky behind Matt’s head.

“What, are you going to hold me hostage now too?”

“Foggy…”

Foggy blinks rapidly and glares at the clouds moving swiftly across the sky. Matt’s hold around his arm loosens, so he dares to look at his friend. His eyes are pink, dampness on his face.

Fuck.

“Foggy…”

“What?” Foggy asks but with the way Matt looks, it’s harder and harder to stay firm against him.

“I feel like I’m losing you.”

Foggy stares at his friend. Tears start welling in Matt’s eyes now. Foggy turns his gaze away, blinking rapidly and happens to glance through the open door to the trailer. He makes eye contact with Anatoly who rotates his head and pretends to bus himself with what’s in front of him.

“If Marcy doesn’t come back, it’s the end.”

“No,” Matt pleads, “It’s not.”

Foggy yanks his arm free, “If Marcy doesn’t come back,” he repeats evenly, “this ends.”

“It doesn’t have to… It could turn into something new, something better. Just us two making music.”

Foggy sighs and closes his eyes, “I don’t want to give up, but I just can’t understand why we’re going on like this.”

“…I’m sorry.”

“Then make me believe you are.”

The first week back he feels sick. Something he ate, probably. After puking his guts out, he writhes in bed sweating enough to fill a bath tub. Ed insists on taking him to the hospital but the thought of sitting up makes him want to puke again. He has to be content with tossing and turning in bed.
trying to find the exact position to lie in that doesn’t make every muscle scream with pain.

“You should take the couch,” Foggy rasps to Matt after puking into a bucket beside his bed, “or stay at Vlad’s until this is over.”

If Foggy didn’t know any better, Matt looked offended.

Foggy grabs some tissues to wipe his face, “You’ll get sick too.”

“I don’t care, I’m staying.”

He isn’t able to get out of bed for days, and on top of feeling like shit physically, mentally he’s jumping hurdles thinking about what it means to be back in Hell’s Kitchen. Everything feels like it’s ending, like the candle is waning and there’s no wick to replace it, to keep the light burning on. It’s like Marci fell off the face of the Earth, too. They had tried looking for her. They had even put out a missing persons report as soon as the festival was over but they couldn’t stick around. They had no choice but to return to Hell’s Kitchen, broke and burnt out. Foggy is so sure Coachella will definitely not invite them to play any other year. As per their agreement, Coachella paid out but only a percentage, which isn’t enough to pay back the damage they did to the Leeds Town Hall. It makes Foggy queasy every time he remembers that it’s Ed’s money that helped settle that dispute.

If Marci hadn’t stolen from them so many times, they wouldn’t be in this mess. Maybe it’s better if Marci doesn’t come back. But that means another thing ends – their band – and that’s all Foggy’s been living for, really. He hasn’t got any other qualifications. How is he going to pay his Dad back by working at Walmart? How is he going to stay sane not doing what he loves?

Foggy can’t make up his mind on that one. He said one thing, but the reality is nearing and ending and the world is closing in on him and he’s stuck in his bed overheating and crying because he can’t keep anything down.

Ed keeps trying to cheer him up by reminding him that they only have a few months left on their contract with Virgin, like that’s meant to be a good thing. In reality, it means more work. Shopping around for a new label might be high on his priorities but he has zero motivation for it. In truth he has zero motivation for anything lately except lazing around in his room. Matt, on the other hand, has become entirely focused on song writing as if to prove something to Foggy. When he’s not in the recording room, he’s on Foggy’s bedroom floor carving sheet music into his notebook. The notes are quite illegible at first glance. Matt writes in vague shapes of music notes and he always wears this pseudo pleased/proud face when Foggy looks at it long enough and is able to hum the tune Matt’s tried to record.

Still, if nothing else changes, he thinks he’ll have to end things. He doesn’t think he can go on another tour with Matt leaving every second night. Foggy worries too much to cope on his own. Rationally, it’s unhealthy for him to be alone thinking about all the possible things that could go wrong to his blind friend in a foreign country, and he knows he won’t get much help from Ed who already has his hands full with Ben and Doris. Without Marci and her myriad of distractions and affections… All he has to do is wait for a definitive answer about her whereabouts. And if that never occurs? Well, he’ll just go on. That’s what he’s good at anyway. Continuing in a perpetual stream of naivety until knowledge forces an action.
Shrivels of linocut wriggle on his bed sheets as Foggy gouges out the grey sections. The shrivels drop sporadically, twisting and turning like surfaced earthworms, then collapse in coils. The plump green envelope rests on his bedside table beneath the rocket shaped lamp he’s had since he was a kid. Around lunch time Ed had quietly opened his bedroom door and tip toed over the carpet to place the envelope where Foggy hasn’t moved it since. He can’t look at it. He’s hoping that the longer he leaves it under the light, it might start to photosynthesize and the green will grow into moss and ferns and make a little jungle underneath the rocket ship. Cover what’s too hard to know and embark on an exhibition somewhere new.

He can hear Ed’s snoring penetrating the paper thin walls. He wonders if Ben’s disturbed by how monstrous Ed sounds when he sleeps, if he’s troubled that the sound travels all the way to the garage. Ben offers to swap every now and again but Foggy’s doing him a favour considering the kind of noise his Dad makes behind the walls. Besides, he’d feel uncomfortable for the older guy to have to sleep in his kid bed. The garage is all decked out for a guest. Utilities and a comfy fold out bed. Good amount of space for himself and his wife when she’s permitted home time. Which is going to become less and less, Ed’s told Foggy. Doris’ health is only going to get worse, and the stress from moving across states hasn’t helped her condition at all.

Although sleeping in his old room isn’t the greatest either. It’s too small and too cluttered with old junk he doesn’t have the heart to throw out. Matt has to sleep on a roll out on the floor and he’s far too big for the space available. If he doesn’t curl up, he ends up kicking Foggy’s bookshelf or cupboards and junk falls off and hits Matt in his sleep. Not an ideal spatial location for a 5’8” 22 year old.

Since Foggy was ill, he accidentally swapped his sleeping pattern to sleeping during the day and being up all night. Honestly he feels a little guilty about matching Matt’s habit to his, but Matt hasn’t tried to change it. It wasn’t only his illness either. Moving through several time zones has messed up his body clock enough that he’s sure Matt’s been affected by it too. But a month in, they’re long past the time when they should have rectified their sleeping pattern and adapted to the New York schedule. Nevertheless, the bright yellow of Foggy’s nightlight is the closest he’s gotten to the brightness of the full sun.

Ed and Ben have had to come to accept the fact that Foggy and Matt sleep during the day. It’s not too much of an issue, really. They’re both quiet in their waking hours during the night, and Ed and Ben are respectively so during the day. When Matt needs to be loud he’s loud in the recording room, and when Foggy needs to be loud he goes out for a midnight stroll in the crisp Summer darkness. Foggy’s a pretty good sleeper himself so even when Ed and Ben decide to watch something loud on the TV, he’s not bothered by the noise. Ed’s slightly deaf so having the TV volume up at full blast really helps him keep track. Matt says he’s not bothered by it but he mustn’t sleep well. Kid looks under slept every night.

Foggy mulls over the thought that it’s the most he’s seen of Matt in a long while with this situation of sleeping in the same room and functioning on the same routines. It’s weird how there’s something about Hell’s Kitchen that makes Matt inseparable from him. He hadn’t really thought about how Matt hung close to him back in their early days, but back then he didn’t have anything to compare it to. Foggy shouldn’t be bitter about it, but he is, considering the last few years and the way Matt brushes off his behaviour like it’s normal. Looking back and really analysing his friend’s actions makes Foggy realise that nothing Matt does makes sense to him anymore. Even while writing songs, there are some lyrics… Some songs are about no one and some songs are about someone in particular and Foggy wonders if the lyrics Matt’s coming up with for his newest tracks are about the girl he’s been chasing or if it’s about himself. He feels frivolous and self-centred for reading into the lyrics and thinking Matt’s singing about him but he supposes if he ever asked, Matt would only say that a good song connects with anyone.
Foggy drives the gouge into the linocut and nicks the side of his forefinger. Luckily his fingertips are worn tough now and the gouge doesn’t do any real damage. Just grazes a few layers underneath, but it’s deep enough to make him bleed. He sucks on his finger as he puts aside his work and pushes off the bed. Bits of shrivelled lino float to the carpet from the movement. He grabs his keys from the bookshelf on his way out to the hall.

Directly outside his room is a window which looks onto the side of the garage. It’s a dreamy dark orange outside. Street lights hang like warm stars in the night and emit a reassuring glow over the neighbourhood. Everyone else in the world is asleep when they’re meant to be. Foggy moves down the hall. Inside, the house is veiled in a dark blue haze. Lights glow in patches along the skirting boards from where his Dad has plugged in small nightlights. Ed had pulled them out from boxes stored in the garage amongst other possessions from Foggy’s childhood. Ed liked playing horror movies at full volume so much that Foggy’s been scarred for life. In Foggy’s opinion, monsters dressed up to scare aren’t any nobler than costumed men fighting low level crime.

He reaches the recording room and keys in. The moment he opens the door, gentle music engulfs him. He flicks the lights on dim and sees Matt playing the harmonium Ed picked up in India in the 80s. Matt halts when he hears Foggy enter.

“H-hey,” Matt stammers.

Foggy closes the door behind him. He speaks with his finger still in his mouth, “keep going, I’m just getting some tape.”

Matt nods and continues playing. Foggy walks over to the computer table and pulls out a drawer where they keep first aid equipment. The song Matt’s playing is a slower kind of song, similar in pace to the other songs he’s been working on for their next album, if there should be another. The harmonium puts out this wheezing kind of noise when Matt plays with the bellows. Foggy remembers Ed had taken the thing to get repaired and it had cost a fortune to source the different parts to fix the missing keys and adjust the knobs in the correct way. He remembers Gregg shaking his head at Ed, questioning him if Ed really wanted to pay ten times the cost of buying it in the first place. Ed was adamant about restoring it though. And sure, they don’t use it very often, but it’s a beautiful antique instrument that makes a unique sound. Seeing Matt make use of it makes it seem like it’s really paid off.

After playing an intro, Matt starts to sing;

\begin{verbatim}
On and on
I’ve been waiting on the open invitation
Your silence shows me no relation
In the rising cold don’t you feel alone?

I’ll be standing with your sorrow
All you left me’s gone away tomorrow
And we may never be here again
\end{verbatim}
And we may never be here again

Pull me up on either side

Don’t leave me standing alone in the light

While Matt plays, Foggy finds the tape and starts to wind it over his wound. He watches his friend stooped over the table where he has sat the harmonium. The dim lighting casts long shadows over Matt’s pale face, disguising the dark bags underneath his eyes. Matt keys his last note long, then folds his hands in his lap.

“Did you hurt yourself?” Matt asks, his face still with his eyes aimed at the harmonium.

“Yeah,” Foggy admits, “wasn’t concentrating.”

Matt nods and starts to fold the harmonium back into its case. He asks offhandedly, “Have you read the letter yet?”

Foggy frowns. “I didn’t tell you…”

Matt puts the harmonium case back in its spot on the shelves as he explains, “I uh, I heard Ed talking about it with Ben in the hall before he came in…”

He remembers hearing Ed opening his bedroom door and trying to be quiet as he walked in, but he doesn’t remember talk outside beforehand. Guess he’d been in deep sleep. Anyway, he wasn’t planning on opening the envelope anytime soon.

“Do you think it’s from Marci?” Matt adds.

Foggy chucks the tape in the drawer and firmly shuts it.

“Can I read it?”

Foggy raises his eyebrows, “you want to read it?”

Matt sits back down on the swivel chair, “If it’s hand written, I’ll be able to figure out what it says.”

Foggy eyes his friend, “well, sure.”

He swings the key ring around on his taped up forefinger as he makes for the door, then shoves the keys in his pocket.

“Wait!” Matt hisses, frantic, “Wait… can you lock the door, Foggy?”

Foggy pauses, “Seriously? I’ll be back in less than a minute.”

Matt’s head tilts down, a fold creasing across his brow and Foggy lets out a sigh. He leaves the recording room and abides by Matt’s wishes by locking the door. He literally only takes thirty seconds to go to his room, collect the envelope and come back. Seems entirely pointless to lock up only to unlock again, but Matt’s always super weird about it if he doesn’t lock after he leaves.
He goes over to the desk Matt’s sitting at and slides the envelope across the surface, bumping the corner against Matt’s hand. Matt picks it up and runs his fingers over the print on the front which reads ‘Franklin P. Nelson’.

Matt turns it over in his hands, thumbs the unopened envelope, “You don’t want to read it first?”

“You go ahead,” Foggy grunts, “Just don’t tell me what it says.”

Foggy sits on the top of the table and watches Matt open up the envelope. The letter inside consists of several sheets of paper. Trust Marci to keep it short and sweet. Matt places the pile on the desk and flattens out the first sheet in front of him before he starts to run his fingers over the writing. Foggy tries not to read it. It’s upside down and Marci’s writing isn’t the neatest, but he does notice lots of capitalisation and exclamation points. Instead, he tries to focus on the way Matt moves his fingers across the words. Watching the way he follows the indents in the paper, traces letter after letter, word after word, line after line.

It takes Matt a while to get through it all and Foggy gets bored of looking at the same thing, so he looks around at the equipment stored in Ed’s recording room. At his bass sitting in its case. At Matt’s collection of Gibsons lining one wall. It’s pretty cramped in here. Too many musicians collecting instruments and equipment and not enough space to store it all. Matt told Foggy one night that once they get on with their next album and start touring again – and start making money – that he’s going to save up for an apartment in the city. A place to call his own…

Thing is, Foggy’s unsure at this point if that’ll ever happen. He’d given Matt the ultimatum that if Marci wasn’t coming back this time, then they’d dismantle the band. It had sounded like a good idea at the time to cut out the bullshit in his life. Mostly Foggy dreads the idea of touring just the two of them and being left alone with no one there to talk sense into him whenever Matt decides he’s going to go on some fake trip to the nearest boxing gym. Ed’s still ragging on about satisfying fans, which actually gets to him because they have been loyal. They’ve been really good to the band and Foggy knows how heartbreaking it is when your favourite band breaks up.

Honestly, the only thing that has him feeling positive about keeping BRMC going has been Matt’s consistent presence. This past month has been great albeit in a backwards kind of way. Matt won’t leave. Foggy’s asked him about it. Encouraged him to go to the boxing club in the city but Matt tells him it’s the wrong season for it. That there are competitions and training and Matt’s too reproached about abandoning his team in Europe to get back into it here in Hell’s Kitchen. And honestly, Foggy’s okay with that. Means nights are filled with making music together like in the old days – sans drums. Means days are filled with the two of them crammed into Foggy’s kid sized bedroom. The only weird thing about it is the whole locking Matt in the recording room when Foggy’s not with him. It makes Foggy very uncomfortable but the idea of bringing the topic up with Matt is too daunting really. It’s probably some sort of Catholic punishment ritual that he’s pulling on himself and Foggy doesn’t want to get into the twisted philosophy behind it.

Matt chuckles and has to drop the page he’s on for a minute to catch his breath. He shakes his head then picks up the page and finds his spot again. Foggy wonders just how much his friend can grasp from the light pen marks, how much is hidden in the depth of the mark.

Foggy’s stomach growls. He’s about to get up to fix them some sandwiches for midnight lunch when Matt starts to fold the pages back together again.

“You should have a look.”

Foggy shakes his head. “Later.”
Foggy watches Matt frown and place the envelope on the table. He imagines it, rapid fire, bursting into a jungle across the surface. Vines grab Matt and twist around him, squeezing him with thin but secure branches. He’ll only know for sure if the contents of the letter will provide him with a similar sense of security or not if he has a look for himself, but that means acknowledging the answers inside as truth. It’s a decision that should be made sooner rather than later but it’s also a difficult one, so of course Foggy’s going to put it off as long as he can.

So later means never, and the letter stays like a fat seed on the table. Its contents are undeniably irreversible. Impossible to turn back into what the paper once was, possible to turn new leaves but without lifting the words off the pages himself, Foggy is able to decipher the truth through his friend’s behaviour. Matt is as still as ruins of Mayan temples, pyramidal with his slanted back, the V of his arms, ascension at the crown of his skull. Then, the twisting vines disintegrate and break away, a machete through the overgrowth as sharp as Matt’s grin.

“It’s over,” Matt breathes through his teeth.

The structural integrity of the surrounding ruins is beyond threatening now. They crumble along with the vines. The creation of an earthquake to wreck disaster against those who wish to sin, a divine response to knowledge that they will sin again.

Foggy’s lip twitches. He’s the fallen ash on dried leaves turning in the breeze, a great fire to sweep through the jungle for days and years, turned into this very second to ignite.

“I knew it,” Foggy scowls.

Matt starts to push out of his chair but grips onto the table when Foggy jumps up too.

Foggy scrunches his face as he growls, “you’ve been hiding something from me and now I finally know what I have been suspecting…”

Matt backs up against the table and in doing so, he bumps the letter off and the pages scatter over the thickened carpet. Foggy’s nostrils flare.

“For years, Matt, years… you’ve been stringing me along… I know about your other life, the one you really want…”

Matt’s eyes go wide, blank and silent.

“I saw you in England, Matt. The real you.”

Foggy looks at Matt now. The friend he thought he knew. The friend he thought wanted the same life as him.

“Why, Matt? All these years? Why didn’t you tell me you didn’t want this?”

Foggy steps in front of Matt and glares at him as he waits for an answer.

“I-I don’t know w-“

“I’ll tell you why,” Foggy snarls, “Because you never had the guts to tell me you’re not cut out for music.”

“Foggy n-“

Foggy stabs Matt’s firm chest as he speaks, “And you know what else? You’ll never be able to
handle the reality of being a musician because it’s about honesty. I don’t think I’ve heard you say anything honest in years. Not since the night you first lead me to question whether you were cut out for this shit. Do you remember that night? Someone stole a car outside where we played our first show. Our first show and you decided to run out in the rain in the middle of the night.

“I should have taken that as the first and final warning rather than being sick to death for days about whether or not you were alive or not. Because that’s all I’ve ever been doing after that. Waiting and worrying and when you do come back your ‘answers’ are veiled lies and I don’t know why it took me so long to figure out why. I knew the boxing thing couldn’t be real.”

Matt lifts his arm and his first contact with Foggy is his elbow, so he cups it in his palm. Foggy frowns, but he doesn’t flinch away, too focused on glaring at Matt and keeping his stance strong and firm.

“I just don’t understand why you had to keep her a secret. I thought we told each other everything.”

Matt squeezes Foggy’s elbow, lifts the touch to his upper arm.

“At least, I tried to tell you everything.”

Matt’s hand gently squeezes Foggy’s elbow.

Foggy continues, “Except it’s kind of hard to confide in your best friend when you’re a world apart. Even when we’re right next to each other.” Foggy shrugs Matt’s hand away, “are you listening to me?”

“I am,” Matt winces. He drops his hands to grip the table, leveraging part of his weight on the surface whilst still maintaining the minimal space between them both.

“Then I need to hear some solid truth, Matt. I can’t pretend to understand you when I don’t actually know what’s going on in your head.”

Matt ducks his head in a silent response.

“Fine. I’m done,” Foggy steps back, holding his hands up, “I know you have nowhere to go so I’m leaving. I don’t care if Marci’s going to show up tomorrow or if she’s on the other side of the world. You can tell her to go find me herself because I’m getting out of this place so I don’t have to spend another second with this… stranger dressed up as a friend I used to have.”

He makes to move away from Matt, but Matt grabs onto his arm and pulls him back. There’s a strange twisted look on Matt’s face. The soundproof walls start to feel like they’re closing in on him, like those traps in horror movies. Except now, if he were to scream and plead with the overseer to make the walls stop getting tighter and tighter, no one’s going to be able to hear him except the fleshy skeleton of Matthew Murdock.

“Foggy, I want you to believe me…”

Matt’s hold is secure on his arm. He can feel Matt’s warmth, the tender tension in his fingertips. Foggy suddenly feels weak, like Matt could overpower him any second now if he tried to leave again. But the hanging on Matt’s words makes Foggy think Matt’s not done. As if behind those dead eyes he’s thinking of how to phrase his next sentence. Maybe Matt’s eyes aren’t so much unreadable barriers as they are translucent windows into his mind.

“Then say something I can believe in already,” Foggy replies.
Matt swallows, “Foggy, I uh… at first I thought Marci would be good… for you. Because she liked
you. You wouldn’t agree with me but she did. Right from the start. And you liked her. And you’d
make each other happy where… where I couldn’t.”

“That’s-“

“Listen to me,” Matt interrupts, “Admittedly, I knew y-your feelings for me, but you also knew my
values. My Catholicism…”

Foggy grits his teeth, “I get it, God hates-“

Matt stops him, “wait, please, just wait. I know that I have given you no time, and I deserve no
time of yours. But please let me explain… what you and I wouldn’t have said if it wasn’t for that
letter.”

Foggy thinks he should reply with some quip of a reply but instead he’s mesmerised by the
determination on Matt’s face. So he allows him space, opens up the vacuum to see if what Matt
says is true and real.

“You need to know…” Matt says slowly, “That Marci’s checked herself into rehab. She wrote
from there. She claims… amongst other things, that she’s going to get well and go to Columbia
next year. I know that… you were getting very close to her of late. She wrote, well, you should
read it yourself. But she wrote that she needs to be separated from us, for a while. And not involve
herself with the band anymore.”

Matt waits for a response from Foggy, but nothing follows, so he continues, “So… For that reason,
I understand if you want to end what we do, but… we owe our fans to keep at it. And… I owe you
time. I owe you much more than that…”

Matt turns his once forceful grip to a gentle touch, tracing his fingers down Foggy’s forearm and
interlocking their fingers. Foggy lets it happen but he also riles at the touch. Vexed by how he’s
wanted this, been rejected from this, found out Matt’s been having this with a secret girlfriend this
whole time…

He squeezes his hand in Matt’s, a fierce clench. Knuckles grind against knuckles like the wrong
key to a lock.

“Did she break up with you? Is that why you’re coming to me for affection?”

Matt frowns, a falter.

Foggy waits.

“Marci and I weren’t-“

“The Yeah Yeah Yeahs girl,” Foggy intercepts, but casts his eyes away from Matt.

Matt is quiet.

“It has been a combination of years of pushing away, and a short time of getting close to someone
else… Elektra made me realise who I was and how insufferable pretending is. She confirmed that
which my Catholicism has forbidden me to embrace…”

Matt finds Foggy’s other hand and envelopes them together. Soft and gentle around Foggy’s stiff,
roughened fists.
“I thought…” Matt sighs heavily, “I thought I had to be alone. That I should be, that living the way I do meant I should have no… support. But in the last month… I spent a lot of time thinking about what it would be like to be away from you and I’ve tried but I can’t. I don’t want to have to not think about you anymore… and after reading… the letter, I suddenly realise that I must ignore the rejection in my faith in turn for embracing you.”

Foggy’s body gives up. Turns lax in Matt’s hold, turns supple as Matt moulds Foggy’s malleable figure into the desired shape, a skill Matt’s always been able to achieve.

“I still want to, as I always have wanted to, make music with you. I want to let the world hear what we make. I want to cross the country to play music people love, with you.”

Foggy holds back tears. Swallows hard and his body is weak, his heart is weak and wrung out and why is he forgetting all that Matt’s done? Why is it so easy for him to ignore it in favour of accepting Matt’s words now. In favour of attesting his current words as true as gospel. Is Foggy a forgiving man, so willingly handing out free tickets to redemption.

“But if you really want to end things, I’ll understand. I’ve been…”

“Not great?” Foggy offers through tight lips.

“Not great,” Matt repeats with a small smile.

Foggy closes his eyes. Unseen by a familiar stranger, impossibly visible to him even with his eyes shut.

“It means a lot, Matt, to hear what’s really important to you,” he says with his eyes still closed, “But I just don’t know at this point.”

He cracks his eyelids open and peers down at their connected hands. He loosens both fists, feels Matt keeping the touch secure. He shudders. He still wants to vilify matt for what he has done to him over the years, but he’s finally getting what he’s wanted and he’d forgotten how weak he is for Matt’s affection.

“I can’t be the only one trying to keep things together. Matt, I need more than your words to convince me that you value what we do.”

“Did I ever miss a show?”

“It’s not just that, Matt. It’s the fact that we’re a team, but to function properly we need trust and I just… don’t…” Foggy chokes, “think I can trust you not to break me again and again.”

“Foggy…” Matt breathes, curling a hand around Foggy’s waist.

Foggy tilts his head back and blinks rapidly at the ceiling, not that Matt could see him trying to hide his tears anyway.

“Our music is important to me, Matt. Except… I don’t think I could make music with anyone other than you. Us being a team is also important to me. If Marci’s involvement in our band ends, but we continue to make music together, I need you to be with me.”

“I’ll be with you,” Matt says, pulling Foggy close to him.

Foggy rests his forehead on Matt’s shoulder and mumbles into his shirt, “it’s going to take me some time to trust you.”
“I’ll wait.”

Foggy listens to Matt’s breathing, smells the scent of Matt’s aftershave around his neck.

“On one hand, I want all of you now in case you slip away from me again, but…”

“It’s alright.”

“I’ll never forgive you if you break my heart more.”

“May I sincerely apologise?”

“Go ahead.”

Matt drops his head, for a moment, closes his eyes and mutters a short prayer, “Forgive me, God.”

Foggy feels matt’s slim fingers cup his chin and pull their lips together. Matt’s lips are soft and gentle and Foggy can feel the cautiousness in the way Matt moves his lips around Foggy’s. His eyes flutter shut and he refuses to open them again in case none of this is real. In case this kiss, this touch, these words that Foggy’s been dying to hear and feel and taste for a millennium, are contained only in this windowless room locked away from the world. In case if he opens his eyes, he might see that the Matthew he knows and loves is no longer the same.

He doesn’t want to push things too far. Matt pushed him away and maybe it was because Matt wasn’t ready. Foggy wanted all of him too soon, and it’s hard, it’s so hard not to lean into Matt now and kiss him harder and feel their clothed cocks harden against each other. He has to hold back. If not for Matt, then for himself. *Kiss me, why wouldn’t you kiss me? I wanted to be with you. But you pushed me away. I thought I shouldn’t, I thought I would be damned but I’m already guilty. I need you. You need me to love you like I should have from the start, before I thought you should love someone else because I thought I couldn’t love you. What a lie.*

Matt scoots back on the table and pulls Foggy in, wraps his feverish arms around his waist tight. Foggy threads his fingers through Matt’s hair, runs his fingertips through the bristles of Matt’s stubble, lets the fine hair flicker across his skin so he knows it’s real. Knows what he’s feeling under his fingertips and in his heart are real and true and when he does, finally, have the bravery to open his eyes he sees the want on Matt’s face. The pure incensed look of desire when Matt rubs his hands down Foggy’s spine, down his tailbone and cups his ass and maybe Matt was about to pull him in closer but Foggy holds his stance.

“Let’s… not just yet,” Foggy breathes across Matt’s flushed neck.

Matt’s touch lifts to Foggy’s shoulders, down to his elbows, gentle caresses meant to convince.

His voice is shaky and breathy when he offers, “I won’t run,” but the blush in Matt’s cheeks and the shudder in Matt’s mouth as Foggy kisses him again tells him that there’s some truth in Matt’s words. He remembers the last time they kissed, the last time Matt had let him kiss for only a moment before Matt had remembered about God and Hell and damnation. There was a time after that, a secret he might have dreamed or it might have been real. On a sweaty couch in some bar with the Dandy’s, Matt’s hair was so dark he’d almost gone invisible against the leather couch. And he’d slipped down against Matt, dropped like a river pearl in the nape of his neck and been allowed to kiss his skin there as they both swirled and sung out of this world. That was Matt’s worst trip and Foggy’s best. Funny how the same growth can change.

Foggy reluctantly lets Matt tear himself away from Foggy’s lips when Foggy’s salt water has trailed down his cheek and slipped onto their tongues. Foggy had kissed on, hoping to let it go by,
quiet acknowledgement and wilful ignorance. Matt cups his chin again now, thumbs Foggy’s wet face.

Shaky, lips quivering, Matt’s rough fingers over his freshly shaven skin.

“You’re crying?”

Foggy swallows and gazes up into Matt’s blank eyes. Windows dark and empty like the absent windows in the soundproof room. Will this really do? Will this give him access to Matt, to his mind, to his inner workings. To understand him, equivalent to understanding the meaning of life.

“Are you sad?”

“Of course I am.”

xxxxvii. the line

Ed pulls the truck into the side parking of Josie’s and peers into the rear view mirror.

“Come on boys, out ya get.”

Foggy waits until Matt clicks his seatbelt out.

“Pick up the pace, come on,” Ed says hastily.

“Join us, Dad,” Foggy says, his hand over the release button.

“We’ll have a little shindig on the weekend once Doris is out of the house, hey son? Tonight’s a celebration for you boys. ‘Bout time your contract expired. Now get in there and get drunk. I don’t want to see either of you until at least 4am.”

“That’s a bit early, don’t you think? Not even past my bed time,” Foggy replies.

Matt laughs as he unbuckles his seat belt, so Foggy clicks out too. He darts around the side of the truck and helps Matt out.

As the seatbelt snaps back into the car, Ed calls over his seat, “hey kiddo, this is for you.”

Ed chucks a rolled up bit of cash at Foggy but instead it floats through the air and falls flat on the seat beside Matt.

“I know you don’t wanna take it son,” Ed says, rolling his eyes, “but take it as a congratulations, alright? I’m just happy to see you boys out and about again.”

“I think he’s trying to get rid of us, Foggy,” Matt says.

“You should be enjoying life, my boys! No sense in cooping yourself up inside the house all of Fall. You’re gonna regret not getting the light of day once Winter rolls around. Take it,” he insists.

Matt pats around the seat until he finds the cash and pockets it.

He shrugs, “I’d prefer to drink something better than goon.”
Foggy gently manoeuvres Matt out of the way so he can shut the truck door. Ed reverses out and sends them a short wave out of the window before charging down the street. Ed’s right, it has been a long time since they’ve left the house. The weather’s certainly colder. Matt’s visibly shivering as they walk around to the front of the street.

They push into Josie’s. Warm air gushes against their cheeks. Friendly conversation bubbles across the bar, people drinking around tables and playing pool. The stage is currently vacant, but a piano rests under a silvery cloth. Foggy takes Matt up to the bar stools and they both take seats. Even after all these years Josie still remembers their usuals. Now that’s customer service.

Foggy sips on his dubious drink. Whatever’s lying at the bottom could be alive or dead, he’ll just refrain from bumping it with his straw to find out. He looks over at Matt. The guy looks edgy. He kind of knew Matt didn’t want to go out but Ed practically forced them out. Matt’s shivering still even in the warm. He looks a little twitchy too, not in the addict sense, just in a way that Foggy can tell is not normal. A sort of restlessness that Matt hasn’t faced in a long time.

Foggy had wondered if Matt had developed some kind of phobia of being outside. Didn’t really make any sense to Foggy considering Matt can’t see. What’s he got to be anxious about? But strangely enough, Matt still asks Foggy to lock the door when he leaves Matt alone in the recording room. Gives some kind of new meaning to being locked in the closet. The way he is now, hunched and reserved, it all points to Matt being scared of something. Suppose it’s only natural for Matt to fear anything, considering he wouldn’t be able to see a pitfall right in front of him.

Foggy places a hand on the small of Matt’s back and asks softly, “hey buddy, you feeling alright?”

Matt sits up straight and stiffens. “I’m fine,” he says under a whisper, but he gently pushes Foggy’s hand away, “not here.”

Foggy frowns and takes his hand back into his lap like he’s touched fire. At that moment, a woman slides into the bar stool next to Matt.

“I thought it was you,” She says as she tries to make eye contact.

Matt cocks his head, that sort of head tilt he does when he’s trying to listen carefully to what people are saying.

“Yes, you had me tricked so well back at the hospital. I really thought you were an intern. Looking back, I honestly don’t know why I thought that. You weren’t wearing any scrubs!” She grins a wide toothy smile. “I think I was too angry about what was going on in Philly and you were the first poor soul I saw who I could vent to. Funny how that happens.”

She hails Josie and orders a vodka shot. Simple, but effective.

Foggy had only seen the Yeah Yeah Yeahs girl from a distance. He hadn’t dared to look her up in magazines. He’d prefer to remain in ignorance. Prefer to know as little about her as possible. He’d feel sick if he ever saw some kind of press photo of her with Matt out and about. Even without knowing much about her, he’s almost certain this girl’s a different girl. Maybe she’s still Matt’s girl, another secret Matt’s been keeping from him. Foggy can’t help but feel contemptuous talking to her.

Foggy leans over to Matt, “you know this girl?”

Before Matt can reply, the woman says, “you don’t remember me do you? Suppose it’s not easy for
a blind guy to remember people either. You had me tricked good on that one too. I really thought you were someone else. It took me a long time to reconcile the fact that I had had a cigarette with Matthew Murdock in the staff area of my hospital, and not some stranger I’d probably never see again. Then again, I never thought I’d get to see you again anyway, not like this. Not here.”

The woman laughs and sculls her drink. She slams the glass on the bar, causing Foggy to jump.

“You wouldn’t believe it,” she starts, “but that chat we had – well, that and the chief of staff getting fired the very next day – really helped me decide my direction in life. Can you imagine? I kept up with my double degree for so long, but in the end music was the obvious choice over nursing.”

“I remember you,” Matt says.

“You do? I really can’t believe it though. I’m here, you’re here, and oh,” she leans over the bar to extend a hand to Foggy, “you must be Franklin, right?”

“Foggy,” he corrects as he shakes her hand tentatively.

“Foggy, now? I never did see the sense in signing as otherwise. The connection to The Call is a very good thing. Virgin was crazy to let you get away with it.”

“And um, who are you?” Foggy questions.

“God, I didn’t introduce myself properly. Isn’t it funny, even back then, Matthew? Neither of us knew each other’s names. Even when I was studying music management I hadn’t heard of you guys. A friend of mine introduced me to your music. It was really all by chance, when I think about it. I saw you on the cover and I couldn’t believe my eyes. It really is a small world, huh? Anyway, I’m Claire. Claire Temple.”

Claire orders another drink and sculls it straight away.

“Where’s your drummer? Since I found out who you really were I’ve been looking forward to meeting you again. I’ve heard a lot of good things about Marci, is she around?”

Claire looks over Matt’s shoulder and scans the bar.

“Good things?” Foggy repeats, “What good things?”

“She’s…” Matt starts.

“Not around anymore,” Foggy finishes.

“She died??”

“God no,” Foggy replies, startled, “she’s in rehab. Doing well, we’ve heard,” he glances at Matt, then at Claire and asks, “Why… do you know so much about us?”

“I’m a band manager for RCA. It’s my job to know about you, and about every other band in the US.”

Matt raises his eyebrow, “RCA…”

Foggy chuckles, “that’s funny… RCA huh? Is that thing about smoking at the hospital true?”

“It’s all true, believe me.”
“Matt,” Foggy touches Matt’s forearm, “We don’t even have to try. It’s right here, practically on top of our feet.”

Matt nods, then speaks to Claire, “how would you feel about representing us?”

“It would be my pleasure, however… Virgin still has their grubby hands on you.”

“Not anymore,” Matt explains, “Starting tomorrow.”

“You’re not serious,” Claire replies with her jaw dropped.

“That’s why we’re here,” Foggy grins, “And now it’s actually worth celebrating if we have someone who’s interested in representing us.”

Claire hails Josie and orders drinks for all three of them.

“I’ve gotta tell you, I’m extremely drunk right now but if this isn’t fate, I don’t know what to call it. Who’s the responsible one? Matthew? You take my card and call me tomorrow… Afternoon. Tonight, the drinks are on me!”

Chapter End Notes

Just some quick notes about this chapter:

- The Coachella gig irl was actually played in 2003 but for the fic i moved it to '04. BRMC have stated in interviews that their Coachella gig was truly the worst gig they ever played, mostly due to sound issues but it was also during a time where there was a lot of tension in the band stemming from Nick Jago's addiction.

- Anatoly Ranskahov takes Peter Salisbury's spot as the drummer for The Verve. The Verve is cited as one of BRMC's influences. Peter Salisbury actually drummed for BRMC's 2002 UK/EU tour when Nick couldn't get a working visa.

- I chose to have Elektra be Karen O from the YYYs because of this scene: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OaBWTdJTIUk i know that ~technically~ it's the scene before Elektra's but it works so well for me to think of Elektra being Karen O in this AU. Karen O sings in a very cheeky, sexy way and Elektra would so do the same.

- the next chapter will lead into 2005-2006 which has been an era i've been looking forward to writing for ages. More plot (and m/m porn!) stuff will happen, and more drama and angst! Please hang in there, i know this chapter might not have been as gripping as previous ones but the next one is hopefully more suspenseful!

p.s. i put a fanart in for chapter 6 that is so so cute so please go have a look if you haven't seen it!
Howl

Chapter Summary

Matt's starting to open up to Foggy but in order to get to where Foggy wants to be, he has to pry Matt open more than he would like to. Both Foggy and Matt are starting to turn into people they're not sure they want to be.

Chapter Notes

I ended up having a lot of fun writing this chapter so i have it out earlier than usual. Hope you guys like it ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Part viii

[2005-2006]

xxxviii. gospel song

~“Bless me Father, for I have sinned.”~

Matt doesn’t mean to sound rude when he asks Ben for his copy of Howl and other poems but thankfully it doesn’t seem to come across that way. Ben’s copy is twenty, maybe thirty years old. Pages turned in from Ben’s college days. He’s lying across the single bed with his feet pressed up against the wall, his bare toes itch the aging plaster beneath the window sill. Foggy’s lying backwards, his head propped up against Matt’s side and his own feet resting on his pillow.

Foggy holds the book above his face as he reads out loud. Matt can hear the delicacy in the pages as Foggy turns them, can smell the musty old dust releasing with each new page. There are slight differences between the two publications. Ben’s copy is devoid of frustrating spelling errors in the braille edition he’d ordered for Matt’s birthday. He’d had to assure Ben that his gift wasn’t disastrously late, even though it had arrived far later than expected. Matt had overheard Ben calling up the manufacturers a couple of times. He knew something was coming even though Ben insisted on the present remaining a surprise. In total there was a three month wait on translation and production, plus an extra two weeks to post it across the states. So halfway through the year, Matt had received this chunky A3 edition with pages large enough to replicate the syntax of the original version. And despite the lateness, it in fact had arrived right when Matt had needed it to arrive. Just
in time to ignite that last bit of inspiration for their album.

Matt’s already read it a thousand times over. He could tell Foggy was jealous that Ben had been thoughtful enough to order a translation of beloved poetry. Matt’s expecting the process will happen more often now that they know it actually works. Still, the sheer size of the braille copy is disconcerting. Foggy’s room isn’t that big as it is, and if he’s going to be collecting more stuff then space is going to run out fast. He’s thinking of buying an apartment in the inner city when they start making more dough. A place of his own would be a safe haven for himself and for his possessions too. Besides, with an apartment to his name, he might be able to sleep without having nightmares laced with asbestos.

Just thinking about the smell reminds him of how thoroughly he is surrounded by it, so he turns his attention to Foggy’s voice as he reads Howl aloud. Listens to the way his voice sounds plateaued from lying down, to the way his breath wraps around the metre of the sentences, to the scratch of old paper turning under Foggy’s rough fingers. He can hear Foggy’s heart too, rapid and warm and the smell of aftershave laps around Foggy’s jawline and neck.

Matt thinks Howl came just in time for Foggy too. Foggy likes Howl just as much as he does, which made deciding on an album title easier than ever. Funny that they always seem to have a release date before they have decided on a name. Now it’s just a month of fine tuning what they’ve got. It’s certainly a departure from their previous sound. Claire’s happy with what they have, happy to let them mix it how they want, too. Maybe it’s Claire’s professionalism in action, but ever since signing on to work with her and RCA, she seems different. She’s not stressed like Matt had observed from her at her old hospital, or as peppy as she was getting drunk at her local bar. Perhaps it’s Claire in her element in that she’s almost entirely the opposite of those two encounters.

Either way, she’s the most help they’ve ever had from a record company agent. Ten times better than Wesley. She’s easy about their new music direction despite a risk of backlash from the label. In preparation, she’s working on media and marketing for them, highlighting the Americana aspects of their album and image. She’s even gone so far as to help them decide on a European label to release under. She recommended Echo so that they can release more than two singles off their upcoming third album. Previously Virgin had only permitted two per album, but no one’s around now telling them what they can and can’t do, or complaining about what they aren’t doing when they haven’t been told about it. It seems like a dream.

Once the album hits the shelves, they’ll be embarking on an intimate US tour. Claire’s booked them small clubs and bars across the states. Crossing over to ’06 they’ll be opening for the Kings of Leon. Ideally he’d like to be the one to have openers, but the Kings of Leon will reap them good ticket sales, and Matt doesn’t mind the Kings’ music too much anyway. Although it does feel kind of like starting over again. New label, new music, new beginnings. It’s not like time has been rewound though. Matt hasn’t forgotten what’s occurred in the past six or seven years since they first released music. To forget is to relinquish improvements. To ignore is to hinder the learning progress from the mistakes that he’s made. And so he may be turning over a new leaf, but he will remain painfully aware of the damage he has done so as not to loop time and time again.

~“It’s uh, it’s been too long since my last confession.”~

When he’s alone in the recording room, the sound of the keys unlocking the door scrapes against his very bones. It’s always Foggy but what if it’s not? The heart wrenching fear compounds against the immense relief. At first he was furious after being torn from England. The way he’d left
things… He’d discovered Manfredi’s sinister inventions stored beneath the stage at the Leeds Town Hall, and he’d ruined their potential far better than he could have predicted.

Of course, he hadn’t meant to break the floors too.

Of course, the cost for repair wouldn’t have been a problem if Marci hadn’t utterly robbed them.

And then he’d been forced to fly away which meant he’d lost his chance to encounter Manfredi upon discovering the damage to his inventions. Now he has no idea where Manfredi is, Elektra isn’t answering the emails he has sent to her band’s contact page and he’s fairly sure Claire doesn’t have the connections nor the permission to give out Elektra’s personal contact details. And if he can’t go through Elektra to locate Manfredi, then it all comes down to chancing upon suspicious activity. Which is driving Matt crazy. And he knows that the moment he leaves anyone’s presence, Stick will find him. Stick will find him and force him into a war he knows he’s already losing. A war he’s starting to think he should truly give up on because he’s not getting anywhere with it. Not on a substantial level anyway. And all his second life is proving to do is tearing him farther and farther away from somebody who actually loves him. From someone who values him and appreciates him, and loves him so much, and for so long, Matt has made Foggy get used to rejection.

~“He never got knocked out, my Dad. Knocked down sure, but he uh, always got back up. He was always on his feet when he lost. Every now and then though, every now and then he’d get hit and uh, something inside of him would snap. My Grandmother – she was the real catholic. Fear of god ran deep, you would’ve liked her – she used to say, ‘be careful of the Murdock boys, they got the devil in ‘em.’~

~And you’d see it sometimes… in the ring. His eyes would go dead. And he’d start walking forwards real slow with his hands at his side like he wasn’t afraid of anything. And the other guy, he’d see that look and he’d try to get away from him. Nah. My Dad, he’d catch him and… trap him in the corner.~

~Let the devil out.”~

The cold walls of the recording room are as still as the build-up in ice boxes. Thick and unimpressionable, deaf ears to the rest of the house. Matt experiments above the bored hum of the computer that never gets turned off. Can’t ever be turned off or it won’t turn back on again. The excruciating sound of jagged metal teeths into place, turns like clockwork. The scent of warm blood over Foggy’s fingers interrupts his feigned aloof song. Surely Foggy would have something to say if he’d read the letter, but he hadn’t, so Matt experiences an extrapolation of time between Foggy’s brief absence and swift return. Then, the thick paper is in his hands.

Madly scratched indents form words meant for Foggy.

“It’s over,” He’d said aloud.

“It’s finally over,” Foggy had heard.

He asks himself, why had he said anything at all? Or, why hadn’t he said anything until then? While compressed in that claustrophobic room, forced to read private confessions, he thinks of Foggy, finally. Finality. And he shivers in want, waiting for Foggy to push him and punch him and
get something out of him. Make Matt bleed externally as much as he’s made Foggy bleed internally.

He hadn’t known Foggy had seen him and Elektra in Oxford. He’d known Foggy was around. Maybe he wanted to be seen. Wanted Foggy to see him with someone else, so that Foggy could stop thinking of Matt in a way he felt he could not reciprocate. And still, he’d left the wrong questions answered with misunderstandings due to the confessions, the undeniable truth denied for years, and his failures. He lets Foggy believe what makes sense to him, because he still can’t break it to Foggy. He’s held it a secret too long, failed at it too long that that he may as well bury that identity.

He’d failed to stop organised crime, grappled with loose ends and came up with more shreds in his sweaty palms. He’d failed to stop death and pain or from his friends from hurting and hurting and lusting and crying. And if he’s too much of a failure to maintain both lives, he’ll have to settle with one. He’ll let himself love Foggy and let Foggy have what he’s lusted over for time gone blurry.

He won’t walk out in the hall and have Stick face him, because Stick will only tell him what Matt already knows. He’ll leave his failures behind and embrace his sin. Make Foggy fight him, push him and shove him down on the table. Make his mouth hurt and tongue sore and his dick flush pink and twitching.

Make God smite him for his sins.

~“Perhaps this would be easier if you tell me what you’ve done.”~

~“I’m not seeking penance for what I’ve done, Father. I’m asking forgiveness for what I’m about to do.”~

~“That’s not how this works... What exactly are you going to do?”~

who wandered around and around at midnight in the railroad yard wondering where to go, and went, leaving no broken hearts,

who lit cigarettes in boxcars boxcars boxcars racketing through snow toward lonesome farms in grandfather night,

... who broke down crying in white gymnasiums naked and trembling before the machinery of other skeletons,

who let themselves be fucked in the ass by saintly motorcyclists, and screamed with joy

(Ginsberg, Allen. Howl and Other Poems, 1956.)

xxxix. howl
They drive through valleys cloaked with fog in an early misty morning. Clouds move in sweeping tendrils over dimpled hills. Forest festivals are Foggy’s favourite kind of festival, and not just because of the intimacy of a smaller crowd, but because of the drive. He favours the scenic route. It may be a few hours longer but they’ll arrive around the same time as their equipment truck. Plenty of time to get settled at the festival before their time slot. Gullies run down the hillsides from the recent rain making riverbeds look exceedingly full. Thickets of short-pines and hickory trees line either side of the road and whip past in a faded dark green shadow behind Foggy’s periphery. The sun begins to peak on the skyline, the mist sparkles as it warms and lifts.

Matt’s curled up on the front seat, his knees tucked in close to his chest. Foggy quietly observes him. The radio low and crackly, the heater puffing out small breaths but the natural turn of the day is doing more to heat up the car than the machinery itself. They’ve been on the road for only a few weeks now and Foggy’s actually surprised at how easily he has fallen back into the routine. Claire’s booked them out crossing over Christmas and bleeding into next year. And Foggy’s more excited than ever to tour nonstop, mostly because of his company, but he’s also excited to play new material and let their fans hear the new sound they have developed.

Their end of year shows are going to be limited to acoustic sets. Claire has encouraged looking for a new drummer but they hadn’t auditioned anyone they like enough to recruit. The most Claire can do is arrange Anatoly to sit in as their touring drummer as of February ’06, which will help them play their more popular and well known songs live. Until then, Foggy’s enjoying the vibes of acoustic sets. He’s not always sure the fans completely dig it. He knows some of them are in the audience for their hits and nothing else, but those kinds of ticket buyers are just going to have to appreciate the artistry or get up and play the drums themselves.

Foggy starts to wind down a decline, so he gears the car low until the road curves to a flat. He recalls evening drives with Marci in Europe, driving to get away and then driving back with their lungs light from cannabis and their lips sore and throbbing. In rehab, she wasn’t allowed a computer so he’s into the habit of writing to her. Not often. There’s not much to say, and Marci’s busy with starting her first semester at Columbia anyway. It’s funny, Foggy just can’t picture Marci
sitting still in a lecture hall taking notes or whatever. She’ll be a formidable lawyer, that’s for sure, so long as no one finds out about her dealings with drugs.

The last letter he had received from Marci contained a small package of developed photos from her last roll of film. Evidently she hadn’t taken many photos which in effect showed an air of decisiveness in each shot. They were mostly of buildings in construction and strangers in cities, and a handful of images of their mess of equipment in hotels or airports, plus the rare shot of familiar faces. He’d held up the negatives against a light to work out of Matt was in the corner of a photo or not, and he’d found a handful of undeveloped frames. A shimmering brown spectacle of dirty pictures. He’d kept the developed photos in an album and the negatives rolled up in a drawer of his desk in his room and he hasn’t looked at them since. And he’d never read Marci’s first letter either. He’s still afraid of what it says, to be quite honest. What kind of hex had Marci placed on it that had convinced Matt, in only a few minutes, to finally abandon his Catholic values and kiss him back?

Matt’s hand twitches, a muffled whimper in response to a dream. It’s not like it’s perfect with Matt. Yeah, he’s more open to affection now but only in private. And even then, he can be pretty rigid. It’s just hard when Foggy’s finally allowed to think about Matt in a sexual way and that just makes him horny all the time. He’s trying to go step by step himself, so that he doesn’t push Matt into doing something that he doesn’t want to do, but also so that Foggy doesn’t burn himself out too soon like a one hit wonder. Only, at this point, all Matt seems to be comfortable with his hand holding and occasional gentle kissing. Which is something, but the patience is testing Foggy’s faith in himself because when it’s just him and Matt, he kind of just wants Matt all the time.

It’s not like he’s expecting Matt to accept the fact that he’s blatantly gay overnight. Foggy gets it. It’s a process. It’s Matt’s Catholic values ingrained into his way of thinking. It’s Matt’s whole life facing the fact that he’s not attracted to girls in the same way as he is to boys. It’s Matt trying to change the way he reacts to being touched by Foggy in a certain way, to being caressed and kissed and loved in a way that makes him a sodomite in the eyes of God. It’s Foggy feeling bad that Matt has to have this conflict within himself in the first place. It’s Foggy finally allowing himself to love Matt, after time gone blurry of not being able to. It’s Foggy coming to terms with previously having to ignore his feelings and now allowing Matt, in tender snippets, realize just how much Matt means to him. It’s progressing but at such a snail rate that Foggy gets frustrated sometimes, because he’s waited so long and Matt’s right there, right there, and sometimes he can’t touch Matt. Can’t hug him or kiss him better because that’s only going to make it worse. Sometimes he’s just got to be Matt’s friend and he just has to breathe and respect that Matt has boundaries and recite to himself that there’s always time for a shower later when Foggy can sort out his own heat.

There’s a loud, dull thud quickly followed by folding metal and screeching tyres. Foggy lurches forward from the inertia. Matt wakes with a start. A split second later, Foggy slams his foot on the brakes. He can only see a smoky blur, then, as the engine comes to a quiet, he sees spidered branches oscillate in front of the windshield.

“What…” Matt drawls sleepily.

“I think I hit a deer,” Foggy murmurs.

His hands hover over the seatbelt buckle. He’s mesmerised by the stag rotating its head against the front of the car. The speed of it slows as the life seems to lift out of the animal, and Foggy closes his eyes as he punches the button of the seatbelt. He climbs out of the car. Out in the chill damp air, Foggy can hear the stag make this horrible yelping noise. Dark red gushes over the body of the car, rushing like the deep channels over the mountains.
Matt climbs out of the car and clings to the door. He covers his nose and mouth with one hand, grimacing at the stench of the wrecked wild animal and burning engine.

“I didn’t see it,” Foggy says quietly.

The deer’s yelping wanes and as Foggy comes around to the front of the car, the deer looks limp with its limbs melded into the dented frame. Matt disappears inside the car again and comes out with an article of clothing. Foggy tears his eyes away from the animal and watches Matt get down to business. He shreds the clothing in two and starts to wrap the rags around how fists like makeshift gloves.

“I can’t look at it,” Foggy says, his face contorted in disgust.

He stares at Matt and when Matt places his hands on the light brown body of the deer, he looks away into the low hanging sky. Mist lurches through the passage divided through the mountainside by the road. Cold starts to make his ears numb and sore. When he looks back, Matt has dragged the carcass to the side of the road. He’s thrown the rags over the stag and is in the process of wiping blood off his hands over the dewy grass.

“Car still work?” Foggy hears Matt call to him.

His toes are frozen, a chill creeping up his arms and clawing his shoulders and neck. He climbs into the car and tries to start it again. It grumbles and whines but doesn’t start. He tries a few more times. Smoke fumes from the front and makes the blood on the frame coagulate and bubble.

“How far are we?” Matt asks him, coming up to the car.

“Far,” Foggy tells him.

Colour drains from his face as he steps out of the car again. They pose in a stand still for a collection of time. No cars pass. Foggy tries his cell but there’s no service. He kicks himself for not packing the aerial extension. And for thinking it would be alright to drive the scenic route after heavy rain the night previous. He’d thought the mist would have risen by midday already. They’re a good two hours away. By car. Worse on foot.

“I was watching the road,” Foggy swears, “the big guy came out of nowhere.”

Except all he can remember before he hit the stag is looking at Matt’s body curled up on the seat, the way his shirt had lifted slightly up his back and showed off the first few notches in his spine. The way his ass looked in his tight pants. The way Matt’s lips were parted and wet with sleep.

“We’ll have to walk,” Matt says.

“We can’t leave the car here blocking the road,” Foggy points out.

He reaches for Matt then, tries to hold his hand but Matt seems to shift out of his path.

“Put it in neutral and we’ll move it aside.”

Panic and agitation gets Foggy through forty minutes of a walk playing catch ups with Matt. Once their equipment arrives without the band, their engineers will surely realize that they’re late, and then they’ll be beyond late and someone’s going to come for them. But that’s closer to sundown and Foggy’s bleary eyed and hungry and Matt won’t let up on his speed.

After what seems like hours, Foggy stops by a large rock around a long bend and tries to catch his
breath, but Matt doesn't seem to notice.

"Matt!" He pants, "Wait up, I need a break!"

Matt walks back and crosses his arms as he waits for Foggy to breathe normally again. Foggy’s stomach rumbles loudly.

"Got any reception here?"

Foggy flips out his cell again and accidentally drops it on the pine needle laden ground. He grapples for it but ends up sliding down the rock to the ground. He tumbles the phone over into his lap and checks the screen.

"No bars," Foggy replies breathily.

Matt nods. He drums his fingers on his biceps, then says, "You have no energy left, Foggy. You stay here, I’ll keep going and find a payphone or hail someone down on the highway."

Foggy scrunches his face, "No."

"No?"

You can’t fucking see!

"No," Foggy says resignedly as he gets to his feet. "I can keep going."

He makes it no more than half an hour before he begs Matt to stop with him again. He stumbles into the side forest and finds the nearest tree to sit against. Brambles and blackberry leaves scratch against his leather jacket as his chest heaves against the trunk. A moment later a car passes them, but doesn’t stop. Panic surges in Foggy’s chest again, his heart throbbing in his throat.

"Can you,” he wheezes, “can you hail the next car, Matt? I’ll tell you when there’s one coming.”

“How about I just go on ahead. I can reach the farm if I go at my own pace."

“How about no?” Foggy retorts, then shakes his head. “Sorry, but I am not letting you go ahead on your own.”

“I’ll be fine.”

“Have you forgotten that you’re blind?”

“I’ve learnt to live with my disability.”

“Well that’s great Matt! But we’re in the middle of nowhere and I can’t contact anyone,” Foggy explains exasperated, “And if you get lost…”

Matt’s brows are knotted into a frown, his bulging arms folded across his chest.

“Our best bet,” Foggy pants, “Is to wait until another car passes… and hope they’ll have the heart to give us a lift.”

Matt looks like he’s about to quip something, so Foggy quickly sneers, “Otherwise we’ll just have to take it slow. I thought you preferred it that way anyway.”

“This is different.”
“Uh-huh,” Foggy replies flatly.

Matt lets out a sigh as he drops his knees to the ground. He starts palming the pine needles and crushing them in his fists. He grinds the needles until it sifts out of his fingers like dirt.

“The deer was gigantic, Foggy, how did you not see it?”

“I just didn’t see it, okay?” Foggy grumbles.

Matt claws at the pine needles some more. Foggy watches the smaller fragments float away in the wind.

After a while Matt starts at it again, “I just don’t understand it. That car that passed was the first car we’d seen in hours.”

“How do you know? You were asleep.”

Matt shakes his head, “There was nothing to distract you.”

Foggy pulls his knees up and rests his arms over them. “Well obviously I was distracted by something.”

Or someone.

Matt winces and sits back on his heels. Foggy can’t help but look at the way Matt’s jeans tighten around his muscled legs, the way the denim wears thin around his knees, shows off a spot of skin in a tear. Matt’s long sleeve hangs loose on his frame, the neck hole sags off to the right and reveals a portion of Matt’s chest glinting with sweat and mist.

A cool breeze sifts through the forest, a leafy sound devoid of the noise of wildlife. Foggy’s legs tingle as the blood in his veins thicken and becomes temperate. Just a few more minutes then he’ll get moving again.

Matt looks at him in that sideways way, as if it’s his ears that are doing the seeing instead.

“I can’t sit here anymore, Foggy. I’m going to go,” He starts to stand up, “Come with me or not. I’ll come back for you.”

Foggy kicks to his feet. His ankles scream at him. “Why are you insisting on this, huh?”

“It’s fine, really, I can make it,” Matt’s saying as he tries to walk away from Foggy.

Foggy snatches onto his sleeve, “Stop, would you? This is crazy!” he says with fire on his tongue.

Matt halts rigid.

“Seriously, can’t you just wait a minute? You’re always trying to get away from me.”

“It’s uh, it’s not like that,” Matt says, ducking his head.

“Then what is it? I don’t wanna fight with you but you’re really pushing it.”

“You’re gonna…”

“I’m gonna what?” Foggy derides.
“You’re holding me back.”

Foggy scoffs. “Oh that’s rich. *I’m* holding you back?! I’m trying to look out for you but obviously you don’t give a shit if, oh, I don’t know, a giant stag rams into you because you’ve learnt to live with your disability?! There’s nothing for me to worry about! I’m holding you back… Jesus, would you listen to yourself?! You don’t know how I’ve felt all these years with you holding me back!” Foggy retorts, stepping in closer to Matt, “And now that you have finally admitted you have feelings for me too, you still wanna push me away?? It’s like, it’s like you would prefer to put yourself in danger than to pay me the time of day!!”

Foggy can feel Matt’s breath on his neck when he speaks.

“I know I can make it,” Matt insists.

“God, would you shut up?” Foggy spits, “You don’t have an inch of patience for me but you’ve got no time to lose when it’s something you wanna do!”

“Fog-“ Matt starts as he backs away but his footing slips and he falls backwards.

For a split second, Foggy watches Matt flail, then instincts catch up with him and he tries to catch his friend. Only Matt’s a lot heavier than he thought and ends up actually pulling Foggy down with him rather than keeping upright. Foggy falls on top of him and accidentally elbows Matt’s stomach. Matt makes an ‘oof’ kind of noise as he flops back on the ground. Matt’s eyes are covered with his fringe, so all Foggy can see are his parted lips and Matt’s throat swallowing, but that’s not enough to stop Foggy from reaching up and snatching the skin between his teeth. Matt lets out a yelp and Foggy quickly smooths over the bite by smacking his lips over Matt’s neck. He guesses he’s still horny from his earlier voyeurism and having Matt pushing his buttons hasn’t helped his case. Even now, Matt doesn’t seem to be pushing away. He lets Foggy aggressively kiss his neck, lets Foggy teeth parts of his salty tasting skin, lets Foggy suck and leave a mark. Foggy feels Matt’s hands press against his waist like he’s holding Foggy secure. He ignores Matt’s touch and focuses on letting Matt feel his frustration. Matt cranies his neck and hisses as Foggy sucks on a portion of skin on the other side of his neck. Foggy faintly smells the dirt and the pine needles beneath them but his sight is caked in a rage incensed blur. He can only see in a sliver between the blur, a single line of vision like the red bar in Scott Summers’ eyewear. He starts to grind his hips into Matt’s, pushing into Matt’s firm abdomen, and yeah, he’s getting hard but *Christ* is that Matt’s boner trapped beneath is jeans? And Dear God, is Matt harder than him??

Foggy nibbles at Matt’s neck and rolls his hips and every time he applies some force to Matt’s neck and applies some pressure down south, he can feel Matt’s dick twitch and strain beneath the fabric. He runs a rough finger over Matt’s sandpaper jawline, hooks Matt’s chin up to observe the damage he’s left on Matt’s neck, then pulls the chin down to kiss Matt’s lips. Matt’s mouth feels hot as Foggy shoves his tongue in, forces Matt’s tongue to play ball. He breathes in when Matt breathes out, runs his hand over Matt’s throat and feels his Adam’s apple rise and fall and hitch and quiver when Foggy snakes his hand down to Matt’s crotch and gives his clothed dick a harsh squeeze.

Matt lets out a moan and lifts his head off the ground, only for Foggy to push him back with a flat hand against the top of his throat.

At the thud of the back of Matt’s head hitting the soil, Foggy blinks. Why is he enjoying hurting Matt like this? He pulls back and sits on Matt’s lap. This is not him. He’s never done this to anyone before.
Matt arches his back and he moans something like Foggy’s name. Foggy’s vision goes dark and he feels Matt grabbing his limp hand and kind of shoving it at his cock raised in his jeans. He feels Matt spread his fingers and get Foggy to massage his dick.

“I’m sor-“ Foggy starts but before he can finish what he was going to say, Matt sits up quickly, hoisting Foggy in his lap, and kisses Foggy to shut him up.

It’s the farthest he’s ever gotten with Matt and yet he feels sick, feels guilty and weird that it took him getting rough with Matt to get a response from him beyond simple affection. Matt takes his lips away from Foggy in a sloppy suction and he presses his forehead against Foggy’s. He pants between them. Foggy looks down the slant in Matt’s nose, watching his cheeks flush and lips part and his shoulders heaving, back shuddering, breath ragged and hot and Foggy’s dreamed of Matt like this but not the leading up to. He’d never imagined he could do that.

He’s not as hard as he was but he’s still half there and Matt’s hot breath skating across his neck gives him feverish chills. Matt’s got his large hands partially covering Foggy’s ears, and threading into his long hair. Matt’s knees either side of him, shaky. Matt stays like this for a while, silently cradling Foggy. Sweat beads on their faces, drips with the mist down their cheeks.

Slowly, Foggy peels himself away from Matt. His stomach lurches, a flashback to the deer mangled on the front of their rental and he scampers in the needles, not far, and empties his stomach. Matt shuffles over on his knees, rubs Foggy’s back.

“You okay?” Matt asks softly.

Foggy can’t look at him. He stares at the shady forest floor. Glares at the notches in the pine needles. Eyes dart to the phlegm and spit and breakfast oozing into the soil.

Foggy sits on his heels and wipes his lips with the back of his hand. He stands up and Matt follows suit. After a moment of dizzy swaying, Foggy starts moving out towards the road again. He feels Matt slip a hand into his own. He looks on into the mist still shrouding the road.

He’s not quite sure how much time has passed. The sun is low now. That’s something. It’s getting colder too. At one point, Matt slows. Foggy loses his hold altogether when Matt stops completely. Foggy looks back then. Sees a weird stain around Matt’s crotch before Matt turns his back and starts waving frantically.

Foggy starts to hear it. A truck rumbling down the deserted road. He starts to jump and flail too, and thankfully the truck actually pulls over. A stoic kind of guy, a farmer, thick accent and a booth that reeks of chewing tobacco. They tell the farmer where they’re headed and he seems to be familiar with the place. He talks about the types he sees turning down the mouth of the driveway. Complains about the trash and the smell and the noise the whole time he drives them there. Foggy’s not paying much attention. The sun’s setting, filling the truck with a warm musty glow. On the long single seat, Foggy glares at the side mirror reflecting Matt and his tousled hair and darkening hickeys on his neck.

Naturally the festival goers offer him pot and at first he refuses because it makes him horny. Instead he smokes a couple of cigarettes in the beer garden with Matt and the engineers after their show. Matt buys the guys rounds as a thank you and when Matt’s caught up in a conversation about technicalities with one of the newer techies, he slips out of the beer garden and out into the main festival. He wanders across the wood chip laden ground and catches a few sets before a girl dressed up in a lion onesie takes him to her caravan. She cooks him some kind of tea. She says his
hair looks like a lion’s mane. He says her sleeve is catching fire on the stove.

The tea makes his vision dim to greyscale. After some time of dancing despite his blistered feet, he finds himself sitting on a grassy hill and watching the sun rise and rise and rise again and again. This white orb burning over shadows. His lover glitches in beside him, like a collection of missing frames in a roll of film. Words sound disjointed, like echoes, torn through permanence.

“Is it always like that?”

Foggy keeps his distance but he doesn’t want it to go back to the way it was.

Matt flickers, colourless.

“Make me feel…”

An engorged hand on his thigh, grey and flush with want, but cold and statuette like David’s. A sterile replica under the rising dome of the Accademia, Florence. Breathy, needy, close proximity.

Matt kisses Foggy and the sun rises once more, bursts yellows and reds and pinks across the horizon. Matt breaks and Foggy watches colour drip into the negatives swathed in modern restoration. Matt describes his history of celibacy broken. Bends into Foggy’s heat comparable to the sun, kisses and takes Foggy’s hand in his. The morning sunshine highlights the purple across Matt’s neck.

xxx. fault line

They leave Anatoly asleep in their hotel and go for a midnight drive to where the skyscrapers taper off to long horizontals rather than verticals. The suburbs smell of stacked linen paper and towering copper coins. Thickly treed driveways draw distance between mansion and road. Lamps cool over a wide grassy oval. Empty parking lot save for a man swinging fire. A roulette of timed steps, turning full circle to rotate the ball of fire through the frosty night.

The windows of the car fog up quick. Condensation drips. Foggy sits on his left, takes a puff of the bong and then passes it and the lighter over. Matt’s fingers are painfully numb against the wheel. Foggy’s been… different since their encounter on the lost highway. His heart still beats for Matt and the longer Matt holds Foggy back, the quicker the overgrowth along the old highway will dry up and flake into dust and nothingness. Matt decides that Foggy must have him or else he isn’t distracted enough to block out the sound of disquiet across cities. A sound that siphons down poverty stricken areas like weak infrastructure built in the middle of a floodway. Every night, every second, he hears them, his muscles twitching, itching, to help in some way. Chatter of the existence of Daredevil diminishes.

The fire swings through the night, as hot as a false sun. In thoughtful gentleness he will take his time. In the heat of the moment he will bend to any whim. He leaves it up to his friend as to how Foggy will entice passion between them. But perhaps he pushed Foggy too far. Tearing teeth at his neck, incensed force in fingers around his throat. He’d made Foggy do something out of character and he’d… he’d loved it. The rush of it. He could take Foggy, easily. He’s far stronger. But he didn’t, he’d submitted to Foggy’s force and felt chills running through his bones and the heat in his pants and he hadn’t ever let himself feel that kind of pleasure. The choice is Foggy’s but after pulling ferocity out of Foggy, Matt thinks he should offer the affection first.
He places the bong in the foot space and sidles up to Foggy. A quicken of the heart.

Matt clears his throat, “I want to know what you look like.”

“I’m nothing pretty,” Foggy says, the hairs on his skin lifting, warming.

“That doesn’t matter to me.”

Matt lifts his right hand across to Foggy’s shoulder and traipses his fingers up Foggy’s neck. He starts with the chin. A soft point covered in coarse beard, a trimmed line of hair to his lower lip. A twitch in Foggy’s cheek as Matt trails the line of his lower lip, catches the edge of a light moustache as he dips into the dimples. Full cheek, rounded nose, nostrils flare. Bags under his lidded eyes, curved heavy eyebrows. A kick in the widow’s peak, shoulder length hair, thick. Sideburns.

He runs his fingers across Foggy’s locked jaw, finds the corner of Foggy’s lips and presses his forefinger in to feel the enamel of Foggy’s straight teeth. He nudges at the underneath of the front two, gently prying the rows of teeth apart. Foggy lets out a hitched breath over Matt’s finger as he’s analysing the shape of each tooth until he finds Foggy’s tongue. Foggy’s eyes flutter shut, heart fast. Foggy then seals his lips around Matt’s finger. He coils his tongue around Matt’s finger and sucks. Matt feels Foggy press into Matt’s side more, Foggy’s left hand reaching Matt’s thigh, massaging. Foggy’s right circles Matt’s wrist, a soft clasp around the tendon which runs the underside of his wrist, the bone to his middle finger and the under curve of his thumb. A soft encouragement for Matt to press his finger deeper in Foggy’s mouth, and recede like the gentle wash of waves on the distant shore.

Each deep thrust bumps Matt’s thumb against Foggy’s Adam’s apple, the pull back drags through the growth over Foggy’s neck. Matt can feel Foggy’s moan amplified through the throat and across his fingertip like the vibration through a keyboard stick. Foggy’s hand darts to Matt’s crotch and Matt flinches. His finger slips from Foggy’s hot mouth.

“Matt?”

“Uh,” Matt breathes, curling his spine as he paws Foggy’s hand away.

Foggy claws his hand along his own thigh. Matt can hear the fabric stretching under the force.

“It’s uh, sorry,” Matt coughs, “It’s Anatoly’s car…”

Foggy pauses, “Okay.”

Heart crazy, Foggy nudges a hand at his dick, pushes it to a more comfortable position.

“Foggy…”

Foggy scratches his neck, “No, it’s fine.”

It’s not.

“Am I… am I breaking you?”

“Huh?”

“Your heart…”

“No.”
A lie.

Foggy turns to look out the window. He mustn’t see anything through the fog. Depending on the brightness of the swinging fire, Foggy might be able to see a soft blur move across the darkness in the shape of infinity.

“I never thought about the fact that you don’t know what I look like,” Foggy admits after a while.

He turns back to Matt but reaches for the bong. He ghosts around Matt and fumbles for the lighter, but is careful not to touch Matt’s legs as he brings the bong to his lap.

“I guess you must recognise me by my voice, normally?”

“Yeah.”

Foggy nods. He lights and as he takes the hit he wedges himself in the corner and brings his feet up on the back seat, knees bent. Matt places a hand on Foggy’s left shin.

“Foggy…”

His friend ignores him, “So I guess you know what I look like now. You done that to many other people? I must be ugly-“

“No, no.”

“…compared to the other girls you’ve done that to. A face like yours, any girl’s gotta say yes to some face touching.”

Matt drops his hand into his lap. The oil burns in in the spherical glass.

“You done it to Marci?”

“Yeah. A long time ago.”

“She’s hot. How about Elektra? I bet there were other girls too.”

“No,” Matt tilts his head, “Not her… It’s a very… intimate action. I only know the faces of a handful of people. Half of Marci’s face – I’ll explain that later – and now yours. I can remember the way my Dad’s face feels but I can’t remember the exact details of his face. I uh, I used to patch him up after his fights. When… it happened. I remember being knocked on the ground and I saw the sky slowly fade away as my Dad’s voice got louder. By the time my Dad got to me, I couldn’t see anymore. Back then, I didn’t need to see to give Dad adequate first aid after his fights, I’d done it so many times already. But the first time I had to do it without vision I… I was so afraid of applying the bandage at the wrong angle, or of driving the needle too deep.”

Matt reaches for Foggy’s leg again and this time Foggy widens his legs and pulls Matt up between them, rests Matt’s head on his chest. He rubs Matt’s head, running his fingers through Matt’s hair and hugs Matt with his other arm.

“My Dad never beat me, but I wonder if he would if he was alive today… and knew.”

“He loved you.”

Matt threads his fingers between Foggy’s.

“My Grandmother was the real catholic anyway…”
Foggy keeps massaging Matt’s head for a long while, then as time passes, his movements slow and cease altogether. Foggy’s breathing evens out and if Matt didn’t know any better, he’d think Foggy had fallen asleep.

“Think I could drive later?” Matt asks casually.

“Yeah, better wait a few hours though.”

Matt half turns and places a hand splayed against Foggy’s chest.

“Wait, wait, what’d you say?” Foggy asks sleepily.

“You just said I could drive.”

“Oh no,” Foggy waves, “No, no. I thought you asked me if I could drive.”

Matt sinks back on Foggy’s chest. “I may not be able to see but navigating the world with just sight and touch isn’t all that different. I can ride a bicycle just fine,” he adds thoughtfully, “One day, Foggy, let’s ride together.”

Foggy’s heart flickers, “on a bike?”

“On a motorbike.”

Foggy relaxes, “now we’re talking, Brando,” then a moment later he laughs, “I’ve never seen you ride a bicycle Matt.”

Matt raises his eyebrows and taps Foggy’s knee, “I’m telling you I can.”

“I’ll have to see it to believe it.”

Matt traces the window where the water courses across the pane on the other side. The air outside isn’t cold enough to snow so instead it’s been sleeting rain across half the state. They’d driven straight from a show that marked their last of their American tour. Claire had managed to get them to open for the Kings of Leon January through to March which has been nothing like Matt has ever expected. They went from playing at 150 seat rooms under Virgin, to 500 or 800 seat rooms under RCA. And opening for the Kings of Leon had them play in 1000 to 2000 seat rooms. 4000 in New York alone. It’s mind blowing, really. They’d been going to the same cities seven or eight times, playing in the same club and walking on the stage before the first Kings of Leon set they did really cemented the idea that they still have a long way to go.

On top of coming straight over from their show, they’d needed to drop their stuff off at Ed’s. They hadn’t even had time to see him properly, and then they were meant to be off again. Foggy had been driving like Marci through the rain despite rattling off with Anatoly about how calming rain can be. Matt silently disagrees. Especially on the road, people are careless. They’re more accident prone when the rain gets so heavy that they can’t see two feet in front of them.

Still, they’d made it safely back to Ed’s. Left Anatoly’s car there and split the taxi three ways to get to Columbia for Marci’s party. She’d titled the invitation, ‘First Semester Completion
Amongst Other Celebratory-Worthy Successes’. He’s sure that one of those successes is being cleared from rehab. The moment that they arrive at Wein Hall, he can smell straight away that she has been diligent. He congratulates her but she hasn’t forgotten their last fight, so she insists on taking Foggy and Anatoly on a tour around the building, sans Matt.

He’d been left in the company of one of Marci’s fellow students, Patricia Wilson. He perches on the windowsill of one of the large windows at the back end of the foyer, waiting until his friends returned from their eleven floor foray. Patricia too, momentarily leaves him in search for drinks for the two of them. He thumbs the veiny windows as he waits for her return. He knows exactly where she is, and where Foggy and Anatoly are too. But the distance grates on him. He appears transfixed by nature, but in reality, scrupulously aware of all movement around him. Manhattan sings in sirens to him but he blocks it out. His ears are bleeding, the sound of the stirring ocean. He has to block it out. He has to.

For Foggy.

“It’s really thunderstorming out there,” Patricia says as she clip clops to his side.

A clap of lightening sounds shortly after. She sets down her glass on the floorboards, then gently nudges Matt’s glass into his hand.

“I watched ’em pour it. Bottle sure was dusty but it ain’t gonna be spiked,” she says reassuringly.

Matt takes a sip and feels the alcohol burn down his throat like molten magma hitting the icy ocean. She collects her glass and perches on the other side of the sill.

Anatoly had joined them in November for their American tour continuing on through to March. In just a few days they’ll be commencing their first ever Asian tour. Under RCA’s permission, Claire has made all the necessary bookings for them, convinced that the Asia Pacific region is an untapped market that Virgin was unwilling to exploit. She’s trying to convince Anatoly to continue to tour with them throughout the rest of the year but she’s not getting much help from Matt. Finds something off in him. Doesn’t seem to quite fit with the band. He knows his tracks now, picked it up pretty fast. Maybe a bit too fast and Matt can’t help but be a little suspicious of him. Foggy seems to quite like the guy. And Matt never does find him lying about things often. Still, he can’t imagine Anatoly becoming a regular member. He’s only doing this as a favour, anyway. The Verve’s his main gig. And maybe that’s why Matt’s suspicious about Anatoly becoming too comfortable too fast. His role is merely functional after all.

Patricia breaks the silence, “Marci should’ve warned me you don’t say much.”

Matt drains his drink. She’s nervous but he doesn’t have the energy to entertain after too long gripping the edge of his seat worried about a car crash. It’s almost as bad as flying. He’ll feel better when Foggy returns by his side, or else the alcohol will do the trick.

“Okay then…” Patricia mutters.

A waitress comes around and tops up their drinks. Beyond them, in the lounge, Matt hears the familiar noise of cables and amp wheels and the buzz of the audio jacks clacking in and out. After a few minutes, the classy jazz music comes to an immediate halt. Three bodies stand in a complete triangle. Their perimeter refines as people crowd around. A single chord on an electric guitar begins quickly followed by the bass and drums. Patricia stands up and cranes her neck to see the musicians.

“Can’t believe Marci really got The Raveonettes to play a private show,” Patricia gushes to Matt.
Matt raises his eyebrow, “Must have cost a bit.”

“Money’s not really an issue for anyone who’s living in a place like this,” Patricia says, “Besides. I heard she’s a friend of the band.”

Matt frowns. He’s about to enquire further when he hears Marci, Foggy and Anatoly descending the staircase. He sculls the last of his drink and sits the glass close to the wall then stands up. Before Marci and Foggy reach him, Anatoly peels off into the crowd in search for his brother who is meant to be here tonight too.

“Patricia! What are you still doing babysitting him?” Marci says as she saunters over to them.

“Well I thought a fine man like him would have something to say to a girl like me but I guess I’ve been barking up the wrong tree,” Patricia speaks as if Matt’s deaf too, “This boy ain’t got nothing interesting to say. Where’d that Russian go? He ain’t buff but I bet he’s got stories to tell.”

Marci nods toward the thickening crowd. Patricia kisses Marci on the cheek before embarking on her hunt, alcohol sloshing from her glass as she walks away.

“How was the grand tour?” Matt asks.

Foggy comes over to him and tries to take Matt’s hand but Matt’s suddenly got an itch on his neck that needs attending.

“Easiest tour I’ve ever been on. No dramas,” Foggy says with hurt in his voice.

“Ouch, Foggy. Don’t you like it? The bottom floor is my favourite. Even though the upper floors have stunning views of Morningside and Central Park, they’ve got nothing on the impressive entrance. Just look at those pillars. It’s like a palace!”

“The place sure is nice,” Foggy says, “Real nice.”

“Makes you think, doesn’t it Foggybear? You could’ve had this too if you hadn’t been such a dropkick at school.”

“I don’t want this,” Foggy replies, “This is too fancy. I just wanna do what I love and live with what I need.”

Marci continues talking but Foggy doesn’t seem to be listening anymore even though it’s clear Marci’s talking only to Foggy, not Matt. He can hear the twitching in Foggy’s fingers, the heat builds between them too and maybe that’s just because of the alcohol but no, he can feel Foggy edging closer to him. The music’s nice, 60’s kind of mellow stuff that gets your feet tapping and your heart swooning. Foggy’s fingers brush against his and he has to flinch away again. He doesn’t want to be visible in front of Marci. She’ll make a big deal about it. Dig up old stuff and make a scene probably. Besides, he’s too close to home. Stick mightn’t intervene while he’s with friends but that doesn’t mean Stick’s not watching in his own way.

“… All that comes down to is that hard work pays off.”

Matt distracts himself from Foggy’s magnetism by addressing Marci, “Patricia said you knew the band.”

Marci scowls at him and gives her answer to Foggy, “It’s a funny story, Foggybear. You wouldn’t believe it. I happened to be walking around a venue they were playing at in Midtown last month and the engineers mistook me for Sharin Foo! I mean, I can understand we both have a similar
resemblance to Debbie Harry but Sharin’s chopped all her hair off. Suppose that’s men for you, hey? They nail you down to three things. Your skin colour, your hair colour, and the size of these girls,” Marci says as she clutches her breasts. She laughs, “I just went along with it! They pulled me inside the bar and were asking me all these technical questions about my guitar tunings and all that, and you know they weren’t ever really my thing so I went straight for the drums and just look at Karen over there! I don’t know how she does it with no stool for the whole set. Must be a Scandinavian thing. My legs would give way and my finishing number would feature me crashing into my own drum kit!

“Anyway, Karen comes backstage and maybe she’d thought Sharin had somehow quickly dropped her accent because Karen legitimately thought she was getting drunk with Sharin around the corner of the venue until she realized that I didn’t know who the hell Sune Rose was, let alone that Karen’s name was Karen!”

“And you promised me you were off drugs,” Foggy says.

“I am!” Marci protests, “Not my fault I was in the right place at the right time. Now come on, Vlad’s dying to catch up with you.”

Marci grabs onto Foggy’s arm and tries to drag him away, but when he tries to bring Matt with him, Marci holds up her hand.

“Not you. Vlad’s gone off you. You weren’t invited anyway.”

“Marci you’re being very childish,” Matt warns.

Marci huffs and spins in her heels, then storms away.

Foggy turns to Matt, “Do you wanna get out of here?”

Foggy’s hand is creeping up his bicep and Matt shivers, “No, I’d like to listen to the rest of this set. I like it.”

He pans his magnetic pull to the music. Foggy trails after him, fingers bouncing off the opposite force field Matt has put around himself. They push into the crowd. Heads sway around him, hearts beat the hidden bass line to each song. He can sense it in the musician’s movements that the set is almost complete. A feeling of excitement and relief in the way that they move their fingers over their instruments. Foggy hangs close to him, that inch of space around him breaks every so often as the crowd moves to the music. Steel sparking against anvil at contact.

He can go on like this, keeping Foggy at bay and listening to the music. But at some point the music is going to stop and they’re going to have to hang around and things are going to be awkward between the old three. So he calculates. Foggy’s despondent movement affects his speed, the tempo of the music affects his ability to move between bodies. Marci is the unpredictable one, but he’s sure that the moment Foggy sees Marci, he’ll attempt to smooth things over, try and make Marci diminish the importance of their previous encounter.

“Foggy,” Matt says as he turns to make sure his friend can hear him, “Can you go get us drinks?”

“Yeah, okay.”

Matt’s in no way doing it to benefit himself though. He sets up this engagement to ease Foggy. He knows his friend would rather stay impartial to either side. Knows that Foggy would sleep better at night knowing that there’s one less drama to worry about. He listens to the music and intently overlaps the sound of Foggy and Marci having a heated conversation behind him. The
conversation begins an extended play, even when the band finishes their set. He waits for Foggy to return to him. Listens to the band start to pack away their equipment as the jazz music resumes over the speakers. Matt walks over to the emptying space around the band, listening to what they’re putting away. Their equipment is quite minimal. Only a few pedals, some mini equalizers, a compact drum set too. They shuffle the equipment off into a small storage room and all the while, Matt keeps alert on Foggy and Marci as the crowd disperses around them.

“Hey, are you Matt?” An approaching woman asks him.

She flexes her fingers. Her knuckles crack. Her hands smell of waxed wood and sweat.

“Uh, yeah,” Matt replies.

“Sorry, I know I’m not mean to talk to you but I’m kind of a big fan of yours so I really wanted to meet you.”

The statement is a weighted truth, only half true, or true on only a certain level.

“Why aren’t you meant to talk to me?” Matt enquires.

“Oh,” The woman stammers. She tucks a strand of her behind her ear, ducking her head as she speaks, “Marci, she uh, she told me a lot about you.”

He hears Foggy and Marci’s conversation settle. They must be coming towards him.

“All good things, I hope,” Matt smiles.

“Actually,” she swallows, “All bad things. But I know you’re not really a bad guy! At least, I don’t believe all the things she says.”

The woman hovers around him with a kind of electricity in her bones. Matt runs his hand through his hair, exposing a fraction of skin as his shirt lifts. It’s a move that he knows makes Foggy squirm and he only does it to see what her reaction is, which is unsurprisingly similar. Even though he hasn’t been able to see his own reflection since he was ten, he’s come to understand, from multiple sources, that he’s handsome. The toned muscle over his body surely adds to his image, not that he cares what he looks like or what anyone else looks like in the slightest. Honestly he only does it because he expects to hear the same reaction in Foggy as he approaches, except he hears nothing.

Foggy seems to no longer be on the same floor anymore.

“To be fair, it’s only since I met Marci that I really started listening to your music. But… since then, I have listened to your records a lot. And I’ve, um, read lots of interviews in magazines and things—“

“You must have had to hunt for those.”

“Not really! See, there’s your modesty, Matt. You’re really more well-known than you think. And I’m starting to believe you’re as sweet as you sound in those interviews too.”

Matt smiles, “This is some flattery, Ms uh…”

“Oh! I never introduced myself. My name is Karen Page. I kind of know your drummer by accident. She walked in on our show prep last month and she had no one else fooled but me. It’s silly…”
“So you’re the drummer for The Raveonettes?”

“Yeah,” she beams, “I am. Well, not officially. I’m only their touring drummer for the US. They have this other guy who tours with them in Europe but the Berlin Wall is as far East as he goes.”

“And you cover the rest of the map?”

“Yeah, I mean, it’s something. It’s work right? And experience. I have almost nothing here. I’m living in New York out of my friend’s cupboard! But, don’t get me wrong, I love what I’m doing. I just want to be part of something, you know? I want to start something and well,” she shakes her head, smiling, “You know the rest. You’ve done it!”

Matt returns her smile, swaying a bit. The alcohol in his system must be more potent than he’d thought because it’s really starting to hit home now. A smooth jazz song plays overhead and he feels Karen’s slight body edge closer to him. Their hands briefly touch. There’s no true way to tell if a person is attractive just from the sound of their voice. It comes from the reactions of people around them, from the kind of jealous sparks he tethers from the way onlookers inhale or leer or avert their attention full view or away. It’s one of the sins he tries to repent for. For feeling prideful of the affection placed upon appearances which he cannot perceive.

“Sorry, I’m talking too much. I’m always buzzed after a set.”

She starts to back away but Matt reaches out and catches her by the elbow. The flight of her heart, the element of second-hand romanticism in those who are observing. He holds on, a fleeting idea running through his mind, an idea so pure and true that in this moment he believes he can drop everything and run away with her. Devastate his life for this girl, whom he doesn’t know, but who feels food in his arms. Ruin, because that’s what he’s good at.

“It’s alright, I want to listen to your voice a while longer.”

“Shall we dance?” Karen asks in a mesmerised tone.

Matt answers her by slipping his right hand around her waist. His fingers run across the velvet of her dress and as he takes her right hand in his left, he caresses the fine fibres of the velvet. Moving it slightly down, a seamless return. She said she was poor but he hasn’t felt quality like this before.

“You have piano playing hands, Karen,” Matt comments, his hand a spider across hers.

She looks up at him, “And I chose drums.”

He smiles. Pulls her in. Touches the velvet across her waist, rising up her ribs, down her spine.

“What’s it like?” she asks.

He’s starting to think Patricia really did put something in that drink, or else he’s getting tipsy on a glass of wine only because he hasn’t had anything this expensive before.

He feels light headed, breathy. “What’s what like?”

“Being blind?”

“It’s like I can’t see,” he says, and listens to her chuckle until he explains, “I can see, in a way. It’s a different kind of visual landscape than you see.”

She leans into him, he runs his hands over her back, over the slight curve before her ass, careful.
She’s so slender, tall, too. She must be the same height as him. Their geometry clicks in place perfectly, like tessellation.

“What do you see when you look at me?”

Her lips are so close to his. She smells like the deeply forested mountains, like velvety woods and the silky fibres that encase bony antlers. He lifts his hand to her supple cheek, she lifts her chin and his fingers catch on her parted lips. A break in his ambience illustrates Foggy and Marci’s presence on the ground floor. Marci giddy and shrill.

He parts from Karen. Warm air chills between them, but his attention instantly reverts to Foggy. Matt turns with his teeth grit the moment Foggy is close enough for him to smell cum on his fingers. His lips twitch. Karen falls into conversation with Marci, who steers her away from Matt.

The smell of cum is potent now. Recent and wet. He balls his fists.

Foggy fishes out a packet of cigarettes and taps Marci’s arm before she starts her disappearing act, “Where can I smoke?”

“Not in here!” She calls over her shoulder, “There’s a door at the back over there! Don’t leave any ash on the porch!”

Foggy nods. He holds the pack between his teeth as he wipes his hands on his jeans. He starts walking towards the direction Marci had pointed him in, and Matt closely follows.

“What do you want?” Foggy spits, his hand on the door knob.

“To speak to you.”

Foggy rolls his eyes and opens the door. The rain plummets outside, sharp tear drops hit the pavement lining the small roofed area. Foggy steps out and starts to light up a cigarette in a rush. He leans over the metal railing. Matt can feel the cold steel seep into Foggy’s veins, hear how he breathes in the air, cold and wet and smoky.

Matt kicks the door shut with his foot.

“What’s wrong with you?” Foggy says, turning to him.

“Did you fuck her?”

Foggy reels. The cigarette suffers in the weather.

“You fucked her, didn’t you?”

“No.”

Matt punches the stone wall, breaks the skin across his knuckles. Foggy jumps at the action, and tries to hold Matt back from doing it again. Matt ressigns to Foggy’s hold, which then tightens.

“What is this to you? What is this really? Do you want me? Or do you want to fuck me up but not fuck me?”

Thunder claps, a low rumbling roar.

“What the fuck was that in there with that drummer? Did you think I wouldn’t see?” Foggy accuses. “Because yeah, even though it’s none of your business, I did have sex with Marci.”
Matt grits his teeth. His fists pound. Blood dribbles from his broken skin, from his broken heart.

“Do you feel anything, at all?!”

“I feel betrayal.”

Foggy lets go, stunned. He stares at Matt for a brief moment, before clashing his lips against Matt’s. Matt only tastes steel. Worn lips on his, trying to make him feel, trying to make him say something, mean something.

Foggy breaks from him, his thumbs press hard against Matt’s collarbone.

“I hate it when you push me away. I know you want me.”

Foggy kisses his neck, rough, slight teething, a smack of lips over his beard. Foggy smells musky and salty and he leans into Foggy’s touch.

“I know you want this,” Foggy says as he grabs Matt’s hand and presses it against his hard dick, “but you won’t even hold my hand at a friend’s party.”

Foggy lets Matt’s hand drop and instead he squeezes Matt’s dick. He lets out a gasp. Foggy kisses him again, tasting the end of the gasp and he curves his body into Matt, grinds his hips, tears his lips across Matt’s cheek, nibbles his ear. The rain distorts into the white noise of a tuneless television, no sound matters except the wet noises of Foggy’s mouth. No temperature matters except the heat emanating from his friend. His lover.

Foggy finds Matt’s hands and slams them against the stony wall behind Matt. Pins him there. Makes Matt feel the bruises and the weary skin of Foggy’s hands. Matt cranes his neck to the heavens. Thanks the Lord for letting him live. Foggy puckers Matt’s neck, wrecks it down to his collarbone. Then he’s pushing at Matt’s shoulders, forcing him down on his knees like he’s about to pray for forgiveness.

He feels Foggy’s hands run through his hair, cup the small of his neck, thumb the skin behind his ears with a sharp nail. Matt hooks his arms around Foggy’s waist and curls his fingers over the hem of Foggy’s jeans, gives them a tug. He can hear Foggy’s heart beat rapidly, hot and nervous and excited. Foggy unbuckles his belt and lets Matt tug Foggy’s jeans and boxers down far enough to get Foggy’s hard cock out in the open.

Matt breathes heavily, panting, his knees burning on the altar, the devil watching him from the gates of hell. Foggy’s exposed cock smells of cum and musk and thin plastic. He closes his eyes as Foggy’s thumbs hits his jaw, and lifts his mouth open by his teeth. Matt can sense hesitation and to show Foggy he’s alright, he takes Foggy’s dry cock in his mouth.

It’s Foggy’s turn to gasp. He catches the wall for support, leaving one hand splayed over the back of Matt’s head. Matt’s mouth is filled with Foggy’s dick, and for a moment he stays completely stationary because he’s not sure what to do. He’s never sucked dick before. He hasn’t even had his own dick sucked before. Luckily Foggy seems to know what to do and starts to roll his hips back and forth.

“Use your tongue,” Foggy instructs with a shaky voice.

Matt blinks. Rain pours steadily on the little roof above sheltering them. Foggy rolls into his throat again, skin just grazing underneath the top row of his teeth, the underneath of Foggy’s cock sliding across his tongue. Foggy starts to quicken his pace, his palm on the back of Matt’s head encouraging a deeper reach. Tears come to Matt’s eyes as the sheer size of Foggy’s cock wears into
his mouth. He wishes he could see. Never in his life has he wished he could see than he does currently. He prays to God, with cock in his mouth, that he can look up at this moment and see the expression on Foggy’s face. See the lust. But all he can do is the same as before.

Instead of seeing, he feels the want in Foggy’s fingertips, the heat in the tip of his cock. Matt licks his tongue around Foggy’s cock, as far as he can smother it, a kind of belly flop action that mustn’t be good but Foggy seems to like it because he makes a particularly exasperated pant. That sound sends chills to Matt’s dick, and his eyes flutter shut as he lets Foggy fuck his mouth, tastes the flavour of Foggy’s skin, lips pressed against shaft, against balls and pulsing veins.

His dick strains in his pants and it’s a combination of anything and everything, an amplification of his senses that means touch and taste and sound brings him over the edge a lot sooner than most. He comes and he’s sure Foggy doesn’t notice because shortly after, Foggy starts heaving and rocking his hips into Matt’s sore, wet mouth. Foggy balls Matt’s hair in his fist as he thrusts his dick against the back of his throat and Matt does what he can, getting hot and hard all over again just listening to the way Foggy’s reaching his climax.

And then Foggy’s shuddering.

Hot salt shoots into Matt’s throat, drips down into his stomach and Foggy’s apologising in a frantic panting way, trying to slip his dick out of Matt’s mouth. But Matt stops him. Holds him, sucks him, lets Foggy finish because he needs to taste the bad.

When Foggy’s shuddering starts to slow, Foggy pushes Matt’s face away and drops to his knees too, wraps his arms around Matt’s neck, catches his breath. Matt holds Foggy’s waist, sturdies him. Cum smears his mouth and he licks his lips, drinks the last dribble of wine brewed by the sodomites. Let God forsake him as he himself comes again at the sheer feeling of cradling the aftermath of passion.

Foggy leaves his face pressed in the crook of Matt’s neck as he starts to do up his pants again. “So, did you cum just then or what?”

Matt’s heart drops. Foggy cups Matt’s clothed dick, rubs his thumb across the damp material. “Because uh,” Matt shudders, licking his lips, “because I can’t see… I’m more sensitive in uh, other areas…”

Foggy nods. He caresses Matt’s groin as he chokes out his words, “Matt I have to… be honest with you,” he takes a deep breath, then speaks in a rush, “I hate having to get rough with you to get you to do stuff with me.”

Foggy feels hot, but a different kind of hot. Nervous hot. Matt pulls him in for a hug, their knees touching, grazing against the pavement. “I’m sorry,” Matt says into Foggy’s ear.

“No, I’m sorry,” Foggy kisses an already bruising spot on Matt’s neck, “I don’t want to treat you this way… even though I think you like it this way… I was hoping that… that the first time I make you cum it would be in a better situation.”

“Better?”

“Yeah,” Foggy continues to speak over Matt’s shoulder, “but I guess both times have been… like this. Correct me if I’m wrong, but… I’m guessing it’s your Catholicism that makes you want to be
punished?”

Foggy waits but Matt’s speechless.

“And… And I’ll try,” Foggy sighs, “but I don’t want to have to hate you to get us both off.”

“I don’t want you to hate me.”

Foggy turns to look at Matt. He brushes the hair out of Matt’s face and seems to be studying his face.

Foggy smiles, “Sex can be really fun, Matt. I actually find it a lot better when it’s… not how we’ve done it so far. If you let me, I can show you how much better it can be.”

Matt moves his hand to Foggy’s face and pulls him in for a tender kiss.

“I’ll do anything for you.”

Foggy pauses, “We’ll see. Now let’s get you home and into a change of clothes.”

xli. promise

They only have a week to prepare for their next tour. Foggy tries to treat his time home in Manhattan like he’s not home at all. He gets too used to home too quickly, and then gets torn from it for months on end. It’s easier to pretend that he’s still on tour. Still busy. And that kind of mentality really helps him with Matt too because being home means they’re back in Foggy’s tiny room, so close to his Dad’s room, and they can’t really do anything that Foggy would like to do.

Then it dawns on him. This interim between tours might possibly be the only time he will be able to get with Matt, alone. They start in Mumbai and work anti-clockwise through the Asian region and Foggy’s sitting here on his bed, looking over the itinerary and realizing with a heavy shock that Claire’s booked triples at almost every hotel.

He wonders if Anatoly knows about it yet. That they’re never going to be separated. That they’re going to drive each other nuts by constantly being in each other’s space. Sure, they’ve been touring together for almost three months now, but at least American hotels offer good rates on singles.

Look. He doesn’t mind sharing but he does mind sharing night after night with someone he’s wildly attracted to plus their fill-in drummer. It just won’t work. Besides, he knows from experience that Matt really values his alone time while they’re on tour.

He goes out into the hall and takes the phone off the hook.

The moment Claire picks up on her end, Foggy states, “Triples?”

“Is this Foggy?”

“Yeah it’s me. Why are all the hotels booked as triples?”

“Not all of them, just the ones where it was cheaper to do so.”

Foggy looks over the documents again, the phone wedged between his ear and shoulder.
“No. I’m pretty sure you’ve booked every hotel as triples.”

“Let me pull up the email,” she mumbles, then after a few minutes of grumbling, she says, “Okay, so I might have made a mistake with the bookings, but I assure you this is the cheapest option. RCA dug the idea of marketing BRMC in Asia but there’s a cost effectiveness side to it, and honestly the way I’ve done it is going to make the label happy.”

“What about making us happy?” Foggy snaps.

Claire exhales, “I am sorry. I know it’s not ideal, but you need to understand your position under the eyes of the label. You did not work well with Virgin—“

“You did not work well with Virgin,” Claire repeats, “but your talent shows through your music. You’re going to make money, and with what I’ve shown to the execs, you’re going to make us money on this tour too. I pulled sales statistics to prove your marketability, so you need to hold up your end and make this work. The incorrect hotel bookings are noted, and I will make the changes where financially possible, but if you don’t follow my instruction, you not only endanger my job, you endanger your contractual rights.”

Foggy sighs, “Ugh, I hate this.”

He hears Claire cover the phone with her hand momentarily, then speak in a hushed tone, “I know it’s shit. But you need to listen to me. Just stick it out, I’ll see what I can do for you.”

“Thanks Claire.”

“Alright, now don’t call me on this number again. I need you to go through the main desk line.”

“But I know you’ll answer on this one.”

“You know Foggy, you’re starting to sound like a spoilt artist.”

Foggy laughs, “Alright, I’ll call you in a week.”
Mumbai. Not every capital city has US franchises that Anatoly’s accustomed to. As for him and Matt, they’re both digging the local food. Can’t get enough of it any country they go because it’s nothing like the versions at home.

The team finish with aligning the camera and the interviewer introduces himself. A translator beside him waits a few moments, then begins to dictate the interview. They go through standard questions as per usual. Foggy answers most of them, even when Matt’s addressed, he has to say something because Matt’s zoned out so much he could very well be baked.

“You have quite the following even here in Hong Kong. What differences have you found in your fans here?”

“Differences…” Foggy starts, “I would say the audiences are more mellow, don’t you think Matt? They’re more, I don’t know, receptive. The crowds back home they really get into it. And neither is better or worse than the other, just you know, it’s a difference.”

“Yes, some bands visit and say they are intimidated.”

“By the audience?” Foggy laughs, “No, no, that’s not us. I don’t really get stage fright. I kind of close my eyes most of the time anyway.”

“Like Matthew.”

“Yeah,” Foggy smiles.

“Next question. By looking at the order of songs on the album, Howl seems to be divided by songs about despair and disappointment, versus love and gratitude on the second half. There is also more religious references in this release than in your previous records. What is the meaning behind including these themes?”

Foggy sits back, “that’s a really good question. I haven’t been asked that before. Themes…”

He thinks about the question, hoping Matt would say something, but Matt only slouches in the couch beside him, content to remain silent.

“In terms of religious references, I would say that Catholicism plays a role in Matt’s song writing more than my own. I’m not religious myself, but that doesn’t meant those motifs aren’t meaningful or powerful to me. Um, what was the start of that question?”

“That Howl is divided by songs about despair and disappointment, versus love and gratitude.”

“Yeah, wow. I’m not sure if it was intentional, to be honest. I think that’s just how the album came together. We don’t often write songs together, lyrically speaking. We help each other with the chords and such, but the deal is if you come up with a verse or a chorus, it’s your responsibility to finish it.”

He laughs, and catches a smile on Matt’s face.

“So um, I’m not sure that those themes you talked about were planned. It’s true that it this record is almost half and half. I think Matt penned a couple more than me, but in terms of what the album is about, or if it’s about anything… We didn’t set out to write an album about love or hate or whatever. The songs we wrote about just kind of, they were about something personal but the best songs are universal, you know? So it’s really interesting to me that you’ve dissected themes from our songs. The depth that our fans read into our music is really fascinating.”
“Okay. You now have a MySpace. Do you go on the forums?”

“No not really.”

“I do,” Matt pipes up.

Both the interviewer and translator voice Foggy’s surprise, “You do?”

“Yes. I have computer software that lets me access the web,” Matt explains, “I only go on to answer a couple of questions like what kind of harmonica I use.”

Foggy turns and says quietly, “I didn’t know you did that.”

Matt shrugs nonchalantly.

“Ah, so when we see questions answered under your username, we know it is truly you.”

“Yeah I don’t think our label impersonates us. Claire, our manager, runs most of the site but I believe she makes posts under her name rather than one of ours.”

“That is good. It is good to know when celebrities are being themselves or if they are being a puppet. Okay, so next I want to ask, what is your opinion on illegal downloading?”

“Well, it’s illegal,” Foggy says flatly.

“Yes, but there are few laws here in Hong Kong. Do you think that this new technology will change music?”

“I don’t think that the technology will change music,” Matt says, “I think it’s up to… it’s about respecting the music. It’s about people supporting the music and the musicians. It’s the people who are going to, you know because it’s a choice. You can risk jail or punishment from doing it because it’s a personal choice. The way music is made and gets put out there isn’t going to change, it’s the way people are accessing it that’s new. Do I think illegal downloading will change music? … No I don’t think so, because there are more people out there who respect music.”

“So the technology, are you against improving technology, like maybe a technological change for vision?”

“No that’s, that’s a different conversation,” Matt says, “Illegal downloading is not improving technology. It’s something else. I don’t know, it’s new. I don’t know if new technology for enabling me to see again will work because that kind of technology isn’t improving right now. There’s just new ways of getting around the problem.”

“Yes, that is true. Technology sometimes goes around, or people invent things that no one needs, or by mistake. In the future, technology might get your vision back but instead you’ll get super mutant powers like the Inhumans.”

Foggy watches Matt twitch. Wouldn’t Matt be a different person if the chemical spill that blinded him as a child had in fact given him something crazy like super strength or invisibility?

Matt frowns, “The question about illegal downloading… I don’t actually have a problem with it. The way companies are taking money away from the musicians in every way possible, that’s a problem. And look, I’m fine with not having money. That’s not… that’s not why I’m in this business. I mean sure, break even. But we’re here to make music, not sell out.”
Foggy sits up quickly and says, “I think you’ll need to cut that part out.”

After a quick translation, the interviewer shuts off the microphone.

“Yes, maybe your label will not like it. Shall we wrap up?”

Foggy and Matt sit on stools opposite Anatoly. Foggy watches their temp drummer scoff down his sixth slice of pepperoni pizza. Watching someone else eat makes himself hungry, but he wants to save his cash for paying for food he actually wants to eat, not something he could get anywhere.

“As I was saying,” Foggy continues, lifting his nose away from Anatoly’s dinner, “You can’t say stuff like that in interviews, Matt.”

Matt slouches on his stool, “Why not?”

“Because that kind of talk always get back to the label one way or another.”

“But it’s true, isn’t it, Anatoly? They profit off everything. Not just your record sales, your tour, your merch, and we don’t even get security like health insurance or super.”

Anatoly nods in answer, continuing to devour his food. It’s funny. Foggy sees the guy eat junk all the time and he’s still a pretty skinny dude. His hair always looks like wet garbage too. Face perpetually dirty just because of the blotchiness of his skin and the greying in his stubble.

“And I get it. With illegal downloading, that’s how the record companies have gotta make their profits somehow. Doesn’t make it right.”

“He makes a good point,” Anatoly says with his mouth full.

Suddenly Anatoly starts coughing, food splatters out of his mouth and over the table. The stool screeches across the floor as he stands up quickly and rushes over to the restrooms.

“You don’t agree with me?” Matt asks after the door to the restrooms shuts.

“Yeah, I agree with you. I’m just saying that you shouldn’t say that shit to the media.”

“Fine, I’ll continue to sit in silence then.”

“You’ve never been good at interviews anyway.”

Foggy picks at the pizza box for something to do. Shreds bits of cardboard off and arranges the fragments in a circle over the table. This is only the start of their tour. Two and a half months of spiralling through Asia, and Anatoly is already having troubles adjusting to a new culture which is only going to change altogether in a week. He understands what he must be going through. Foggy’s used to the travelling since he kind of grew up with it. Naturally Matt had some issues adapting since he had barely stepped out of Hell’s Kitchen before he met Foggy. He supposes Anatoly is at a cross roads because he’s done the whole culture shock thing before when he moved from Russia to the US, but he’s also already toured with The Verve before, so Foggy’s not quite sure what’s got Anatoly clinging to him and Matt like a parasite.

“I think this is the longest he’d been away from us. Think I should check on him?” He asks Matt, “Guy’s been in there a while.”

Matt shakes his head, “I’m sure he’s fine.”
Foggy sighs, “I don’t want to have to do this again.”

“Do what?”

“Be a babysitter,” Foggy replies.

Seconds later, Anatoly emerges from the restrooms, his hand clutching his stomach.

Foggy sits up, “How are you doing?”

Anatoly winces, “Think I ate too fast.”

“You sure you’re going to be alright sticking it out with us?” Matt asks him.

Anatoly plonks down on his stool and paws for the pizza, “Yes, yes. No need to worry. I am just missing home.”

Anatoly becomes the sweep of hair that falls on his shoulder, tickles him, is brushed off and returns in the easy breath of a breeze. He sleeps when they sleep, wake when they wake, travel when they travel. Foggy’s thirst for Matt’s affection appears in midnight drives, but Anatoly wedges himself between the crack in the car door, straps himself in the back seat and forces their hands apart. Even when he asks to be alone, he can see the shadow of Anatoly’s footsteps under a closed door, see the tip of his shoe around the corner, hear his voice on the phone a whisper away. Anatoly decrees loneliness and homesickness and the guy’s not a bad guy to hang around with, just not every day, every second, every moment during which Foggy wants to kiss Matt without a pair of seeing eyes leering at him.

Travel becomes more troublesome when Anatoly begins to refuse public transport, preferring the intimacy and exclusivity of taxis. Efficiency is at the cost of depending on the city, the route, the distance. A free day in central Tokyo has Anatoly in a panic. His feet won’t budge off the top staircase down into the Tokyo Loop subway. Only crabbing sideways, backwards, his toes turned upwards and heels downwards when pushed or pulled. Foggy wants to experience the culture for once and in a huff he leaves Anatoly on the staircase.

“How about that?” Matt asks him, lips close, a hundred people around under their wings.

The train moves swiftly, wheels racketing across curved steel. The passengers pile in quietly, compact, still and involved in activity on cell phones. Foggy hears nothing but Matt’s breath and the name of the next station.

“Can you hear that clicking noise?”

And then it’s Matt who won’t move, legs plastered to the faux leather seat, his walking stick perpendicular to the metal rails. Tokyo Loop around, and around again. Back and forth, back to front. The trip loops on and Matt assures him it’s not the clicks from the wheels or the engine or the doors he can hear, not the clicks from the hands in watches or the buttons on flip phones or the click of rotten teeth gnashing together. Matt hears clicks and they must wait. Foggy asks someone but they understand as poorly as Foggy.
Liquid Room, Shibuya. He holds Matt’s arm and takes him across the canal at such a speed that he hopes to lose Anatoly, but like the stretched tension in a spring, Anatoly coils back to them. In the bar, he fills the spaces between them with eager fans who spill out over the sides of the lounge, pushing Anatoly to his feet. Foggy sinks into the lounge covered in sheep’s wool. A TV splays a cyclone of colour over Matt’s face as he becomes involved in a conversation with a fan. Talks about passenger statistics, about ticket sales and route expansion. Foggy loses track quickly due to the alcohol consumption and the way the lights from the screen flash over Matt’s skin and highlight the last points of the fading love bites.

“Hey, I remember you,” Anatoly’s saying to someone, “You’re the army guy from Hong Kong.”

“Yeah, I caught you on a couple of relief days from Nam. Loved your show then and loved your show now. Real nice music you guys have got going, very Americana, very raw. Really reminds me of home and my girl.”

“The army lets you take a break to see music?” Foggy asks incredulous.

“Nah, nah. It only worked out that way because my squad got captured, and those who didn’t get captured got tortured, and those who didn’t get captured or tortured got put into the psych ward for three months until I was deemed sane and due for respite. Should’ve been longer – my leave – then I could’ve flown back home but they only gave me the weekend off and an extra six years on my serving time. Ain’t that the cherry on top?”

An awkward silence weighs between Anatoly and the fan. Foggy zones out again and stares at the screen behind the man. His bald head rounds off against the flitting pixels. Matt’s still talking with the girl about something garbled up into noise. Foggy wishes he would stop so that he could take Matt away into the bathroom or the alleyway and… he crosses his legs.

“So… you’re an American marine, huh?” Anatoly asks to fill the void.

“Yeah, what gave it away?” the man laughs, “you tell from the uniform or did your blind boy clue you in with my accent?”

Finally Matt pulls away from his conversation, “You said… our music reminded you of home. Where’s that?”

Foggy watches the guy straighten up, “Queens, originally. Left my fiancé and baby girl there. Did a real number on my girl Maria when I knocked her up, took her right out of college so we could have our beautiful girl. You guys got girls missing you back home?”

Foggy glances at Matt, catches a twitch in his jaw.

“Suppose you don’t need to have girls waitin’ on ya being in this line of business. Don’t matter what you look like, you’re in a band so the girls are gonna dig it,” he winks at the girl Matt was talking to and continues, “just don’t let the competition get to ya. Ladies are always the ones to break up bands, and if not the girl then the kings at the top who wanna change ya from rock to pop.”

“What are your tattoos?” Anatoly asks the guy.

He holds ups his fist and Foggy notices that they’re covered in stars.

“Meet me outside and I’ll explain what each one of ‘em means,” he says, cracking his knuckles.
The man stands up threateningly, but his presentation quickly resolves to that of camaraderie. He slaps Anatoly on the shoulder.

“Hey, you seen this shit?” he says, referring to the TV, “been playing this ad on all the channels, I swear to God. I thought I was done hearing about that criminal on the news and now here they are making some kind of movie about him, as what – tribute?”

“I’m surprised the Man in the Mask has a following here when most of his activities have taken place in the US and Europe,” Anatoly says thoughtfully.

Foggy can hear the sudden tension on Matt’s voice, “H-how do you know that?”

“Vlad’s obsessed with keeping up to date with him and I can’t be his brother without hearing him out!” Anatoly shakes his head, “I know too much about Daredevil. It’s embarrassing.”

“Trust the movie industry to make some money off of this guy. I wouldn’t pay to see that,” the marine smirks, “I’d pay to put him behind bars.”

“He helps people,” Matt states.

“Helps people?” the marine scoffs, “You ain’t heard about the shit that went down in Athens? The guy might’ve taken down a criminal but in the process he hurt people in the audience.”

“Technically that was because of the Strongman,” Anatoly points out.

“Because the dumbass threw the Strongman on the crowd. Imagine the hospital expenses those people have gotta pay for life now thanks to this idiot. This is why people who think they’re doing good without proper training need to be stopped. There’s a reason why cops are cops and marines are marines.”

“There’s a theory that he might be ex-military,” Anatoly speculates.

“Isn’t he doing what the cops can’t do?” Matt says quietly.

“Nah, this guy? He don’t know what the hell he’s doing. He’s getting himself into all kinds of trouble and keeping the cops from doing their jobs right. It ain’t right.”

“Army guy’s right,” Foggy says, “I’ve only really heard about it from Vlad but from what he tells me, this Daredevil guy seems to be doing more harm than good.”

“He hasn’t been on the map in almost a year now. Vlad thinks he has gotten the hint, but there are people…” Anatoly points at the Daredevil movie advert rolling through again, “Who think that he’s worth having around.”

Matt has gone very still and very quiet. He looks like he’s about to say something when someone pushes through the crowd of people and starts taking photos of the group. The army man reels and pulls his collar up to hide his face.

“Don’t take one of me, fuck off!”

The photographer snaps a couple last shots then slips away again, startled by the army man’s sudden temper.

“Nah, I can’t stand being captured,” the man explains, straightening out his uniform, “Those old folks rattlin’ on about a camera trappin’ your soul? They’re on the nose with that one. It’s an
unnatural process. Makes copies of real life. Not like music, no, no. Your music has roots in the earth. I heard it on the radio when I was stuck in the psych ward and it grounded me. I made sure I heard it in person and again ever since. It’s like home, but it’s not the same, is it? There’s beauty in that.”

“You know that our concerts are mostly filmed, right?” Anatoly points out.

Foggy watches the man’s eyes go wide. “That’s alright, that’s alright. You know why? Because when it’s dark, light falls on your face in a different way. They make you look different so if I ever get caught you know if I ever have a mug shot taken, it’ll look different than anything put out on the web, I’ll be unrecognisable.”

Foggy laughs because it seems like something Marci would say, so he says, “You really remind me of someone.”

“You reminded me of someone too, your music I mean. My girl, my little girl too. This whole reassignment thing is gonna have me serving longer than I’m meant to and they keep giving me these ‘weekends’ which aren’t long enough for anything except what’s close by. Get this, I won’t get to see my little Lisa until she’s half grown up. Ain’t that a joke? But the minute I’m home and dusted I’ll get to spend the rest of my life with the two most important people in my life. First thing I’m going to do is I’m going to take her to my favourite park in Queens, you ever been to the one with the merry-go-round? Beautiful old thing, and no vigilante motherfucker’s gonna show up and cause an explosion or nothing. It’s just gonna be me, Maria and my little girl.”

xlii. weight of the world

Matt’s still working on his dessert when Foggy drops the wooden stick back into the wrapping. He hears Foggy stand up and dump the wrapping into the vending machine disposal. Foggy looks back at him. A group of school girls sit on the benches outside the convenience store gossiping loudly in flighty language. Foggy wipes his sticky hands on the back of his t-shirt as he wanders over to the payphone.

Despite everything that happened the night previous, Foggy’s surprisingly content. Perhaps it’s because Anatoly’s absence means triplets turns into twins and twins pushed together into doubles. Foggy seems perfectly happy to forgive Matt for leaving him alone for hours in favour of the remaining two weeks together. Matt should be thankful for the forgiveness but he’s starting to feel itchy again after all this business hitting too close to home. Something’s going on, still going on, but he has made a commitment to Foggy so he has to forget about all that and focus on being who Foggy thinks he is.

Still, the events of the night previous are still fresh in his mind.

There was no reason for Matt to be suspicious. Anatoly had every good reason to be how he was, except Matt couldn’t shake the feeling that Anatoly knew something about him and his secret identity. Paranoia reared its ugly head when last night, after their show in Shibuya, Anatoly had announced he was going out, sans Matt and Foggy.

The door to their hotel room closed and Foggy sat beside Matt on his bed. Anatoly jogged down the flights of stairs and Foggy placed a hand on Matt’s thigh. Anatoly walked out of the hotel complex and Foggy had his lips on Matt’s. Anatoly headed for the Tokyo Loop line, unperturbed
by the concept of using the busiest train line in the world, and Matt peeled Foggy off him. Excused himself as politely as possible while tasting the rejection in Foggy’s throat and the hollow neglect in his heart.

He’d chased Anatoly down to the subway at a safe distance, and he’d heard Foggy cry. He’d *cried*. Matt’s throat went tight as his ears filled up with the sounds of Foggy’s distant sobbing but his feet magnetised with curiosity. It had been 2AM in the morning and Anatoly had been so anxious to leave at that exact minute. Why? And why had Anatoly so fearlessly taken public transport when he furiously abhorred it prior? What important business did Anatoly have at this time of night that couldn’t wait until the morning? What was so important that he would be willing to separate himself from his group, something which he had not willing done the whole time they had been touring together? And where on Earth had Anatoly obtained a firearm in Japan??

The city was loud with cries and complaints and silent qualms. The loudest city Matt had ever been to, home to 4 million more people than he was used to. He couldn’t stray too far from Anatoly or he could too easily lose him in the noise. He entered the carriage two down from Anatoly and the clicks returned. They didn’t sound like clicks that should be occurring, they sounded from the engines, back and front, wedged between the fuel tanks. He’d wanted to ask someone about it, that’s why he’d talked to the fan that night but she hadn’t known what he was talking about. Statistical measurements of passengers were taken from ticket takers, not the trains themselves.

Anatoly got off at Shinjuku station. Walked half a mile down the main street then wove through tiny back streets. His body was brimming with nervous energy. Kept looking over his shoulder. Matt climbed up the first fire escape he could find and levied himself on top of the apartment buildings. Anatoly would look around but he wouldn’t look up, all Matt had to do was be careful with his footing.

The apartments weren’t built like architecture in New York was famous for. The only similar factor being that sky rises lined the main streets of Shinjuku, but medium density housing cropped out quickly from behind them. At the most, the apartment buildings were four or even five levels, the rest ranged from two to three. The design was not uniform, rather a jungle of mixed form and heights and widths, making it harder for Matt to calculate his next move.

Anatoly stopped by a small park consisting of a jungle gym and a single swing. Matt got as close as he could, taking cover with the roof ledge. He heard Anatoly light up a cigarette, then lean against the fence that lined the little park. For about twenty minutes Anatoly remained in that position. Anyone else would have given up at that point, but Matt could hear the anxiety build in Anatoly. Tell-tale signs through the way Anatoly pinched his cigarette, the way his fingers shook when he tapped the old ash away, the way the foot of his boots toed the wires in the fencing in a repeated fashion.

Anatoly was waiting for someone.

At that time of night there was scarcely any foot traffic. Matt noticed the woman’s approach way before Anatoly did, and when Anatoly finally turned his head to spot the woman, he muttered something in Russian under his breath. He dropped his cigarette on the ground and stamped it out as the woman came up to him.

She spoke in English, “Do you have it?”

Anatoly swore in Russian, then in rough English, said, “You are late. That is not a concept here, how are you late?”

“Do you have it?” The woman repeated with a growl.
Anatoly ran his hands through his hair and nodded. He unzipped his jacket and pulled out a package concealed in his breast pocket. The woman went to grab it but Anatoly stepped back.

“You have seen it, now tell me the information. Then you will get what we agreed on.”

The woman clicked her tongue. She looked over her shoulder, then she too pulled something from underneath her jacket. She handed the collection of papers to Anatoly, who snatched them and began to scan it.

He muttered, “1.4, 1.8, 2.2, 2.9, 3.4… you are sure these figures are correct?”

The woman crossed her arms, “My company has run many tests over a period of three years. You can be sure that the statistics are correct.”

“Good. He will be pleased,” Anatoly said. He started to pull out the package again, but stopped, “No one suspects you?”

Matt’s jaw clenched at her answer, however, Anatoly believed it and handed over his bundle. She snatched it from him and stepped three feet back before examining the contents.

“This is not enough.”

“You will get the rest when he has the New York results,” Anatoly explained.

He slowly moved his hand to his back pocket, thumbing the gun wedged in his belt.

“This is not what we agreed on! Give me the rest!”

As she shouted, she pulled out a blade from her sleeve and lunged forward, slashing at Anatoly who dodged to the right as he got out his gun. First shot, pavement, second shot ricocheted off zipper as she lunged again. Matt stood up and ran to the corner of the roof, but it happened too fast. There was nothing he could do to stop the blade from slicing through Anatoly’s waist. Her move got her too close, close enough for Anatoly to fire his third and fourth shot against her abdomen. The woman collapsed on the ground, clutching her stomach.

Anatoly stepped over her, aimed his gun at her head but before he could shoot, sirens began to sing just around the corner. Two police start to run toward him having jumped out of an unmarked car. They shouted at him in Japanese. Anatoly snatched his bundle of cash from the lady and began to bolt away from the police. One policeman knelt down and took aim while the other attempted to chase Anatoly down.

Matt was hollow, could taste blood in his mouth and smelt the trail of Anatoly’s blood and sweat in the air like bad perfume. He’d been right to be suspicious but he had no idea what Anatoly had gotten himself into. He’d shot someone. Tried to kill someone. Over what? What did those numbers mean? But is he really about to let his band mate get taken into international police custody? Is he going to make an appearance as Daredevil and potentially blow his cover?

The dial tone ends and a voice answers on the other side. Foggy says, “Have you heard from him yet?”

He lets the ice crime drip over his hand as he strains to hear the voice on the other side.

“Yes, he’s okay,” Claire’s voice crackles, “He landed a couple of hours ago. I picked him up myself… he refused to go to the hospital so I took him to his brother’s. I think he’s doing alright now.”
Foggy inserts a few more coins into the machine, then balances his change upside down from his fingertips, the coins held up by the sugary remains of his ice cream.

“How are you boys doing?”

“We’re fine.”

“Are you sure?”

The coins drop off Foggy’s finger and begin rolling across the ground. Matt disposes of the last of his ice cream and wanders over to Foggy, who’s stretching out across the ground trying to collect the coins, the phone swinging on the line. Matt reaches out and latches onto Foggy’s sleeve, clinging to the fabric. Foggy stands up and apologises to Claire for the quiet.

“Yeah, we just stopped for a snack.”

“Good, because it’s too late to cancel your show in Matsumoto tonight. In fact, it’s in your best interest to retain the bookings for the remaining two weeks.”

“I think we can do that,” Foggy says, spreading his free hand over Matt’s.

Claire sighs, “You were so close to finishing, but from the sounds of it… it was really time for Anatoly to come home. The timing is always funny for culture shock.”

“I don’t think it was culture shock anymore than it was him getting mugged, cut and shot at by the Yakuza,” Foggy says.

“I’m sure it wasn’t the Yakuza, Foggy. Japan is a very safe country.”

“So we’re told,” Foggy replies.

Matt turns Foggy’s hand over in his, presses their palms together.

“…you’ll have to tweak your set lists now. After that, it’s up to you whether or not you want to extend your show bookings. I’m going to go ahead and alter your hotel bookings which, on the plus side, will save us a bit of money. But you need to let me know by this time next week if you two decide to continue touring or if you want to start sending me some new material. Remember, you have until February next year to deliver us your album. March being the absolute deadline.”

“Got it, boss.”

Claire sighs again, “Sorry to be hard on your guys. It’s a stressful time. You have been doing well. The tour has proven your marketability but when things like this happen time and time again, it warrants hesitation on renewing your contract. I know you might not be thinking about it, but RCA won’t sign you on again if there’s instability. It’s not good for business.”

She hangs up shortly after. Foggy takes out wet wipes from the plastic bag he’d been given the ice creams in and wipes his hands, then offers a sachet to Matt. They pull on their helmets and climb back onto the Kawasaki motorbike. Foggy secures Matt’s hands around his waist, kicks the engine on and takes off.

“Say that again?” Foggy shouts over his shoulder.

The wind snaps by their heads, leather rippling.
"I said, I wanna run away with you."

"You want to run away with me?" Foggy repeats, slowing down to hear better.

Matt squeezes his arms around Foggy, "I’ve been thinking about it, and I think it’s achievable."

"You’ll have to give up on those fancy dinners you like so much,” Foggy points out.

"I’ll be perfectly content eating convenience store snack for as long as we need to."

Foggy laughs, "those microwave pizza pockets, am I right?"

They stop at a shrine hidden away in a nook beneath thick foliage. Foggy passes the time away in the souvenir shop. Matt stands by a rock cropped garden, listens to the way the piled sand granules slowly topple down the pyramidal structure. When Foggy calls him over, he breaks from his concentration and smiles. Foggy pays for a round of O-mikuji. The priestess shakes a box containing a collection of sticks, each marked with a code. The first stick selected pertains a corresponding fortune. If the fortune is bad, you must tie it to a tree to transfer the bearer of bad luck from the self to the tree. If good, you may keep the fortune, or tie it to a tree to greater increase the effect.

Matt runs his fingers over the raised print in the paper and pockets it, waits for Foggy’s cold fingers to clumsily tie the paper around a tree branch.

The wind picks up again once they’re out of the enclave and back on the road.

"What do you see, Foggy?"

"You haven’t asked me that in a while,” Foggy says, gives Matt’s clasped hands a squeeze. “The first thing… I notice is how flat the land is. Stretching out into the horizon. Houses crowded together, divided by tiny rice fields. Telephone wires cross every which way like lasers in museums. Big electrical towers,” he slows right down to count, “six, seven, eight tiers of thick wires strung across the country. Hills, when the come, are raised like welts. An avalanche of mid-grey structures tumbling out of sight, into the rising sea. Those hills, they look like a cluster of puckered skin over the Earth. Deeply forested, and tunnels pierce straight through them for the bullet trains.”

"Realistically, we could stick it out til March, at the most. That’s a good three, four months. We would have to live on convenience store snacks, and sleep in 24 hour establishments where possible to save money while we write and make love and-"

"I love how invested you are in this whole running away idea,” Foggy says.

"It’s very achievable. I think we could do it.”

"It’s very dangerous thinking because I really want to do it. But I would totally miss a good shower.”

"And fancy food,” Matt adds with a smile.

Foggy drives along the flat highway, zipping past boxy cars and tiny trucks. Eventually they pull into the city of Matsumoto. Foggy tells him the white castle is reflected in the lake. They bike over to the inn they’re meant to be staying at, just around the corner from the venue, but when they go inside, there’s no booking for them. Instead, Claire has accidentally booked them an inn in a village on the outskirts of the city, an accommodation with a name almost identical to the one they’d just
walked into.

The lady at the front desk apologises, “Normally we would offer a shuttle service but all buses have been recalled in this prefecture.”

She draws on a map for Foggy. They kick off on the road again, driving an hour and a half out of town to the Paper Inn.

“Would you really give up all of that for four months of just us, this bike, and microwave pizza?” Foggy asks as he waits for Matt to step off the bike in the driveway of the inn.

Matt turns and catches Foggy’s arm, gently tilts Foggy’s chin and kisses him. After a moment of rapture about the grandiose idea of abandoning everything, he removes himself from Foggy, facing the unreality. Matt might be able to abandon his musician identity, he might be able to love Foggy, but he’ll always love people and be aware of their cries for help. There’s always itchings, ticklings, inklings of what’s more. He could try to be nothing and no one and love one person and no one else, but Elektra’s right, he can never abandon the truest part of himself. The part that makes him who he is. And Foggy can never know that truth.

xliii. ain’t no easy way

For a 2 star hotel, the place looks pretty impressive. Foggy supposes the negative rating comes from the remoteness. There’s not much of anything around. One small convenience store supplies the village. Then next out is almost a two hour drive to Matsumoto. That’s going to be a fun commute the after their show the next night.

When they arrive at the inn, the housekeeper’s running around closing all the windows and doors and Foggy gets a twisted feeling like something bad’s coming. Funny that the first night where it’s just him and Matt, Claire happens to have booked separate bedrooms for them all. They get settled for the night, and even with a room meant for Anatoly separating them both, the rest of the wing has been emptied out. Foggy starts to wonder we he doesn’t just slide into the room closest to Matt.

He lies down on his roll out. He swears he can hear the course of the wind pouring through the building, hear the way it sings through rooms left open, down hallways and through the gaps in bamboo and the fine holes in rice paper. Then, heavy rain starts pelting over the roof, thunderous, and thunder rolls over the noisy night and keeps him sleepless.

Funny that the first time in months that he gets a room to himself, he can’t sleep. And it’s not so much that he’s away from Matt, it’s that all that’s protecting him from this thunderstorm is paper and wood.

“Is there anything I can do?” Matt asks through the walls.

“What?” Foggy squeaks.

Matt speaks up, “You’ve been restless… tossing and turning.”

“I could use a hug,” Foggy admits.

At that, he hears Matt’s blankets shuffle as if he’s getting up, so Foggy scrambles, “No, I’ll come to you. If… that’s okay?”

The sound of Matt’s sheets ruffling stops, “That’s okay.”
Foggy heaves himself off the bamboo floor and pads across his room. He slides his door open and a gush of wind howls down the hallway, carrying the voices of spirits. He crosses the hallway and slides into Matt’s room. Matt’s stuff is all arranged neatly in piles. His clothes in one, his instruments stacked in order of size in the corner. His boots, with shoelaces tucked in, sit side by side at the end of Matt’s bedding.

Matt lifts the blankets and Foggy melds in beside him. Thunder clashes above them and Foggy shudders within Matt’s warmth.

“Thanks,” He says quietly.

Matt runs a thumb across Foggy’s forehead, brushes the hair out of the way, then plants a kiss there.

“I’ve missed this,” Foggy sighs.

“Me too,” Matt agrees.

Foggy’s heart soars as he looks up at Matt in the soft darkness.

“Really?”

“I have,” Matt confirms.

Foggy paws at the hair on Matt’s chest, “Last night… where did you go?”

Matt frowns, his fingers freeze of Foggy’s shoulder.

“If you… really did miss this, why did you go out?”

Foggy caresses Matt’s face, searches for the answer there, for the truth to speak out of Matt’s dead eyes.

“Foggy… I…”

“I’m not going to get angry at you,” Foggy says, closing his eyes.

He traipses his fingers across Matt’s neck, circles his thumb and forefinger around the curve.

“I just want to know why you had to go.”

Matt swallows and Foggy feels Matt’s Adam’s apple rise and fall.

“I don’t want to keep asking…”

Foggy spreads his other fingers across Matt’s neck, slowly strengthens his clasp. Matt relaxes, lets Foggy apply pressure against his supple skin. A hot breath exudes from Matt’s mouth, his tilting body, curving into Foggy. Then, Matt flinches, and Foggy thinks he can hear the housekeeper slink around the house.

Footsteps fade, Matt’s body begins to relax until Foggy slips his hand under the sheets, trails down Matt’s chest and cups his dick. Matt gasps, lips grazing Foggy’s cheek.

“Forgive me…” Matt breathes into Foggy’s ear.

Foggy kisses the nape of Matt’s neck, nibbles his ear, stubble against stubble. “I do, every time.”
He reaches into Matt’s boxers and tickles the skin before his dick, then encircles his fist around Matt’s length.

“…God,” Matt chokes, sitting up slightly to grant Foggy better access.

Foggy slowly drags Matt’s foreskin back and forth with the circle of his finger and thumb, feels Matt’s dick harden in his hands, feels his own dick strain in his pants. With his spare hand, he shucks Matt’s boxers away, then, to his surprise, Matt straddles his waist. He bends his knees, holding Matt up, his dick sliding against Matt’s ass. A warm glow from fire lit lanterns sparkles through thin windows that line cut into the top of the walls. Matt’s white skin looks flushed pink, hair grows patchy around scars from his boxing.

Foggy rolls his hips against Matt’s ass, slides his dick between Matt’s butt cheeks as he pumps Matt slow. Matt paws at Foggy’s fist around his dick, tries to make Foggy go faster but he knows if he hastens, Matt’s not going to last long and all Foggy wants right now is for this moment to last forever. Matt rippled with ecstasy, chest heaving, skin sheening with sweat, dick twitching in Foggy’s hand and the only thing that would make this moment better would be if he could push inside Matt. He dips his hips down, turns them back at an angle that grazes the tip of his erection across Matt’s hole. Matt whimpers, edging forward so that Foggy can no longer repeat that action.

Foggy inhales sharply as he sits up, craning his neck to kiss Matt. Arched back, messy hair, wet lips. He kisses Matt’s breath away, his heart hammering in his throat, his fingers hot and hungry and Matt finds Foggy’s dick, tries to find a rhythm. Elbows parallel, wrists sore but impassioned. Matt bites Foggy’s shoulder when he comes, moans into skin and curves like waves, through waves. Foggy grits his teeth, gives thanks for all that he’s received, kisses Matt’s shoulder blade as he comes too, white superseding the dark.

Matt’s clearly out of breath but he’s good about the mess. Pats around until he finds his pile of clothes and uses a sock to clean them both up, then flops down in Foggy’s arms on the roll out. The thunderstorm continues, but amongst Matt’s warmth and scent and arms and love, Foggy can sleep.

The buses still aren’t running the next morning. Water spills out of creeks, swamps fields. The couriers haven’t been booked to transfer their equipment to the venue so Matt’s stuck with strapping both acoustics on his back as they ride out of town. Foggy doesn’t want to ignore Matt’s erection digging into his back a second longer so he pulls over into the steep of a hill and takes Matt under the shade.

“It’s the vibrations of the bike,” Matt’s telling him as he kisses Foggy, “And being so close to you.”

On the road again feeling emptied and full, Matt starts to squeeze Foggy’s waist again and for a moment there, Foggy doesn’t think he’s got another round in him. But Matt’s frantic in telling him to stop, to pull over, his feet kicking forward trying to brake the bike himself.

Pebbles on the side road kick up in dust and Foggy’s about to yell at him for being dangerous when he hears a loud bang all around him. He looks around, bewildered. Then, on the horizon toward Matsumoto city, a massive cloud of smoke billows into the sky. A compact Toyota truck pulls up beside them and a small Japanese man stumbles out.

Foggy climbs off the bike and asks the man, “What’s going on? Is it a fire?”

The man looks at them with wide eyes, “No English, sorry, no English.’
Foggy glances back at the smoke turning an ugly grey across the sky. He hears the bike engine start up again and turns around to see Matt at the front of it.

“Matt?! What are you doing?”

He runs over and Matt slides back.

“We need to go,” Matt says with a deep voice.

Foggy frowns at him, “What, toward the danger?”

“We could help.”

“Or we could get hurt. How about we go back to the inn?”

Matt freezes, then as his face sets into a frown, he starts stepping off the motorcycle.

“Matt? What – stop, I’ll take you in, okay?”

As they drive closer to Matsumoto, the outward traffic gets thicker against the darkening sky.

“It looks bad, Matt,” Foggy says over his shoulder.

Once off the highway, traffic banks every outward lane. A thick film of smoke hazes over the city. Sirens flash red and blue, catching in the smoke. Toward the more industrial side of the city, police and fire engines and ambulances clog up the streets.

“I can’t get any closer,” Foggy says as he reaches another blockade.

“Where are you going?” Matt asks as Foggy turns the bike around.

“We’re going to find an internet café and find out what’s going on.”

Foggy stops at the first one he sees, pulls up on the curb. Matt won’t come in. In the corner of his eye, he watches Matt outside the window as he logs into a paid computer. He scrolls through news websites looking for international coverage but nothing shows up. Probably too early to reach in English. While he’s here, he checks his emails.

There’s one marked in bold from his Dad.

The sun goes behind a cloud as Foggy moves the mouse across the unread email. He clicks it open. He reads the email, then reads it again. He wheezes Matt’s name, completely inaudible, and yet by some will of God, Matt rushes inside.

“What is it? What happened?”

Foggy drops his hand on the keyboard, typing an endless G in the reply box.

“It’s… It got demolished.”

“The factory?” Matt asks.

Foggy looks at Matt in confusion, “No, what? My Dad he… he got a notice from the zoning department. His property was to be usurped. He…” Foggy swallows back tears, “He had 30 days to move out or else be forcibly removed but Matt, he…” Foggy clutches Matt’s sleeve, “He had a heart attack. And they demolished the house with him and Ben still inside!”
(P.s. Maybe you could tell i was looking forward to writing this chapter just so i could finally write sex scenes haha. But also it's the first time i've written rough sex so if i should have tagged something and didn't please let me know!)

just one quick note - if you haven't guessed already, the marine the guys were talking to after the show was Frank Castle. He's sort of taking the role of BRMC's long time groupie (and friend!) Ian Ottaway. In reality, Ian was following BRMC since much farther back, but i'm introducing him closer to when Frank has a bigger role in the main story.

(edits - i made a minor error with location, where i wrote in the city they were performing in as Kanazawa instead of Matsumoto. The corrections have been rectified.

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