Promenade in Green

by reges_criniti

Summary

And isn't that just a fitting metaphor: Bradley an ever bright sun, the center of Colin's whole world.

Notes

Another fic that I didn't meant to write. It just kinda spilled out after seeing the Bello magazine spread and spiraled out of control from there. This is a companion of sorts to Fare Thee Well. Same dumb, sappy boys, more stupid texts, but this is Colin's side of their little pity party.

He almost scrolls right on past; he barely registers them for what they are. Nothing adds up, rings familiar. The stiff poses, the stern face, the perpetually squinted eyes like the photographer couldn't be bothered to correct the lighting, the mop of dyed hair that's overly stylized and trying too hard to look "bed head chic".

(And Colin laughs at that because he knows better than anyone what Bradley's real bed head looks like. Like the way Bradley will wake up with a cowlick on the left side of his head when he lets his hair grow a little too long. Or the way his fringe is always matted and pushed back from his forehead because he nuzzles his pillow throughout the night, hugging it close as if trying to bury himself inside it. Or the way his bed mussed hair smells, all sleep warm and a little oily but wholly, undiluted Bradley. And god, how Colin loved that more than anything- being able to slide up
behind him and bury his nose in Bradley's soft locks and inhale him deeply, the scent of the other man settling deep within and feeling like home.)

All in all, they look nothing like Bradley, not really. And, sure, it's been a while since he's truly laid eyes on the other man, but Colin's spent too many hours, stolen too many private glances back when his eyes and heart were greedy and used to drink in every last drop of Bradley he could until too many terabits of his memory were taken up by Bradley James to not be able to place in him in an infinite sea of lookalikes.

He boils his discomfort over the spread, how jarring it all looks, how different Bradley seems, down to a bout of bad photoshop, airbrush distorting the features he knows almost as well as his own because he's seen them under a thousand different lights, has kissed and touched and explored them a million different ways.

But there are still parts of the article that make him pause, parts that remind him of the old Bradley, the Bradley he used to know and love, his Bradley. He keeps retuning to the photo on story's cover page, smiles at it fondly and stupidly. Because he can so clearly imagine that face behind a different pair of aviators. He remembers how the French sunlight would glint off those metal frames, a prop sword reflected in their mirrored surface as Bradley horsed around in Arthur's mail between takes. He remembers how warm the sun felt on his neck during those moments, but how Bradley radiated even hotter as if he ate up the sun like a black hole, giving it back to the world ten fold. And isn't that just a fitting metaphor, he muses: Bradley an ever bright sun, the center of Colin's whole world.

And then there's a series of Bradley perched on a bench in a laundry mat and every time his eyes pass over them, Colin stills, feels his heart lurch, overcome by an overwhelming sense of déjà vu. Because he doesn't need to imagine what that scene must look like played out in real life. Doesn't need to because he really has seen this before, he's lived it before.

It was during a filming break- those rare stretches of time when their schedules were unhurried, when they could cocoon up in bed because there were no five am wake up calls, no stumbling to set while the sun was still rising and returning to their hotel rooms well after the sun had set- when the battered old washing machines in the basement finally shuddered to a stop. It was only a matter of time before they broke; even when Colin first moved in they had been too old to properly function, never quite lifting stains and yet always leaving clothes a little damp despite multiple rounds in the dryer.

At the time, Colin secretly suspects it might have been Bradley who brought about their demise because he knows Bradley has a penchant for rushing things, for shoving too much into the machines in one go just for the sake of getting it all done faster. But Bradley swears he wasn't the culprit because he knows how to do laundry properly, his mum's taught him at least that much, thank you kindly, Colin. So while his landlord works on replacing the machines, they make a pact to go out and do laundry but somehow-partially due to laziness and procrastination, no initial sense of urgency because their underwear supply felt endless; and later, partially due Bradley's aversion to household chores- they never do quite get around to it.

Eventually though, when Colin, suppressing a grimace, slides the same pair of boxers down Bradley's hips for the third night in a row, when he himself has been slipping sock-less feet into his sneakers for a few days now, when Bradley's running shorts have to be quarantined in a plastic bag in the bathroom closet, they realized maybe a trip to the laundry mat was finally unavoidable.

They had gone a bit mad with making an event of it, tearing through the flat, bundling their arms with stained, smelly, soiled linens. All their sheets and towels and dish rags; every sock hidden
under the couch, under the bed, under the dresser; all of it, seemingly every washable thing in their shared flat was shoved into bags and baskets and they packed it all in to Bradley's rundown Corsa.

Colin remembers the way Bradley marched up to a row of washers and declared them acceptable for their use. Remembers how Bradley busied himself with bundling up pants and tossing them in to the empty basins like smelly basketballs while Colin carefully measured out detergent for each machine. He remembers how they spilt the coins between them and raced to see how could feed the machines the fastest, Bradley declaring himself the winner. With a flush, Colin remembers how Bradley crowded him against a rumbling washer and pressed kissed to his cheeks, his nose, his brow, his lips, declaring them a winners spoil.

And he remembers Bradley perched up on one of the garish pink folding tables, rare London sunlight streaming in through the large front windows, haloing him in gold. It was always in these quiet moments, when Bradley was still and pensive, lost in his own mind and just simply existing that Colin caught himself flooded with awe that such a man could be so hopelessly in love with him. He remembers then, Bradley blinking, world coming back in to focus for the blonde and how he turned his gaze from the spinning machines to find Colin engrossed, observing him.

He remembers how Bradley slid off the table and sauntered over to him, devilish smirk on his lips. If Colin closes his eyes (and alone in his quiet, dark flat he does, allowing himself to give in to the memory) he can almost feel Bradley's fingers threading through his hair, nails indulgingly raking along his scalp because Bradley always had a thing about stroking Colin's head and Colin never called him out on it because he has a thing about his head being touched like that. It was just one of the endless ways they seemed to compliment each other, complete each other.

He knows he might be obsessing, knows for sure he's nitpicking when he goes through the spread for another countless time, squinting to read the tiny print on each photo detailing what Bradley's wearing. It's then that some giant beast he thinks might be envy roars to life within his chest when he sees the aside noting that the tee he's wearing is the "stylists own".

It's almost funny how easily that flimsy piece of cotton makes his mind spiral off into the darker corners of his brain, stirring to life emotions he's kept locked tight for so long. Because it's almost too easy to imagine Bradley slumped on the metal bench, uncomfortable, pulling and fidgeting and frowning through it all until the photographer calls everything to a halt, glares at him over her camera as if he's a puppy who's had an accident in the house. Imagines her saying, "This outfit isn't working. Go tell Ty to give you something else to put on."

He imagines Bradley standing like a sullen child before shuffling over to a designated area five feet behind the photographer where some bored failed-model-turned-intern named Ty stands guard over a rack of cheap shirts and expensive jackets. Imagines how Bradley will relay the problem and how the stylist will sigh and flip through the rack pulling new outfits.

And because he's bored and because he's Bradley, Colin just knows what comes next: how Bradley likes to waste away the minutes in times like this in too close proximity, amping up his charm, flirting relentlessly. Colin's been on the receiving end of it enough times to know how he'll crack a stupid joke just to break the tension before flashing his crooked little smile that can send a heart beating frantically.

He imagines Bradley standing in a pair of jogger bottoms, arms crossed against his bare chest, slighting each new choice the stylist pulls saying, "Am I meant to be doing laundry? Who wears that just to go wash their clothes?"

He imagines Bradley chuckling as the stylist grows ever more exasperated. Imagines him sliding closer in to the stranger's personal space, leaning in close, hoarse voice saying, "I don't know about
you, but I tend to do the wash in as little as possible," all while his fingers play along the hem of the Ty the stylist's tank.

In his mind's eye, it's not hard to imagine Ty's flushed face, how quickly he must shed his outer layers under Bradley's dark eyes until he's scrambling for the tank, mussing up his hair as he pulls it over his head. Imagines how Bradley slips on the body warm garment, tosses a "cheers, mate" over his shoulder before strolling away as if he hasn't just left the stranger half-naked, wound up, grasping for straws. Because Bradley really, truly has no idea the effect he has on other people when they're the sole focus of his charismatic charm. But Colin does and he shakes with the memory of it.

Of course, it's nothing like that though, exists only as a wild figment of the darker half of Colin's overactive imagination. In reality, Bradley goes through the motions- quite literally- subtly moving from pose to pose while the camera snaps away. He's too polite to complain about the bright mid-day sun or how ridiculous it is to be sat in an empty laundry mat even for the sake of a photo. And in reality, the shirt was commandeered per the photographer's request because the one they had on supply for Bradley was too big and he and the stylist just happened to be the same size. How it was handed over without fanfare, how Bradley dutifully shed the old clothes, donned the tank, and carried on with the shoot, too polite to complain that the new top smelled like sweat and smoke and someone else's deodorant.

Colin snaps his laptop shut and with shaking fingers reaches for his phone in an attempt to clear his head, tame the envious dragon that's churning, roiling, raging within his chest.

He knows he's being a bit impulsive and maybe a little bit reckless, a bit self-destructive when he pulls up a message titled with a name he hasn't seen appear on his phone literally in years but for the past few weeks now has chirped to life almost daily.

He struggles with what to say, tries to find the words that don't make him sound like a rabid dog desperate to mark his territory with a wee or a hump. He thinks he manages it in the end and hits send while still bolstered by a false bravado.

*Imagine all the offers you'll get once you add "sexy mic stand" to your CV*

He knows Bradley always has his phone nearby, knows how he constantly flicks the screen on and off when he's bored as if he could will a message to appear and entertain him. So he isn't all that surprised when the reply comes back rather quickly.

*HA*

Colin smiles, can hear Bradley's bark of a laugh echoing in his own ears as the rest Bradley's replies flood in.

*What a bother*

*Load of rubbish*

*Got a milkshake out of it tho*

*Vanilla :/*

*Guess they were afraid of stains??*

This is how their exchanges go now, as if nothing's missed, as if no time has lapsed between them. Or, no that's not quite right, Colin muses. There's too much between now but they carry on as they
used to, both pretending like nothing's really changed. Like they're still just Colin and Bradley, a pair of weirdos. So they undercut the things they really mean with silly jokes and little taunting insults. They say everything without really saying anything, simultaneously dancing around and addressing the elephant in the room.

This new thing between them, their new dynamic is all a little bit frustrating and a little bit miserable and a little bit heartbreaking, but Colin plays along. Because if this is how he gets to have Bradley back in his life, well, that's a price he's willing to pay over and over and over.

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