Summary

The one where Patrick is not a girl.

1. like.

When Patrick was sixteen, he gave Joe fifty dollars and one of his wallet-sized school photos and a week later received his first fake ID. It said Patrick was twenty-one, and that his name was legally Patrick Martin Stumph, and that he was legally an M. "For male," he said to Kevin when he showed him the little plastic card.

"I don't know; when I got mine, the lady at the DMV said it was for 'moron'," Kevin said, and laughed when Patrick smacked him.

"I'm going to have a real license like this when I'm actually twenty-one," Patrick said.

"Totally," Kevin said, and gently tapped the back of his head. Patrick carefully put the card back in his wallet.

At seventeen, he felt really awkward, just kind of standing by the wall, beside a table piled with pamphlets ("Safer Sex for Grrls," "10 Things You Should Know About: the Age of Consent in Illinois," "Queers of Colour: the Hidden Rainbow," "Coming Out Got You Down?" et cetera) and free condoms and little ketchup packet-sized samples of lube.
Kids were lounging on the mismatched couches and chairs, sitting around scratched tables and desks, talking to each other or the middle-aged facilitators. Patrick was the only one standing alone. He didn't want to be there, felt incredibly out of place, only came because his mom and his therapist made him.

"You should meet kids like yourself," Dr. Gina had said.

"But I'm not like them," he'd said. "I mean, I'm not--for the millionth time, I don't like guys."

"It's not just a place for queer youth," she'd said, smiling. "There are plenty of trans kids there of all sexualities."

So far, he'd seen two girls with the hollow chests, knobby wrists, and nervous smiles he knew meant "not born female," and a few people he wasn't sure about—they could be like him, or just butch, or—it was all really confusing and uncomfortable and he wanted to go home, but his mom wasn't coming to pick him up until eight.

"Just hang out for a while," she'd said in the car on the way there. "Meet some kids your own age, make some new friends."

"I have friends," he'd said sullenly. "I have friends my own age."

She'd reached over and brushed his hair off his forehead. "Okay," she'd said. "How about some friends who know who you are?"

He'd clenched his fists and set his jaw and said, "They know who I am. This is who I am. I don't need--you just. He'd breathed out hard through his nose. "You just think I hang out with Pete too much."

She'd rolled her eyes at the bait, told him to relax and have fun, and kicked him out of the car in front of the community centre downtown. There was a fluorescent yellow paper sign in the window by the door declaring: "YOUR PLACE: A Safe Space 4 LGBTQ & Questioning Youth! Mondays + Fridays @ 6PM-9PM RM 116!"

And it was lame, it was stupid, he did not want to be there. One of the facilitators, a bald guy about seven feet tall, had welcomed him into the butter-coloured room. "You look a little petrified," he'd said. "My name's Lloyd."

Patrick had shaken his hand and said he was Patrick and that he was fine, just fine, just checking things out.

Lloyd left him alone with the same stupid knowing smile Patrick's mom and therapist kept giving him. Patrick really, seriously was not fond of people over thirty today. At all.

"Um, hi," someone said on his right, and Patrick jumped. It was a girl with long, straight, copper-red hair.

"Hi," he said.

She gestured at him vaguely. She was carrying a small purple boombox. "I need in behind you," she said. "To plug in the stereo."

"Oh," he said, and moved away from the wall. He realized he'd been standing under a poster advertising free STD tests at a street clinic nearby.
The girl plugged in the boombox and cleared some space for it on the table, jumbling a few stacks of pamphlets together.

"I'm Anna," she said, putting a CD in the player.

"Patrick," he said. "Nice to meet you."

She reached to shake his hand without looking at him, pushing buttons. Her hand was dry and soft and maybe bigger than his. "I made this CD," she said. "It's mostly me covering other people's songs, but there are a few of my own. Lloyd and Paul wanted to hear it." She waved her hand at where the facilitators were sitting, playing cards and smiling at how wonderful queer youth are or something.

"Oh," he said. "You sing?"

Anna shrugged and smiled. "I guess. I play guitar, really, that's what I really like."

"I'm a drummer," he said. "And I kind of sing, in a band." He shook his head. "My best friend, he's our bassist, he won't let anybody else do it."

She laughed and pushed the play button. He recognized "Rocket Man" immediately. He hummed along; her voice was thready, whispery, strong on the important words, and when he realized she hadn't changed the lyrics to "he packed my bags" or "I miss my man," he smiled.

"You're really good," he said.

"You're smiling," she said happily, pointing at him. "I made you smile. You looked like you were made out of cement or something, just standing over here."

He dropped his mouth into a straight line, shrugged, and put his hands in his pockets.

"It's okay," she said. "I was really shy my first few times too." She leaned back against the table. "I thought I wouldn't fit in, 'cause I'm basically bi, and I thought it would be all these gay boys and baby dykes glaring at me." She laughed quietly, her eyes crinkling at the corners.

"Yeah," he said. He shook his head. "Whatever. I'm straight, but my mom and my therapist were like--"

"Oh," she said, her forehead creasing, and then smoothing. "Oh! You're trans."

He stared at her.

"Right?" she said.

"Yeah," he said, and realized it was the first time he'd ever had to answer the question.

She smiled. "Awesome. You should meet Jeremiah, he's the sweetest guy ever, come on." She took Patrick by the wrist, pulling his hand out of his pocket, and led him across the room, to the table where the facilitators' card game had been joined by one of the kids Patrick hadn't been sure about--a plump, happy-looking person with slick black hair, acne, and numerous piercings. He was wearing a black Super Mario Bros. t-shirt.

"This is Patrick," Anna said. "Patrick, this is Paul, and Lloyd. They're the babysitters."

"We've met," Lloyd said archly.
"Hi," Paul said with a little wave.

"Hi," Patrick said, with a little wave back.

"Hey, I'm Jeremiah," the guy said, shuffling a deck of cards. "You know how to play Crazy Eights?"

"Yeah," Patrick said.

"Then sit down, let's go," Jeremiah said.

Patrick took a seat and Anna dragged a chair over too. Patrick noticed, as she sat down, that there was a perfectly good electrical outlet on the wall three feet away. He looked at her and she smiled at him and Jeremiah dealt them in.

That was Monday. On Thursday, he had work until six, and then he had to take the bus downtown to play a show and was nearly late.

"If we had a fucking singer and fucking instruments we could totally go on," Pete was saying to the promoter when Patrick stumbled backstage. Joe and TJ were standing nervously to the side, arms crossed like they were freezing.

"I'm here, I'm here," Patrick said breathlessly, a guitar case in each hand.

Joe held his arms out and said, "A vision from on high." TJ snickered.

Pete didn't even look at Patrick, just said to the promoter, "Okay, we'll be ready in ten," and shook the guy's hand.

TJ and Joe came to take their guitars from Patrick. "Thanks, man," Joe said.

"No problem, don't ever leave them in my basement again," Patrick said. "I know I'm a little late, but there's no way it took me three hours to get here."

TJ shook his head. "First band didn't show up."

Patrick grimaced. "Great."

"Awesome," Pete said, and flung his arm around Patrick's shoulders. "An opportunity in disguise."

"An opportunity to play to an empty room," Patrick said.

"Like we've never done that before," Pete said.

Patrick shrugged Pete's arm off, suddenly nervous, adjusting his jacket agitatedly. "I invited somebody to come at eight, and if--"

"Wait, wait." Pete put his hands on Patrick's shoulders and stared into his eyes. "Say that again."

Patrick pulled away, feeling the blush heat his face. "Fuck you, man, if she gets here after we play, I'll be pissed."

"She!" Pete crowed.
"Patty met a girl!" Joe yelled, and strummed a power chord on his guitar.

"They grow up so fast," TJ said. He reached over and tapped the brim of Patrick's hat so it knocked his glasses askew.

"Shut up, fuckheads, or I will fuck your shit up," Patrick said loudly and clearly. They backed off and he fixed his hat and his glasses.

When they got out front twenty minutes later, the room wasn't quite empty: a few kids standing around the merch table, some little groups sitting against the wall. No one looked like Anna.

"Fuck this mopey shit," Pete said. He clapped his hands above his head and yelled, "Hey! Who's here for a goddamn show?"

Patrick saw half the kids recognize Pete and come towards the stage, dragging their skeptical friends along.

"Go," Pete said, and Mike clacked his sticks together for the four count, and then they were playing.

Patrick kept his head down and his elbows in and just tried to remember all the words, just tried to keep up when Mike lost the beat or randomly changed the tempo. By the third song, Joe had spit water on him twice and his button-down and t-shirt were damp with sweat, his glasses heavy in his shirt pocket. His binder stuck to his skin uncomfortably and he'd lost his hat. He stood chest-to-chest with Pete and nearly screamed something about drawing hearts on shoes in geometry class. Smiling, Pete mouthed the words and pressed his cheek to Patrick's, and then backed away.

Halfway through "Growing Up," Patrick opened his eyes and Anna was right there, right up front, grinning at him. He smiled back and heard the note change shape as it banged against his teeth. She reached her hand up towards him and he touched her palm with his fingers and somebody knocked into him, TJ or Pete or Joe, and he had to let her go.

After school on Friday, he bussed back downtown to the health centre for his shot.

The nurse, Sara, was as calm and professional as she had been every week for the last two years, but he didn't feel at all calm or professional. Sometimes he did--he could ignore the fact that he was taking his jeans off for a woman in purple scrubs and that if he didn't have his shirt pulled down over his lap, she could totally tell his jockey shorts were filled with a folded pair of socks instead of a dick. Not this time, though. He was fidgety and couldn't meet her eyes as she set out the syringe and cotton balls and vial of testosterone.

He kept thinking--what if Anna was here? Where is she right now? What is she doing? He kept remembering how she'd grinned at him after Fall Out Boy's set, hanging at the merch table, and later too, behind the community centre after the show, helping load equipment into Joe's mom's van. He hadn't even said goodnight to the guys, just gone off with her in her rusty brown Colt. They got fries at the McDonald's drive-thru and she said, "They're really awesome, your friends."

The way the orange lights in the park made her hair seem blood-red and her skin seem golden. The mocking smile on her face when she said, "Oh my gosh, Patrick, what's it like to be in a band with Pete Wentz?"

The sweet little furrow in her forehead when he said, slowly, quietly, that Pete didn't know, that none of his friends knew. "You're not out?" she'd whispered. He'd shaken his head. "Please," he'd said. "Don't--" and she'd shaken her head. "I won't," she'd said, and she took his hand, her fingernails
tickling his palm a little. They lay on the grass beside a picnic table, silent for long minutes under the midnight sky. Anna leaned over him and said, "I really want to kiss you. Is that okay?"

Sara said, "Dr. Kelvie asked me to let you know that we'll be doing some bloodwork next week." She pulled on a pair of turquoise gloves and fuss ed around the exam table Patrick was sitting on.

"Okay," he said. He knocked his left foot against the side of the table a few times.

"Patrick, relax," she said pleasantly.

"I know, sorry," he said. He wrinkled the paper cover on the table with his fingers, folding and creasing it.

"How's school?" she asked. She picked up the vial and the syringe and double-checked his chart for the dose.

"Oh, um, fine," he said. He looked up at the ceiling. A bright-coloured mynah bird looked down at him. He thought about why there was a poster on the ceiling above the exam table and felt a tense little shiver in his spine.

Sara pumped air into the syringe and inserted it into the vial. "How's your band?" she asked.

"Great, awesome," he said, looking back down at her, an afterimage of the mynah's plumage floating over her head. "We had a show last night."

"I keep telling you," she said, drawing testosterone into the syringe, "you have to let me know when you're playing. I love live music."

"Right, yeah," he said. "Mostly we play pretty last minute, so."

She raised an eyebrow at him knowingly. "Sure," she said. "What are you guys called again?"

"Fall Out Boy," he said. "We're, um, we're actually going on tour this summer. For like a month, at least, probably two." Maybe. If Pete and TJ got the money together. If their manager made the dates happen. If Joe could borrow his mom's van. If Patrick's mom let him go.

"That's awesome," Sara said, sounding excited for him. She kicked her little wheeled stool over and sat at Patrick's knee. "Showtime," she said, and he wiggled his jeans down to his knees without getting up. Sara rubbed an alcohol swab over a few inches of skin on his right thigh.

She aimed the syringe. He stretched the skin taut. Sara said, "All right, now. Three--"

"Two," they said together, and, "One--"

She stuck the needle into him, between his fingers, like she was throwing a dart, and there was the familiar sting, cold and hot at the same time. She drew the plunger back a bit to check for blood, and then said, "We're good, okay?"

He took a deep breath through his nose. "Okay," he said. She depressed the plunger and he felt the freezing drain of the hormone into his muscle.

When it was done and she'd tossed the syringe in the bright yellow sharps box and pressed a little round dinosaur-printed bandaid over the needle mark, Patrick slid off the table, tucked his binder back down into his jeans and zipped up and said, "Thanks."

"You're welcome, kid," she said, smiling her familiar half-smile.
"So, I should talk to Dr. Kelvie about doing my own shots, like while I'm away?" he asked, nonchalantly, like he wasn't nervous at all.

Sara filled in some stuff in his file and nodded. "Yeah, ask him about it next week. You're seventeen, you know, you could maybe do your own shots all the time. You've been watching a pro for a couple of years, after all."

He paused in the middle of putting his jacket on. "Really?"

"Totally," she said, and they grinned at each other.

2. understatement of the year.

Patrick's life was drawn in routine, sketched by days into a week, every week. It was band practice and Anna and shows and work and school; the lines of therapy twice a week and doing his T shot on Friday afternoons made dark by repetition.

"I don't have time," he'd tell Anna when she asked him to come to youth group again, or go with her to some queer dance party or punk show. And she'd roll her eyes and scowl and guess out loud that she was glad he had time to go that once, or they never would have met.

"We would have," he'd say, and repeat something he'd heard Pete tell a girl once about sliding doors and the inevitability of their perfect love. And she'd roll her eyes and smile and kiss him.

Patrick's routine was based on weeks, cycling out into months: school to classes, exams, report cards; band practice to shows, showcases, the shining possibility of tour at the end of it all. He finished eleventh grade with average marks and his mom was happy.

"Frankly," she said, "I'm shocked. The amount of time you actually spend in class, or doing your homework?" She raised her eyebrows and flicked him on the end of his nose.

But she let him go on tour.

Andy parked the van in front of Anna's house with a jerk. The stack of merch and equipment in the back teetered and a box of t-shirts fell on Patrick's head.

"Ow, what the fuck," he said angrily, ready to throw the box into the back of Andy's seat.

"Shut up," Andy said mildly, and Patrick did, surprised.

Pete popped up over the front passenger seat and grinned at Patrick. "Andy Hurley, soother of savage Stumphs."

"Fuck you and your ugly fucking t-shirts," Patrick said, and threw the box at Pete's head.

Anna came down the front path as he got out of the van. She broke into a jog and wrapped her arms around him tight when they met.

"I'm going to miss you," she said into his neck, and pulled away, wrinkling her nose. "Oh my god, you already smell like a van full of boys."

He smiled ruefully. "It's so awesome."

She laughed and hugged him again and he said, "I'll miss you too. I'll call you."
"You'd better call me," she said, mock-angry, and he leaned his head against hers. She sighed. "Be careful, Patrick Stumph."

"My mom already said that," he said.

"Still," she said. She put her hands on his jaw and kissed him and he tried to memorise all the things he hadn't yet--the way it felt like he was falling, even though he had to tilt his head up a little to reach her mouth; her fingertips brushing his ears; her nose against his cheek; her warm breath.

"Don't forget," she said, and he wasn't sure what she meant, but he said, "I won't."

He heard the slide-thunk of the van door opening and Anna shifted. "Hi, guys," she called over his shoulder.

"Hi, Anna," Pete, Joe, and Andy chorused.

Patrick took a deep breath and pulled away. "I hate them," he said. "I'm going to kill them all."

She shook her head and smiled. "No, you're not. You're going to use them until you're rich and famous and don't need them anymore. You'd better go before they drag you away by your feet."

He nodded and kissed her again, quick. "Bye," he said. He took a couple of steps backwards, just to prove he could, and then a few more, and then he was standing on the curb.

She waved a little and crossed her arms over her stomach. "Bye."

Pete and Joe pulled him up into the van and shut the door.

"For fuck's sake, Slump," Pete sighed. "You hardly even looked at your mom when we left. Does this girl have magic spit or something?"

Patrick watched Anna wipe at her eyes and turn away as Andy hit the gas. "Yeah," he said. "Magic spit." He wiped his wet mouth with the back of his hand and wiped his hand on Pete's shoulder.

"Oh, it is on, motherfucker," Pete said, and wrestled Patrick onto the bench seat, making noises like he was working up a good gob of spit.

"You going to show me magic spit?" Patrick taunted and Pete grinned. Patrick kicked at Pete's shins and tried to pinch handfuls of skin, mostly unsuccessfully. He always forgot: there really wasn't much of Pete to grab.

"Seatbelts!" Andy called.

Pete turned his head and Patrick heard the wet splat as Pete's spit impacted the back of Andy's seat.

At three in the morning, two weeks later, on a deserted stretch of Indiana highway, Patrick really, really needed to pee.

He held it for almost an hour, hoping to spot a rest stop sign, hoping they'd miraculously make the six hour drive in three hours, but the pressure just got worse and worse. Of course, Pete noticed him crossing and re-crossing his legs and squeezing his knees together and started talking about flowing rivers and thundering waterfalls.

"Fuck you," Patrick muttered, glowering at him.
Pete grinned and said, "Boy, I hope it doesn't start raining. It'd just roll right down the windows, the drops all merging together--"

"Asshole," Patrick hissed. He pressed a hand against the fly of his jeans, pushing his packing dick into his pelvic bone; the twinge of pain was a good distraction. "I fucking hate you."

Pete just grinned harder. "Might even leak in and drip from the ceiling--"

"Pull over, I have to take a leak," Patrick called up front to Andy.

"Here," Joe said, and tossed an empty Gatorade bottle back.

"No fucking way," Patrick said. His packer was a stand-to-pee model he'd been using off and on since he got it for his birthday, but he couldn't fucking do it in front of the guys, in the back of the goddamn van. "Absolutely no fucking way. Stop the fucking van."

"Dude," Pete said, very seriously, and held the bottle out to Patrick. "Rite of passage."

"Fuck that," Patrick said. He knocked the bottle out of Pete's hand. "Stop the fucking van or I will piss on--everything." He stared at Andy in the rearview mirror while Pete and Joe laughed at him and hoped his utter seriousness and desperation showed.

Andy met his eyes and nodded calmly and pulled over.

Patrick yanked the door open and jumped down to the verge of the highway.

"Wuss," Pete yelled after him.

Patrick flipped him off and scrambled over the concrete divider separating the road from dark scrub. He walked as quickly as he could into the brush and unzipped his fly behind a bush. He fumbled his dick out of the fly of his briefs; the silicone was warm, its weight reassuring. He adjusted his hips and his dick to make sure the tubing was where it was supposed to be, and then checked over his shoulder to make sure he was still alone. The van looked blue in the moonlight, the interior light wan and sickly yellow, a silhouette sitting in the open side door.

"Hurry the fuck up," Pete yelled.

Patrick put his eyes back on his dick in his hand and hurried the fuck up.

Anna said on the phone that she'd be waiting for him at Roger's, in the little corner booth they liked to share, but when he got there, somebody with brutally short crimson hair was sitting there, hunched over a book, worrying a thumbnail in their teeth. Patrick rounded the corner and almost dropped the grocery bag he was carrying with Anna's souvenir t-shirts in it.

"Hey," she said, looking up, smiling, eyes and mouth enormous without her hair framing her face. She got out of the booth and enveloped him in a hug, pressing her lips to his ear.

"Hey," he said, hugging back, closing his eyes. She smelled the same, anyway.

"Do you like it?" she asked, stepping back, one hand going to the back of her neck. Her smile turned unsure and sweet, and he nodded emphatically.

"Of course, dude, it's awesome," he lied. He took her hand and made her sit down next to him and pulled out the shirts he bought for her in Ohio, Michigan, Minnesota--he stared at her as she
exclaimed over the witticisms on the shirts. The nape of her neck was so exposed, so boyish and vulnerable.

He reached over and ran his thumb over the point of hair at the base of her skull. She looked over at him and smiled shyly, blushing.

"I missed you," she said. Her hand dropped to his thigh, high up, and he swallowed.

"I missed you too," he said.

He grabbed her hand as it moved up from his knee, the skin of his right inner thigh suddenly bright and burning in his mind, the nerves jangling with memory.

"What is it?" she asked.

The scars, the months they represent, were hazy and dark in retrospect--the months he was crazy, the months he hurt himself, the months he just couldn't believe it, what was happening, that what everyone had been telling him was true; he was a girl, he was going to be a woman; it was all wrong.

"I just--have some scars, and--yeah. So." He shrugged uncomfortably, mouth tight.

Anna frowned, looking concerned, and her fingers tightened on his leg, warm through his jeans. "Okay," she said. "I don't understand what you're saying. What kind of scars?"

"Just." He rolled his eyes at himself and waved his hand, heart racing, sweat beading on his upper lip. "Little scars, on my leg, nothing--nothing you need to worry about. I just. Wanted to warn you. Because. We're supposed to be naked for this, right?"

After Patrick and Anna had their first fight, he yelled at his mom, got sent to his room, and called Pete. "I don't know, we've just never fought before," he said dully.

"Dude, it's been like six months, what?" Pete said, shocked.

"What's the point?" Patrick asked. "Arguing about shit is stupid. Seriously, what do I care where we get pizza or what movie we see? If it's that important to her, you know--I just want to be with her."

"You're like the best boyfriend ever," Pete said. "I fucking hate you."

"Fuck off," Patrick said. "Obviously I'm not, or she would have--." He thinks of her pained, frustrated face, the way she said stealth like it was a dirty word. "Whatever."

"So what did you fight about, if not pizza and movies," Pete said.

"Her friends don't like me," Patrick said. He put his hand over his eyes and decided that was the understatement of the year.

Pete was quiet for a moment, and then he said, "Fuck her friends."

"It's important to her," Patrick said. "So--"

"So fuck them," Pete said.
"I can't just," Patrick said, frustrated. "I can't just tell her that, I have to--" Make an effort, she'd said, try.

"What?" Pete said. "What can you do? Can you make them like you?" He laughed, angrily. "Can you explain to me how they can not like you? You?"

Patrick rolled his eyes. "Whatever. I'm not, like. I'm not into their shit, all the stuff she likes to do with them--" support groups, lectures, rallies "--and it's hard for her to decide if she's going to do shit with me or with them, and they just--they're assholes about it, man. I don't even know half of what they say to her, but it makes her feel like crap and it pisses me off and she thinks I'm pissed at her for being upset that her friends are mad and--"

"It's a vicious circle," Pete said.

"It is," Patrick said, and sighed. His throat hurt. He'd been crying a little, before he called Pete.

"Friends or girlfriends," Pete mused. "Girlfriends or friends. Would you pick us over her?"

"What?" Patrick asked, startled.

"There's this double standard," Pete said, "where guys think girls should dump their friends for their guys, but if a girl doesn't like her guy's friends, he should dump the girl. It's shitty, and I know you're not an asshole, so would you dump us, the band, for Anna?"

Patrick looped the phone cord around his finger tight, thinking. The tip of his finger turned purple-blue. "You mean, would I dump you for her."

Pete said, "Whatever."

"No, I wouldn't do that," Patrick said, and let the cord go. "But--I don't think. I also think it'd be shitty to dump her for you. For the band."

"Yeah," Pete said. "Whatever," he said again, laughing a little. "Like it's even going to go down like that. Anna loves me."

"She kind of doesn't, really," Patrick said.

"I know," Pete said. "But we both love you, and, you know, the seeds of friendship are sown in common ground."

"Seriously," Patrick said.

"Seriously, okay," Pete said. "You want her to be happy, let her go do shit with her friends if that makes her happy. If you're not into their shit then you're not into their shit, don't do their shit with them. And if they don't like you for that, for being your own person instead of some cookie cutter jackass, fuck them."

"Yeah, I guess. Okay," Patrick said.

"Say it," Pete said.

Patrick rolled his eyes and said, "Fuck them."

"Just like that," Pete said. "You should swear more, it's pretty hot."

"Fuck you," Patrick said, and hung up on him.
Later, Patrick went down to the kitchen in search of peanut butter. His mom looked up from rolling out biscuit dough and raised her eyebrows. He smiled and tried not to look like a jerk.

"Are we a human being again?" she asked.

"Yes," he said, ashamed. "Sorry. Anna and I--"

"I know," she said. "She called to say she wasn't coming for dinner, and I told her that was ridiculous."

Patrick knocked his head into the wall. "Mom--"

She shook her head. "Fighting is allowed, just not with your mother," she said. She waved at a pile of vegetables on the counter and said, "Please cut up those carrots."

"Okay," he said, and went to wash his hands.

When Patrick heard Anna's car pull up at five, he met her in the driveway. She parked her Colt behind his mom's Cougar and stood across the car from him for a while.

"Hi," he said.

"Hi," she said. She bit her lip. "I'm sorry."

"Me too," he said.

She smiled. "Okay, good. Um."

He scratched his nose and sighed. "I don't want my life to be complicated, and telling people would make it pretty complicated, know what I'm saying?"

"It's already complicated," Anna said.

"Fine. More complicated," Patrick said. "I don't want it to be more complicated."

She crossed her arms tightly and pursed her lips. "But--"

"No," Patrick said. "The more people have to keep a secret, the worse it's kept."

"They're my friends. They wouldn't spread it around," she said. "They know what it's like--"

"I don't care," Patrick said. "That's not the point. The point is that it's my decision. Mine. I do pretty much whatever I want and you do pretty much whatever you want and it's cool, we work it out, but this is my life and you don't get to do what you want with it."

"Oh," she said, and put her hand over her mouth, eyes going squinty and bright.

"Anna?" he said, and reached for her without thinking about it.

She shook her head. "I'm sorry," she said. "You're right."

He went between the bumpers of her car and his mom's and put his arms around her, his whole body feeling light with relief that she understood.

"I'm sorry," she said again, and snifffled against his shirt.

"It's okay," he said. "Me too." He rubbed her back and leaned his head against hers.
She tucked her fingers into his back pockets. "You should still come to the queercore show downtown next week," she said. "Bride of Pride are really good."

"Jesus Christ," he sighed, and smiled a little. "Okay."

"And 636," she said. "Their drummer has gotten utterly fucking hot since she started taking hormones."

He laughed into her neck. "Awesome."

3. at what price fame.

"We can't use Anna's car on Saturday," Patrick said. "She's not coming."

"Why not?" Pete said. "It's a fucking showcase. All four of my girlfriends will be there, fuck the drama."

"She's going to Bride of Pride's last show, they're like her favourite band," Patrick said. Pete raised his eyebrows and Patrick shrugged. "Whatever, like we don't play nine showcases a year."

Pete's hand slipped and he got Sharpie all down the back of his hand. "Fuck," he said. "Anna's into queercore?"

"Uh, yeah," Patrick said.

"She doesn't seem the type," Pete said, and coloured in his left thumbnail.

"What type? Queer?" Patrick said, unsure if he should be annoyed or not. "Well, she is."

Pete's hand jerked again and he now had a crooked giant X across the back of his hand. "Fucking Christ," he sighed, and looked up at Patrick. "I actually meant, like, she doesn't make a big production out of not shaving her legs or wearing a tie or using the men's room, but you know. She is? For serious?"

"Yeah," Patrick said. "You didn't know?"

"Okay, no," Pete said, drawing a big blocky X on his hand to cover up the accidental scribbles. "Since you're not a girl, I didn't know."

Patrick laughed a little, because he knew he should. "Oh, yeah, I guess."

Pete finished his right pinkie with a flourish. "Let me do yours," he said, grabbing at Patrick's hand.

"Fuck no," Patrick said, scrambling away down the couch. "Keep that shit to yourself, dude."

"You're dating a lesbian, Slump," Pete said, grinning slyly. "I don't think anyone will care if you have your nails coloured with Sharpie."

"I meant, that stuff is dangerous. Toxic," Patrick said. "And fuck you, she's not a lesbian."

The showcase was a fucking blow-out. Bob brought a bunch of major label guys backstage afterwards and Patrick wiped his hands on his jeans six times before he shook their hands.
Pete kissed Patrick's ear and pressed his forehead into Patrick's neck instead of Jeanae's and said, "Jesus Christ, we made it."

"Don't fucking jinx it," Patrick said breathlessly, warning and laughing at the same time.

He was in the back seat of Joe's car, listening to Andy talk about the kit he was going to buy with his advance, and his phone rang, the call display showing ANNABEAR.

Beside him, Andy said, "Annabear?"

"Shut up," Patrick said.

"Hi, Annabear!" Pete shouted from the front seat.

"Fucking--I'm serious, you guys," Patrick said, and answered the phone. "Hey, how was your show?"

"Can you come to Roger's?" she said, her voice thin and choked. "I need you."

"Yeah," he said immediately, sitting up straight in his seat. He put his hand over the speaker and said to Joe, "Drop me at Roger's."

Pete frowned and opened his mouth to bitch about the afterparty. Patrick flipped him off. Into the phone, he said, "What happened?"

She inhaled shakily. "I'll tell you when you get here, please, just--"

"Okay, okay," he said.

He hung up and held his phone against his chest, staring out the front window between Joe and Pete's shoulders. Everyone was quiet.

"What's going on?" Joe asked eventually.

"I don't know," Patrick said, his throat tight. "Something happened at the show, I guess. You're taking me--"

"Roger's, yeah," Joe said.

The rest of the ten-minute drive was silent. Pete stayed twisted around in his seat, watching Patrick. When Joe pulled over across the street from the all-night diner, Pete said, "I'm coming with you."

Patrick shook his head and didn't meet Pete's eyes. "No," he said. "Go to the party."

"Patrick," Pete said.

"She's my girlfriend," Patrick said, and she'd be in there with all her friends, and some of them probably knew Pete and hated him just as much as they hated Patrick, and. "And we don't need to piss off the label guys, okay. Just. Go." He got out of the car and shut the door before Pete could answer.

Joe pulled away from the curb. Patrick crossed the street and went inside, blinking against the bright fluorescent lighting. He saw Anna's blood red hair in a corner booth, surrounded by inky black, bleach blond, and acid green heads.

As he approached the table, all the kids looked up, half of them narrowing their eyes at the sight of
"Hey," he said, and raised his hand, kind of like a wave.

"Patrick," Anna said, and elbowed her way out of the booth. She hugged him, burrowing her arms under his denim jacket. "God," she said, and kissed him.

He put his hands on her face and pulled back. Her eyes and nose were red-rimmed, her eyeliner smeared from the corners of her eyes. She had a lime green, purpling blotch on her cheekbone, and her bottom lip was puffy. His fingers tightened on her jaw and she winced.

"What the fuck happened?" he asked quietly.

"The pit," she said, shaking her head, touching her cheek, waving her hand, "it was pretty crazy, but. After the show--"

"There were a bunch of frat boys in SUVs outside," a girl named Neil said. "They gave us a hard time on the way to the bus stop."

"They bashed us," someone corrected, Patrick couldn't tell who, and the whole group started telling the story at each other, arguing over who called who a fag first and who started throwing bottles and lit cigarettes first, whether they should have stayed and fought or whether they should have called the police, and Patrick just looked at Anna. She was pale and shivering a little, arms folded tight across her chest, her fake patent leather jacket a fluorescent-lit oilslick.

"Jeremiah almost got into a fight with one of them," she said, whispering. "We had to pull him away." She shook her head and sniffed. "It was like the stories you hear, like a movie of the week, you know, right in front of me."

"I'm sorry I wasn't there," he said, because he knew he should, and because he was sorry--sorry he wasn't there to protect her. Part of him was glad he wasn't, though. Watching Boys Don't Cry was enough, thanks. And--he knew it made him a bad person and a horrible boyfriend, but he was glad he'd gotten his band as good as signed rather than having the shit beaten out of him in a dark, glass-strewn parking lot.

Anna just wrapped her arms around his waist again and nodded against his shoulder.

He was happy about getting signed to Def Jam, and he was even happier about going to England--ecstatic, maybe, is a better word; he's always had trouble with synonyms. He was in a good mood about it until his mom stopped him in the middle of singing "Take Me Back to Old Blighty" and said, "Sweetheart, your passport," and he started to say, "No, I have one, it doesn't expire until next year," and then he understood what she meant.

He spent the next day listening to mopey girl bands and Prince and James Brown and also throwing things periodically. He hunched over the sink in the bathroom, staring at his face in the mirror, poking at his chin and his eyebrows and tugging on his sideburns. He thought about calling Anna, but he just twisted his hands tight around the phone, his knuckles cracking. She would say, "I'm so sorry, what are you going to do," but he could already feel the silent, "I told you this would happen."

In the afternoon, his mom came to his bedroom door with the phone. "It's Pete," she said quietly.

Patrick bit his lip hard and shook his head and threw his passport against the closet door again.
"He's got his headphones on," his mom said into the phone, and smiled. "Yes. I'll tell him you called. Goodbye."

She put the phone in her cardigan pocket and came to sit beside him on the bed. He leaned his head on her shoulder.

"I can't go," he said. "I just have to tell them. Maybe I'll say I'm afraid of flying."

She smoothed his hair over his forehead and his ear. "We'll think of something," she said.

"They'll understand if I'm just afraid of flying," he said, and started crying, which he hated to do. His mom put both arms around him and made hushing noises in his ear.

At dinner, he picked at his green beans. Across the table, his mom took a deep breath and said, "I have a plan," very bravely.

Kevin and Amanda burst out laughing. Patrick tried to sound sarcastic instead of hopeful when he asked, "Is it a cunning plan?"

So now he's standing in a mile-long security checkpoint line at the airport, his tickets and his passport and his driver's license in a black document folder in his sweaty hands. His heart is beating in half-time. His carry-on bag feels like it weighs a hundred pounds, the shoulder strap dragging on his binder uncomfortably, bunching up against his baggy hoodie and jacket.

Pete, Joe, and Andy are two lines over, out of earshot and a dozen people ahead after Patrick lagged behind at a newsstand for ten minutes. They get through the checkpoint effortlessly, one after the other, and he's vaguely jealous, annoyed by their unconscious ease of movement.

He can see them milling about past the checkpoint, waiting for him with Charlie and Bob and everyone. He hands over his documents as the security guard asks for them, her face blank and ordinary.

She glances between his passport photo and his face and the information on her computer screen. She looks him in the face, hard, and says, "Shannon Patricia Stumph?"

He smiles and says, "The 'h' is silent," with a shrug, like her confusion is an everyday occurrence.

She narrows her eyes, and then hands him back his papers. "Good luck, and have a safe trip," she says. He's too nerve-wracked to really notice, but he tells himself her voice is kind.

"Thank you," he says.

Pete breaks away from their group and meets him. "No, seriously, it was a very bad decision," he says, as if they've been having a conversation for the last five minutes, though they haven't exchanged more than ten words all day. It's probably for the best--Pete's been in his own head, stuck in pre-flight anxiety, and Patrick snaps at people when he's nervous.

"What the fuck are you talking about?" Patrick says sharply. His heart rate is still up, his palms are still clammy.

"I miss them already," Pete says, and cups Patrick's jaw, rubbing his thumb against the smooth, strange-feeling skin where Patrick's sideburns used to be.

"Sacrifices must be made," Patrick says, not bothering to make sense. He pulls away from Pete's hand.
"Yeah?" Pete says, and cocks his head, thinking about it.

"Yeah," Patrick says tiredly. He hitches his carry-on back up on his shoulder.

Pete grins, flings his arm around Patrick's neck, and says, "Then this is totally going to be my tragic 'at what price fame' story for Behind the Music."

Patrick smiles and lets himself lean on Pete a little bit.

The sound guy in England is sort of tall and stocky and plain-faced--"English-looking," Patrick tells Anna when he's describing the guy--Ian. "He looks very English. Like, English-English, not international-English, not like Elvis Costello or whatever, you know?"

"Uh huh," Anna says on a yawn.

Patrick basically decided he was going to be friends with Ian when they met--Ian was wearing a wrinkled white button-down under a red and yellow argyle sweater, glasses perched on top of his head, a length of audio cable around his neck, hand outstretched for shakes with the band, big smile with big, crooked teeth.

"Hello, hello," he said, and, "Welcome to the motherland," and, "Shit, mate, I love your shirt--" to Patrick, who was wearing his Ziggy Stardust shirt over a long-sleeved shirt, under his denim jacket, because it was kind of chilly in England. Ian didn't squeeze too hard when he shook Patrick's hand, and Patrick said, "Thanks, man, it used to be my dad's," and then they talked about their dads and music for a few minutes.

"Dick," Pete said in a low voice, when Ian had gone off with their tour manager to talk about equipment costs.

"Who?" Andy said, and pointed down the backstage hallway at Ian and Dan's backs. "The sound guy? You just fucking met him."

Pete shook his head and repeated, "Dick." Patrick and Andy shook their heads.

"I want the hotel now," Joe said, leaning against the wall and closing his eyes, like he was going to fall asleep right there. "Can we go to the hotel now?"

"We have to play the show first," Andy said, and Patrick tuned out the rest of the conversation.

On the phone, Anna says, "So, he's cute?" and Patrick says, "Yeah," without even realizing he's saying it.

"Not like--" he corrects himself, hastily, but Anna's laughing, so Patrick drops it.

In Bristol, in the dressing room, Pete slumps over into Patrick's shoulder, winding his arm under Patrick's and back to his own lap, holding his Sidekick in both hands over his belly. Patrick blinks at the page of NME he's reading, and shifts his hips so Pete's weight is distributed more comfortably.

"You wanted an extra minute with the mics, Patrick?" Ian asks from the door. Patrick looks up at him, and must move as if to get up, because Pete makes a disapproving noise and tightens his arm around Patrick's.
Patrick rolls his eyes. "We'll do it next time," he tells Ian, and smiles.

Ian smiles back and taps the side of his nose and leaves.

"Fucking dicks," Pete mutters.

Patrick shakes his head and rolls his magazine into a tube, the better to smack Pete upside the head with it.

"And he's just adorable," Anna says over the phone.

"Awesome," Patrick says. He's falling asleep, sitting at the table in the bus, but Anna needs to talk about Meredith and Nadine's new baby, so Patrick is trying to listen.

"I feel kind of bad that they named him Gordon, but what can you do?" He can pretty much hear her shrug and smile.

"We'll do better," he says. The night outside the window is deep, more grey than black; he can see silhouetted spires in the distance. He kind of loves England. Fuzzily, he imagines buying a miniature manor house of some kind and making Anna move here. Three little redheads in school uniforms heading down the front path; a studio in the old cellar. They could be like Sting and Trudie Styler.

"Oh yes," she says. "Bernice."

"Balthazar," he says.

"Algernon."

"Doreen."

"That's my grandma's name," she says, laughing.

"I know," he yawns.

"Oh Patrick, go to bed," she says, still laughing. "No, wait, tell me again when you're coming home."

"Next week," he says. He crosses his arms on the tabletop clumsily, holding on to his phone, and lays his head down. "Six days. One hundred and forty-four hours."

"I miss you," she says quietly. She says it every day. It doesn't help him feel less lonely, and it doesn't make the time go faster.

"I miss you too," he says.

Pete slides on to the bench across the table and mirrors Patrick's position, staring at him. Pete's eyes are bloodshot and ringed in purple and he looks generally shitty. Patrick frowns.

Anna says, "You are a brave man, Patrick Stump."

"Thanks?" he says. "What?"

"You don't hear it enough," she says, and his throat turns all lumpy and sweet. "I'll see you next week. Love you. Go to sleep."
"Love you too," he says, a small, goofy smile on his face, and she hangs up. He closes his phone and tucks it in his pocket. "Hey," he says to Pete.

"Hey," Pete croaks.

"Are you sick, or just tired?" Patrick asks.

"Yes," Pete says, and puts his arms over his head.

Patrick reaches across the table and pats Pete's hand. "Write me," he says. He's been getting these long, rambling poem-letter-lyric things from Pete since they landed in London two weeks ago. They're not addressed to anyone, but the desperate way Pete shoves pages at him, or asks if Patrick got his last e-mail--it's weird. It's not how they wrote *Grave*; it's not how they were planning on writing the next thing. It might be making Patrick a little nervous, a little worried.

"I wrote you. I am writing you. I will write you," Pete says. He peeks up at Patrick. "Do you miss me?" he asks.

"I can't miss you if you never leave," Patrick says. Pete squeezes his eyes shut, like Patrick's hurt him, which is not what Patrick meant. Patrick says, affectionately, on a whim, to make Pete open his eyes again, "You're a brave man, Pete Wentz."

"I'm a foolish coward in a world of smart cowards," Pete says to the table.

Patrick wonders, not for the first time, why he can never come up with stuff like that on the fly. He says, "I'm so fucking tired."

Pete says, "Go to bed."

"You too," Patrick says, and pulls Pete up by the elbow. As they pass between the open bunks, Patrick drags down one of his blankets. They avoid Andy's dangling arm and Joe's stray leg. Joe snuffles loudly and flings himself over onto his stomach.

They turn off all but one of the lights in the back lounge and collapse on the wide couch. Pete pulls a little paperback copy of *The Idiot* out of his pocket. Patrick takes off his hat and glasses, settles his head on a lumpy cushion, and closes his eyes. Pete inches over and rests his head on Patrick's shins. Patrick falls asleep listening to the raspy sounds of pages turning and Joe snoring.

They play a really fucking amazing show in Edinburgh, and afterwards everyone goes out to find someplace to drink a lot of beer and scotch. Patrick stays at the venue, taking his time putting his pre-show clothes back in his bag, winding up his iPod earbuds, humming a little of this song he's been working on under his breath.

As he's walking through backstage, headed to the rear exit and the bus, he realizes he has to pee, bladder pressing heavy against his pelvis. He looks around, and there's a men's room just down the hall, door burning bright white under fluorescents and against the black-painted walls. Front of house still echoes and rings with people dismantling things and bagging lost-and-found items, but the back seems deserted--it's largely silent.

Normally, he'd just walk faster and go on the bus, where he knows there is a door that locks, where he knows he won't get busted in on, but--the show was really fucking amazing, and the place is dead, and he's got an invincible buzz loosening his limbs, and he needs to take a piss, for fuck's sake.
He shoulders open the door, arms full of crap from the dressing room. He dumps his stuff on the water-splattered counter and steps in to the cubicle, avoiding the urinals entirely out of long habit. He kicks up the toilet seat and unzips and is doing the age-old jostle and wiggle when he hears the bathroom door open.

"Um, Patrick?" Ian asks.

Patrick stares down at his dick, show sweat and sudden fear sweat cold and sticky in the folds of his skin beneath his binder, heart pounding in his chest and his hands but not in his dick, and says, "Hey, yeah, gimme a minute, will you?"

"No problem," Ian says, and as Patrick is zipping up and hoping this won't take long, because he really, really has to pee, even though he totally fucking can't with somebody standing right outside, Ian whistles the opening notes of "Won't Get Fooled Again." Patrick leans his head against the side of the stall and smiles ruefully at himself.

Two days later, in Manchester, Patrick and Ian are walking through the back of the club, chatting about the new microphone Patrick's going to buy when he gets home, and Ian says, "We could mess around, if you like," and Patrick just about drops his water and his guitar.

"I--sorry?" he says instead, stopping short in the hall.

"Toss off," Ian says, with a mediocre attempt at a rakish smile, a few steps ahead, looking back.

"I--have a girlfriend," Patrick says, feeling his throat constrict, feeling Ian's firm shoulder under his hand when they exchanged back pats the other day, looking at Ian's pink mouth and the pink blush in his pale cheeks.

"Oh," Ian says, frowning a little, and then shrugging. "Still--"

"No," Patrick says, perhaps too forcefully. He sighs and adds, "No, thanks," more gently, more like the friends he'd thought they were.

"Right," Ian says, and they continue walking, in silence, another foot between them in the narrow space.

Just before they reach the stairs to stage right and Patrick's guitar rack, Patrick bites his lip and stops walking again. He shakes his head a little, and he knows it's stupid, but he's got to ask, because it's not like he hadn't thought, momentarily, a couple of times, that Ian's smart and nice and likes the right kind of music and might just be worth it, if Patrick hadn't already had his life worked out ahead of time--it's more like he hadn't ever thought he'd been projecting a "let's mess around" vibe. "Just out of curiosity--uh."

Ian turns back, hands in his pockets, politely blank expression. "What's that?"

"Why did you. Why would you ask me--did you think I'd say yes?"

Ian shrugs. "I suppose. You seemed likely. Why else would I ask?"


"Oh," Ian says. "I don't know. Probably--probably it's the way you are with Pete. Doesn't seem strictly heterosexual to me."
"What?" Patrick shakes his head, sure he didn't hear that right. "Pete's my best friend."

"Yeah," Ian says, again with the largely unsuccessful rakish smile, and Patrick wants to punch him. He can't figure why he thought the guy was good-looking at all.

"No," Patrick says, "seriously. We're friends. And I have a girlfriend. I'm not into guys."

Ian raises his eyebrows and his hands. "All right, mate. Whatever you say."

" Fucking right," Patrick says, and shoves past Ian and up the stairs and on to the stage, where Joe and Pete are wrapping some kid who works for the venue in duct tape, laughing too hard to speak.

"Really?" Anna asks, and she sounds somehow delighted to hear that her boyfriend was hit on by some skeevy English guy.

"Really," Patrick says. "I just--I don't act gay, so. Fuck. It was bizarre."

"Wow," Anna says. "Homophobic much? Also, you kind of do sometimes. And Pete--"

"Nothing to do with Pete," Patrick protests.

"Okay, whatever," Anna says, disbelieving. "How was the show?"

Patrick goes home and records an awesome record with his friends and schedules his chest surgery for the end of March, staring at another stretch of touring and another trip overseas between now and then.

Patrick is half-asleep, rubbing his cold nose against the inside of Anna's warm elbow. His phone starts buzzing and rattling on the bedside table. Anna mutters and smacks at his head before turning over, away. He fumbles for the phone and blinks at the screen three times before he can actually read the name.

"Bob?" he says hoarsely.

"Patrick, you need to wake up right now." His voice is at the peak of stern and forceful.

Patrick swallows and sits up. "What's wrong?" he asks.

"Pete's at Gottlieb Memorial in Melrose Park," Bob says. "I'll give you the address."

Everything narrows, the whole world—even the nerves in Patrick's body contract until he can't feel his hands and feet, only the deep timpani thump of his heart and the in-out vacuum rush of his breath. He is dimly aware of Anna sitting up and taking the phone from him, of her worried curse and scramble for pen and paper. He presses his fingers into numb fists and releases them.

Anna is hauling him up out of bed and helping him dress.

"What happened?" he whispers as she takes his t-shirt off.

She is pulling his arms through the arm holes of his sleeveless binder and tugging it down, down
over his stomach and hips, tucking it into his boxers. She says, her voice is tight, "He ODED, he's at the hospital, we're going as soon as we're dressed."

Mechanically, he adjusts himself in the binder, down-and-out, his flesh uncomfortably warm and sleep-heavy under the elasticized polyester. "ODED on what?" he says, stepping into his packing rig—a circle of wide elastic with a pouch containing his dick. He pulls his boxers back up over everything.

"Bob didn't say," she says. She gives him a pair of jeans and searches for a shirt.

He feels rushed and panicked suddenly, like they're under mortal threat and there is not enough time. He shivers as he fastens his jeans. "Just--um." He points at his red Clan zip-up. "The red hoodie, I'll just--"

"You need a t-shirt underneath, it's not a fucking sweatshirt," she says angrily.

"I know," he says, "okay, but." Pete doesn't do drugs. This can't be happening, because the premise is faulty. Pete couldn't OD, he doesn't--

She thrusts a blue t-shirt at him and he takes it, slips it over his head. He sits on the edge of the bed and puts on his socks from yesterday while Anna puts on jeans and a sweater.

He puts on his glasses and watches her wrangle her hair into a ponytail and it is suddenly very important to him to say, "Pete doesn't do drugs."

She hands him his Vinyl Records hat and a pair of Vans. "Put your shoes on, Patrick, let's go," she says grimly, slipping her feet into her own shoes.

The hallway of their apartment building and the neighbourhood outside are quiet and freezing, frozen in the late winter pre-dawn. Anna's car is quiet and cold too. Patrick stares at the world outside, watching the opalescent horizon between buildings, the way it fades hazily upwards into blue, the dimming streetlights arching overhead, his breath fogging on the window. His eyes slide shut somewhere along the way, so when the car stops, he starts awake and almost thinks the whole sunrise ride was a dream, except for that he's in the car and they're at the hospital.

"I'll park the car," Anna says, subdued. "You go in."

He approaches the automatic doors and sees Joe on the other side, on his way out.

"Dude," Joe says, and they hug. Patrick stares over his shoulder at the white insides of the hospital lobby, glowing cold and golden. "Dude," Joe says again, and squeezes.

Patrick feels his nose running and sniffs hard and pulls away, rubbing at his watering eyes.

"He's okay," Joe says, reassuringly. "He's going to be okay, he's just, like, really fucking sick right now."

"What was it," Patrick says, even though he doesn't want to know, or at least wants to hear it from Pete.

Joe grimaces and shrugs. "Ativan."

Anti-anxiety; addictive; can't kill you. Pete's been taking it for like a year. "What the fuck," Patrick says, relieved, confused as hell, finally awake enough to start feeling angry.
"I know," Joe says. He gestures at the doors. "You should go up. He asked Bob like nine times if he called you."

Patrick adjusts his hat and looks at the doors. His feet won't move. "Where's Andy?" he says.

"On his way. He's hopping the first Greyhound," Joe says. He puts his hand on Patrick's shoulder and steers him towards the door. "I'm just going for a smoke. Go on up. He's in 4959."

Patrick nods and goes inside. The night staff ignore him as he waits for the elevator.

The fourth floor corridor is long and blank and white; the floor is pink linoleum with grey and white flecks. Patrick remembers that it used to be the maternity ward until they built the new wing last year. The plastic room number plaques are pink too, with white text.

Patrick rounds the corner at the end of the hall without finding 4959. There is a little lounge tucked away beside the nurses' station, and Pete's mom and dad are sitting there with Bob, all three of them silent, looking at their hands, surrounded by worn pink upholstery and fake flowers in wicker baskets.

"Hey," Patrick says, and they all stand up. Mrs. Wentz hugs him and Mr. Wentz shakes his hand and Bob says, "You all right?"

"Oh, yeah," Patrick says. He gestures over his shoulder and adds, for no reason, "Anna drove me, she's just parking the car."

Mrs. Wentz hugs him again. "He's probably asleep, but go on in," she says. "Just a little further down the hall. 4959."

He shakes Bob's hand and steps off the pink-brown carpeting back onto the pink-grey linoleum. He can see 4959 a few doors away. He walks to the door and puts his hand on the cold stainless steel handle. He can see the room through the little wire-meshed safety glass window. Pete is on the hospital bed, turned away from the door, silhouetted by the yellow light of a lamp on the far side of the room.

Patrick finds himself standing in the room, inside the yellow glow, Pete looking up at him as if he's just spoken.

"You're here," Pete says, voice hoarse and relieved and alive. Patrick wants to strangle him, slap him silly, punch him bloody and unconscious.

Because--thirty-six hours from now, Patrick will be bluffing his way through airport security again, going away from his girlfriend and his family for months again, and Pete. Pete will be laying in this warm golden hospital room, eating Jello and ice cream, spilling his guts and lying through his teeth to a team of psychiatrists, not taking two trans-Atlantic flights.

Patrick's hands curl tight into fists in his hoodie pockets. Pete blinks; his eyelashes are clumped and sticky-looking, his eyes are bloodshot and dazed, his whole face is pale and used and alone. Patrick sighs. Patrick will be half a world away from home, but at least he won't be alone.

Patrick frowns and says, "Where else would I be, you stupid fuck?" and Pete smiles.

4. see and hear.
After Pete and Patrick have their nine millionth fight, Patrick goes to Pete's house. He rings the bell and realizes he hasn't been here since before Pete was in the hospital—probably Christmas, or even Thanksgiving.

Pete opens the door. It's Monday night, almost eight o'clock. Pete's parents are probably watching Jeopardy.

"Hi," Patrick says, and Pete's jaw clenches. "I'm sorry," Patrick says, and he really means it.

"Yeah, okay," Pete says. "So?" His face is blank and cold.

This is the guy Patrick hates. "So," he says, and he tries not to sound like a dick. It's hard; he's not quite successful. "I'm sorry. And it's really bizarre that I'm apologizing for having a fucking private life."

Pete shakes his head and closes the door. Patrick grabs the handle before the latch takes. He kind of hates the guy he's being right now too.

"I'm sorry," he says again, into the two-inch gap. Pete's right eye appears, narrow. "Seriously," Patrick says. "I'm sorry about what I said before. And just now."

"Okay," Pete says. He doesn't re-open the door.

"What do you want me to do?" Patrick says. "I can't--"

"Tell me the truth," Pete says. "Just do that, that's all."

Patrick looks down at the brick step he's standing on. Tell him the truth, after this long. What can it hurt? He lets out a short, bitter laugh. "Okay," he says. He doesn't want to say it through a nearly-closed door, but. "I'm going to be in the hospital. At first. I'm having surgery--"

Pete opens the door and grabs the front of Patrick's jacket, pulling him inside. The screen bangs shut behind him.


Patrick closes the door and follows. As he passes the living room, Mr. Wentz says, "Who is C. Everett Koop," at the television.

Mrs. Wentz looks up at Patrick and smiles a little. "Hi, Patrick."

"Hi, Mrs. Wentz," Patrick says. The sound of the TV follows Patrick up the stairs, past the ascending ranks of family photographs and piles of Pete's crap, and down the hall to Pete's room. The house is otherwise quiet.

Pete sits on one of the twin beds in his room, his back against the wall, his arms around his knees. Patrick sits on the edge of the other bed. "So, yeah," he says. Should he start over again, or--

"What the fuck, Patrick," Pete says, gesturing with his hands. "Surgery? Are you sick?"

Patrick twists his fingers together and shakes his head. "No, it's just--it's elective. Mostly. I just need some time to recover. I mean, I'm not even going to be able to play for like two months."

"Dude," Pete says, "you're not getting fucking liposuction or something, right? Because I'm afraid I'd have to kill you."
"Ha, no," Patrick says. "No. Not exactly." He puts a hand on his chest, on his sternum. He moves his hand over his heart and pats himself vaguely. "I have. I don't really tell people about this. I'm having." This is nothing like telling Anna--not least because he didn't actually have to tell her. He doesn't quite know where to start.

"Just start at the beginning," Pete says. "It's a very good place to start."

"Yeah," Patrick says. It is. "So, I'm a transsexual." He waits for Pete to laugh, because the word always makes Patrick want to laugh, always makes him think of Tim Curry in black fishnets.

Pete doesn't say anything. Patrick pushes his glasses up his nose and looks at him. The room is dim, only lit by the work lamp on Pete's desk and the blue light of Pete's computer monitor. It's hard to tell if Pete is even looking back at him.

"I mean, I was--when I was born, my parents named me Shannon, but now," Patrick says, trying to explain.

"I know what transsexual means, Patrick," Pete says, and there: Patrick can see and hear that he's smiling, lamplight on his teeth.

"Oh," Patrick says. "Good, I guess."

They sit like that late into the night, Pete whispering questions and Patrick whispering answers:

"So, like, what surgery are you having?"

"Um. A mastectomy." He touches his chest again. "Chest surgery, is what it's called. Not the other--yeah."

"With your doctor?"

"Oh, No, Dr. Brownstein. He's in San Francisco. He's pretty cool."

"Oh. Okay. Three months?"

"Yeah, three months."

"Like, when I met you--I mean, I knew guys from your old bands, and nobody ever said--"

"When. Um. When I started high school, we moved to Glenview, right, and my mom enrolled me as Patrick. It's not--for all anybody knew, I'd always been Patrick. Me. And I started--I take testosterone, right, I started taking it a year before I met you. So, it was just like I was a couple of years behind on puberty. Just a latebloomer, you know."

Pete nods, collapsed on his side in his bed, head propped up on his fist. He smiles tiredly and Patrick smiles back.

"I'm really lucky," he admits. "My family--my mom just never took no for an answer, you know?"

Pete nods again.

"I told her that I needed this, that I needed to be this person, and she just." He shakes his head, lost
for words, and also because that's not the whole story--there was also the hard evidence of the scars on his thigh and the blood under his fingernails and the pale moon of his brother's face when he found Patrick's paring knife and sharpened paperclips. The only people who need to know about those months already know about them, so Patrick leaves them silent on his skin.

"You just--told him?" Anna asks, sitting on the edge of their couch, elbows on her knees, frowning.

"Yeah," Patrick says, hanging up his coat, frowning too, feeling as bewildered as Anna sounds, and also a little tired; it's almost one in the morning. "I just said it, and he was like, yeah, okay."

"'Yeah, okay?'" Anna parrots. Her bare feet are pale against the dark carpet. She's wearing yoga pants and a tank top and her scalp is swaddled in Saran wrap, stuck to her skull with bright red dye.

"That's--yeah," Patrick says, toeing off his shoes, shrugging. "That's what he said, basically."

Anna slumps back and crosses her arms, mouth pinched. "You're fucking kidding me."

"Seriously, I'm not," Patrick insists. "We talked a little after that, just about how long I'll be gone and stuff, but--"

"You've been in the closet for ten years," Anna says, standing abruptly. "You've fought with me about staying there since pretty much the day I fucking met you, and you just told him?"

Patrick freezes, his mouth open a little, and blinks a few times. "What?"

"Are you--you seriously don't get it?" she asks, cocking her head. "I can't tell my friends or my family, but you can tell him?" She gestures sharply at some skinny, pathetic space obviously meant to stand for Pete.

Patrick blinks a few more times, his eyes narrowing with each blink, understanding rising in his chest with every breath, getting ready to fight about this again. "Your friends and your family aren't my best friend. Maybe you know everything about me, and he doesn't, but I know everything about him. I know I can trust him, and that's all that fucking matters."

She waves her hands and smiles bitterly. "Okay, fine. Whatever, just, I really hope he doesn't make you regret saying that." She shrugs and crosses her arms and brushes past him on her way to their bedroom. The door closes with a quiet, final click.

They're on the plane to California a week later, and Anna looks up from her book to say, haltingly, "I know it's up to you who knows what about you and when, but. It's hard. For me to be inside of this, of us, to be with you, and have the only person who knows what's going on. Who knows who I'm with. The only person who knows the real us is your mom." She shrugs and meets his eyes, her eyes bright and damp with tears.

"I'm sorry," he says, quietly, simply. There's nothing else he can say, except: "I love you, Anna."

She nods, smiling a little, so fucking sadly. "I know." She looks back down at her book. "I love you too, baby."
"I'm so proud of you," his mom says, holding his hands between their knees.

He smiles at her a little and admits, "I'm scared."

She smiles back, her lips pressed together, her head tilting. "You should be proud too," she says, squeezing his fingers, "because I'm a little scared too."

He laughs, quietly. She presses a kiss to his cheek and pats his ear as she stands. He looks up at her and catches her hand before she turns to leave. "I love you, Mom." The past ten years--his whole life--his self floods his throat and he chokes out, "Thank you. Thank you for everything. I can't even--you don't even know--"

She shakes her head and shakes his hand in hers, silencing him. "I love you too, Rick. I know." He closes his eyes and kisses her hand and she pats him again, and then she's gone, the warm smell of her perfume fading quickly.

Anna comes in while he's biting his lip and looking at his hands on his hairy knees, peeking out of the hospital gown.

"Hey," she says.

"Hey," he says, putting on a game smile.

She drops heavily into the chair his mom was just in. She leans forward, taking his hands in hers, just like his mom did. "Everything's going to change," she says, their eyes locked. He can't decipher her expression or tone of voice--good or bad, better or worse, she sounds lost and certain at the same time. "Nothing will be the same."

"Yeah," he says, confused. "That's--I mean. That's the point, right?"

"I guess," she says, forehead creasing. "I guess so."

"I don't want to be afraid anymore," he whispers. "I need this, Anna."

Her eyes squeeze shut and when she opens them, a tear leaks from her right eye. "I know, Patrick, I know." She smiles a shaky smile and cups his face in her hands. "You are a brave man," she says, her old litany, voice thick. "I love you so much."

"I love you too," he says. He turns his head and kisses her palm and it's exactly and nothing like kissing his mother's hand a few minutes ago. She slips her hand down and holds it against his heart.

"We're gonna have a party after this," she says, nodding seriously, wiping her eyes and under her nose with her other hand. "We're gonna have a party and make toasts to being legal and everyone will think it's about your birthday." He laughs, startled, and nods. He covers her hand with his and presses her fingers into his chest. Into his--into his breast. He can call them what they are: they'll be gone soon.

"It's gonna kick ass," he promises.

"Pretty much totally," she agrees. She leans forward and kisses him, their mouths closed, lips clinging, and Patrick is reminded of goodbyes at airports and train stations and a long kiss on her front lawn when he was seventeen.

"See you in a few hours," she says quietly, pulling away and standing.
"It'll be longer than that," he says, shrugging up at her.

She rolls her eyes. "I'll see you when you're done, then."

"Okay," he says. She waves awkwardly and leaves.

Yeah. Yes. When he's done.

When Patrick gets back to Chicago, he finds himself weak and sore and at significantly less than his best; he doesn't know why he thought just getting out of California would make him feel better. Anna's been home for two weeks already, so he also finds his birthday party pretty much planned for him.

"I could cancel, or postpone," she says apologetically, helping him ease out of his jacket at their front door.

"It's all right," he hisses. His chest and back and ribs are killing him; obviously his mom was right and he still needs a few more weeks. There's no reason for her to know that.

Anna frowns. "Really? What are we going to tell people about your--"

"What? I'm fine," he says, sitting on the couch in four stages. "Oh, shit," he sighs as he makes it down, slouching.

"Yeah," Anna agrees, eyebrows raised. "I can totally see that you're back to your old self. Wanna go play a show?"

Patrick flips her the bird over his shoulder, barely suppressing a wince at the movement.

The next week is a flurry of Anna making last-minute preparations for the party and a blizzard of Patrick filling out paperwork for his birth certificate revision and driver's license re-issue and yet another name change. He got to be legally Patrick Martin Stumph when he was seventeen, just in time to sign a bunch of contracts, but now he's finally dropping that goddamn silent "h."

None of the documents will be in his hands for a while, but when he puts the last envelope in the mailbox, he feels settled and sure. He feels done. He can't wait to show Kevin his new license.

The night of his twenty-first birthday party, Patrick is standing behind Anna when she opens the door for his mom, who beams at them both. She gives Anna a squeeze and approaches Patrick with out-stretched arms. He tries to grin through the discomfort of the hug, but when has he ever been able to hide anything from his mom?

She steps back and frowns at him. "Are you okay?"

"Of course," he says. Anna rolls her eyes behind his mom's back.

"Take some T3s, or I'm cancelling this party," his mom says sternly.

Patrick bites his lip, rolls his eyes, and smiles thinly at her. "Whatever you say, Mom."
"Exactly," she says, and pats his cheek.

Patrick greets guests through a thickening cotton blanket of painkillers. After the first, abortive round of hugs, he makes up a story about bruising a rib while he was in California, and that gets him lots of sympathy cheek-pats and sad smiles.

When Pete arrives, he gently taps his forehead against Patrick's and hoists aloft a six-pack of Bacardi Breezers.

"Alcohol for the man not fit to consume it," he declares, grinning.

"Thanks, man," Patrick says, deadpan.

"I'll take that," Anna says, and snatches the cardboard carrying box from Pete, who rolls his eyes and sticks out his tongue at her back as she walks away.

Patrick snorts out a giggle and Pete turns the grin back on and back on him.

A long time later, after cake and presents and after his mom has gone home, Patrick looks up muzzily from the Beastie Boys drinking game he's refereeing between Joe, Dan, and some guy he doesn't actually know. He sees, through a gap in the happily tipsy crowd, Pete and Anna staring at each other, stone-faced. Pete says something, and Anna clenches her fists. Pete walks away, and Patrick struggles to his feet, upsetting the iPod speaker dock on his lap.

"Dude," Joe says, catching the dock as the other people gathered for the game groan in disappointment and Dan reaches out to steady him.

"I'm fine," he says, stepping deliberately away from the couch.

To his surprise, he goes after Pete, into the second bedroom/office/storage closet. The apartment moves ponderously around him as he goes. He blinks and he's standing in the doorway, looking at Pete looking at all his touring gear pushed up against Anna's books and desk and research materials.

"What's," Patrick says.

He's pretty sure he finishes the question, because Pete turns around and says, "She tried to--she wanted me to get on your case about coming out. She wanted you to do it tonight, fuck."

"Oh," Patrick says. The room tilts and he pushes it back upright with one hand on the door frame.

Pete frowns and comes over, helps steady things with his hands on Patrick's shoulders.

"You're not a trophy," Pete says, or--Patrick hears it, but he's not sure who says it, or if it's said at all. He nods, though, and lets Pete steer him around, across the hall, into his and Anna's bedroom.

He lets Pete press him to sit on the bed--on Anna's side, but he can't find the words to explain, or correct--Pete helps him lie down and pulls the blankets over him from the other side of the bed, like a hot dog bun.

"I'm the golden ticket," he says, and Pete smiles down at him darkness, the lazy, drunken sounds of Patrick's birthday outside.
"That you are," Pete says, and Patrick closes his eyes and remembers nothing more.

5. keep it.

Patrick is sitting in a cab, halfway home from the airport, when Pete texts him with: "call me when ur not in pubic plc," and then, "*public plc, sry."

Patrick snorts out a laugh at the typo, but his fingers twitch around his phone and he'd call Pete immediately, right away, except--a queasy shiver winds down his back and settles in his stomach and he just doesn't want to know. Not yet. He stuffs his phone back in his bag and stares out the car window, not seeing the brown and grey city passing the expressway as if the city is the thing in motion.

He opens the door of the apartment and dumps his messenger and duffle bags in the hallway, calling, "Anna?" There's no answer, so he wanders down to the bedroom, in case she's sleeping in. He can't remember if they talked about him getting home early on Saturday; they didn't really talk about when or how he was getting home, about her picking him up or anything, just, *I'll see you this weekend.*

The bedroom is empty, dusty late fall light slanting through the curtains over the unmade bed and discarded clothes on the floor. He smiles, faintly; Anna is always messy when he's not around.

His phone rings and goes quiet before he can get to it, six quick strides back down the hallway, Pete's name on the screen. The queasy shiver shudders over him again, but becomes nausea this time. He calls Pete back, eyes closed, bracing himself with one hand against the wall.

"Oh shit, dude," Pete says, sounding breathless. "Where are you?"

"I just got home," Patrick says. "What--"

"Shit, shit," Pete spits. "Is Anna there?"

Patrick blinks. "No, dude, what the fuck--"

"Thank fuck. Okay, I'm on my way to Joe's," Pete says. "Come over to Joe's, right now."

"No, fuck you," Patrick says, firmly, swallowing against the lump in his throat. "Tell me what's going on."

"Patrick, come on, not over the phone, man," Pete says, and the tone of his voice, the sound of it in Patrick's ear, full of misery and loathing and bad news, almost makes Patrick throw up right here in his silent, chilly hallway.

He hears the slam of a car door and the finicky, high-pitched stutter of Pete's car starting, and Pete saying, "Patrick," quiet and far away.

"Okay," Patrick says. "I'm--okay, I'm on my way."

"Dude," Pete says. "Do you--"

"I just have to call a cab," Patrick says. He pushes off from the wall and asks, knowing the answer already, "It's not--it's nothing to do with the band, is it?"

Pete doesn't reply for a long time, long enough for Patrick to recognize the song playing on Pete's stereo. "No," Pete says. "No, Rick, it's not about the band."
Patrick's eyes squeeze shut and he presses the phone hard against his cheek, and he knows. He thinks he knows. Pete hardly ever calls him Rick--only when he's feeling especially protective, especially like family.

"Don't call her," Pete adds, in a rush.

"I'll see you soon," he says to Pete, and hangs up.

"Have you talked to Anna since you got back?" Pete says, pressing Patrick down onto Joe's couch. Joe sets a jug of something rummy-smelling and three glasses on the coffee table, mouth slanted in a pensive frown.

"No," Patrick says, and doesn't add anything about how Pete told him five times not to talk to Anna, and Pete nods. He and Joe take seats on the other couch, across the table from Patrick. Pete crosses his arms and tucks his hands in his armpits, slouched into the cushions; Joe sits straight up, tense, hands in his lap.

"What the fuck is going on?" Patrick grits out. "And what the fuck does it have to do with Anna?"

Pete glares down at the jug; Joe glances at Pete, and then meets Patrick's eyes. "The thing is," he begins, hands coming into motion, framing the room and the three of them sitting in it.

"Anna's got somebody on the side," Pete interrupts, directing his statement to the jug and glasses in a low, hoarse voice.

"Jesus Christ, Pete," Joe says, slapping his hand over his face.

"What?" Patrick says. "What did you just say?"

"Anna's seeing someone else," Pete says. He shrugs and looks, just, angry.

"How, what, why do you--what the fuck?" Patrick sputters, palms going damp, heart racing an insistent beat of you know you know you know in the back of his throat.

"Joe and I've both--a lot of people have seen them," Pete says, painful emphasis on a lot.

"She's allowed to have friends," Patrick says acidly, reflexively. "We're not you and Jeanae."

Pete flinches, and his lip curls for a second, but Joe puts his hand up and says, "No, Patrick, it's--it was like--not friendly--more than friendly--"

"They were making out against the bar at the Regency," Pete says and it is Patrick's turn to flinch.

"Dude," Joe says to Pete, admonishingly.

Pete stares across at Patrick, and Patrick knows he should be saying it's not true, punching Pete, anything--he knows he shouldn't believe it just like that, just like this. He should be saying, I don't believe it. But here's the thing. The thing is: he does.

He stands up, angered by that fact as much as what Joe and Pete are telling him, and puts his coat back on and Pete is grabbing him, pressing him into the wall beside Joe's coat rack. "Get the fuck off me, man," Patrick says. "I'm going home--"
"Listen, dude," Pete says. "Listen. Fucking call her and ask her, okay--"

"I'm not doing this on the fucking phone," Patrick spits, and shoves Pete away. "Fuck you."

Pete stumbles back and Joe catches his arm. Pete glares at Patrick and Patrick glares back, because he can't do anything else. "You're not doing this alone," Pete says fiercely.

"Let him do it how he needs to do it," Joe says to Pete, and then looks at Patrick. "I can drive you home, if you want."

"I'm going too," Pete says.

Patrick shakes his head and yanks the front door open, too stunned and furious to answer that with anything but, "Fuck you both."

He stands on the stoop for a minute, the door swinging closed behind him, hardly comprehending that it's only been about fifteen minutes since he got here. He fumbles his phone out of his pocket to call yet another fucking cab and jerks away, nearly falling down the stairs, when Joe touches his shoulder.

"Dude, sorry, wow," Joe says, catching his arm, just like he caught Pete when Patrick shoved him. "Let me give you a ride," Joe says. He glances over his shoulder at the closed door. "Pete's not coming, don't worry."

They ride in silence in Joe's brand-new Mustang, Patrick hunched low in the bucket seat, staring at his hands in his lap, his phone in his hands, switched off to forestall Pete and anyone else. It's a calm trip through a blurred city and when Joe pauses outside his apartment building to let him out, Patrick feels a little less panicky, a little less like he's been through a bombing raid, though the aimless fury and echoing certainty are still thrumming in the back of his head.

"Call me later," Joe says. "I'm sorry, man," he adds, mouth twisted and eyes dark, when Patrick looks over.

"Thanks?" Patrick says.

Joe claps him on the knee solidly. "It'll be okay."

"I--yeah, whatever," Patrick says disbelievingly, and gets out of the car. "Thanks for the ride."

Anna is unpacking groceries in the kitchen; he can hear the paper bags rustling and cupboard doors opening and closing; the slide and thunk of drawers in the refrigerator. She calls, "Patrick?" when he closes the front door.

"It's me," he calls back, automatically, and then squeezes his eyes shut.

"I saw your bags when I got home, but you weren't here," she says as he drifts down the hallway toward her, deliberately placing his hand on the wall to steady himself with each step. "I tried to call you, but--oh, hi." He looks up at her from the pass-through that divides their living room and kitchen.

She's wearing a red t-shirt and a yellow cardigan and unfamiliar spiral earrings--they look like they're made of blue glass. She's smiling faintly, her eyebrows drawing together in concern as she looks at him, a box of cereal in her hands. She looks. She doesn't look any different. He loves her just the same, just as completely and helplessly as he ever did, but he still believes it. He closes his eyes again
and presses his fingers over them, under his glasses.

"What's wrong?" she asks, but she doesn't sound really very curious.

"I talked to Joe and Pete," he says, and takes his hands away and opens his eyes for the last time.

"Oh," she says, and sets down the box of Apple Jacks.

Numbly, some moments later, he asks how long it's been going on and she bursts into tears and he waits, dispassionately, for her to answer the question.

"A few months," she says thickly, breathlessly.

He doesn't know what to say to that. He doesn't even know why he asked. It doesn't really matter.

"Who told you?" she asks.

"Joe and Pete," he says. "They saw you out the other night."

She puts her hands over her face and shakes her head. "I didn't think they were back yet, god, what--"

"You didn't--" Patrick repeats blankly. "You didn't. What? What I'd like to know is, how many of my friends saw you and didn't fucking call me? How many times have you gone out like that?" He finds himself smacking his open hand down on the counter to punctuate his inquiries. "How many times have you fucking done this to me?" He stares at her, his face hot and his palm stinging and tears leaking between her fingers, aware that these questions and their answers don't matter either.

He backs away from her, from the bright yellow light of their kitchen, where they have danced around each other, cooking and drinking and singing and laughing, where Anna has braced herself against the counter, skirt held up in her fists, while Patrick kneeled on the hard tile floor and pushed her panties out of the way and made a long meal of her. Where they stood the day they walked through the empty apartment, two weeks after he signed the Island contract, and held hands, and nodded at each other, smiling. Yes. This is the place.

When he comes up against the back of the couch, he sees and hears and feels the thousands of hours they sat together, talking, watching movies, listening to records, playing their guitars, kissing, fucking, the long silences while she did work for school and he worked on music, the long silences when they weren't talking.

She looks up, hands falling to her chest, folded over her breastbone, covering the swallow pendant. He bought her that, for her birthday. He bought the couch he's standing against, and the Happy Bunny calendar in the hallway, and the blue reed mat in the bathroom, and all of it is pressing against him now, full of what she's done, and how he didn't let himself see it in the silences and the weeks they'd been spending turned away from each other in their comfortable bed. Everything is pressing against him and he can't stand it.

"I'm leaving," he says, and moves back down the hall.

"Patrick," she says, one foot out of the kitchen, behind him, one hand on the wall and one hand hanging at her side. Not reaching out.

"Keep it," he says, gesturing vaguely at the perfect shade of light blue on the walls. "I'll--my records
and stuff, I'll come, but just. Fucking. Just keep it."

"I--okay," she says.

He pauses in tugging his shoes back on and looks up at her. "I gave you everything," he says.

He means the apartment, and the furniture, and the necklace, and his body, and his life, and her eyes well up with fresh tears and he can see she understands: when he says "everything," that is exactly what he means.

"I'm sorry," she whispers as he opens the door, and he only looks back for a moment, does not make any reply but the slam of the door as he goes.

6. look.

He wakes up in the middle of the night. The bus is silent, the road a fine tremble underneath its wheels. The tail end of his dream hangs in his head, a memory: Anna leaning over him a hundred years ago, grass damp through his jacket and his jeans, the dark sky and bright stars behind her, her voice, "I really want to kiss you, is that okay?"

He closes his eyes against the blank grey ceiling of his bunk and misses her like a thousand clichéd similes, the fury and bewilderment and pain muted by a year less six thousand miles.

His curtain rattles and Pete whispers, "Dude, you're so awake. Look at this."

"Fuck off," he whispers back.

"You're awake and your hands are on top of the covers. I'm totally allowed to bug you. Look." Pete grabs his arm and shakes him until he opens his eyes.

"What?"

Pete grins and holds up an open catalogue, pointing to a picture of--"Jesus Christ, Pete, put that away," Patrick hisses, smacking the catalogue down onto his bunk. He points to his left, at Andy and Joe's bunks a mere two feet away.

"Shut up, they're fucking comatose," Pete says.

"I don't care," Patrick says.

Pete rolls his eyes and climbs up into Patrick's bunk. He pulls the curtain closed and turns on the little overhead light, holding the catalogue up so they can gaze upon the glory of the shiny, five-inch silicone dildo.

"It has gold sparkles, Patrick," Pete says, still whispering. Curtains do not equal soundproof.

"It's a dildo," Patrick says.

"With gold sparkles," Pete says. "You could wear it on stage!"

"It's a fucking dildo, Pete," Patrick says. The weight of his dick in his jock-style pouch presses into his pelvis. "They tend to look a little--excited. In your pants. Know what I'm saying?"

Pete moves his head, getting comfortable on his half of Patrick's pillow. His brow furrows. "Oh," he
says, and laughs quietly. "Yeah, I guess. So--"

"So the kids would be traumatized and I would go to prison. So I can't wear it on stage," Patrick says. "So go away and let me sleep."

Pete flips a few pages in the catalogue, looking thoughtful. "So," he says, "if you don't wear a dildo, what the fuck's been in your sweet package all these years?"

Patrick pulls his blanket over his head and says, "Pete, my hands. My hands are under the covers. Go. The fuck. Away."

Pete pokes him in the stomach through the blanket. "Come watch a movie with me."

"Jesus Christ, Pete," Patrick says.

"Patrick, Shawshank Redemption. It's that time of year." Pete plucks at the blanket. His fingers creep and burrow under the edge. Patrick knows they're coming. He grits his teeth.

"Take a fucking Ambien or twelve, okay," he says. He knows Pete knows he doesn't mean the second part. "Andy and I have an interview at ass o'clock in the morning, your highness."

That's when the tickling starts, at his stomach. Patrick squeezes his eyes shut and jerks away. He kicks Pete, but it's no deterrent.

"Fuck off," he says, hoarse, trying not to laugh, trying to catch Pete's hand under the blanket, hoping Pete doesn't try to shove it in his pants. Pete's quick fingers slip away around Patrick's ribs, still tickling.

Pete pulls the blanket off Patrick's face with his other hand. "You can sleep through the movie," he says, "Just sit with me."


Pete's fingers crawl up towards Patrick's chest and encounter a shallow indent, just under his pectoral muscle, one of the scars from his top surgery. The light touch doesn't tickle, exactly. "Oh," Pete says, going still.

Patrick takes the opportunity to grab Pete's hand and thrust it away, out of the blanket, into Pete's stomach.

"I will sleep during the movie," Patrick says, because he's thoroughly awake now anyway. "You can fall asleep on me, but if you can't sleep, you will not do anything humiliating to me while I'm sleeping."

"I want to see," Pete says, reaching back under the blanket, tugging gently at Patrick's t-shirt.

Patrick stares at him for a moment and does not push him out of the bunk. "What? No," he says, automatic.

"Patrick," Pete says.

"No," Patrick says. "Get out and take your dirty magazine with you." He fishes the catalogue out from under his hip and puts it in Pete's hands. "I'll be there in a minute."

Pete doesn't move. He looks over Patrick's head, squinting and obviously thinking.
"What?" Patrick says, wearily.

"At the next hotel," Pete says. "When we're alone and there's a door. A door that locks." Patrick crosses his arms over his chest. He can see in his head the scene Pete has set. He suppresses a shiver, though he's pretty sure Pete doesn't mean it to sound like some kind of illicit assignation. Pete touches his shoulder. "Please. I just want to see."

Patrick rubs his right eye with the heel of his hand and looks at Pete, who looks sincere, earnest, and respectful. Patrick knows Pete is fully capable of faking all these things. Patrick says, "I'll think about it," half hoping Pete will forget he even asked, half something nervous and anticipatory.

Pete smiles, just a little. "Awesome." He pulls the curtain open and swings down out of Patrick's bunk. He leans back in and says, "Patrick, hey. Brooks was here."

"So was Red," Patrick says. "In a minute."

Pete puts the rolled-up catalogue in his mouth and goes away.

Patrick covers his face with his arms and takes a moment to be grateful Pete did forget about what's in his pants.

A curtain across the way rattles. Patrick looks over just as Andy sticks his head out, glaring daggers.

"Dude," Patrick says, and shrugs, not very apologetically.

"I am getting too old for this shit," Andy says, and yanks his curtain closed again.

The shows are so good, and if Pete is putting his hand over Patrick's heart more than usual, the usual being at all, well. There was a time when he didn't kiss Patrick on the neck either. The show changes; it's natural. It's evolution, baby.

"Hey, Handsy McGroperson, what's the news," Joe says to Pete after a show Pete largely spent glued to Patrick's side.

"Fuck you," Pete says, and up-ends a bottle of water over Joe's head.

"There's the celebrated sterling wit," Joe says. He pushes his sodden hair out of his face and looks at Patrick with a serious expression. "Your boyfriend's being a bitch, Stump. I think Marie has some Midol?"

"Fuck you," Patrick says, and dumps the remains of his cold pre-show tea down Joe's shirt.

A week later, they have a hotel for two whole nights. Patrick is unpacking in his room when Pete comes in.

"I've got a video conference thing in half an hour," Patrick says.

"Seriously, how long do you need to take your shirt off?" Pete asks, and locks the door.

Patrick puts down the wrinkled pair of jeans he was folding. "I thought you forgot about that."

Pete grins and sits on the edge of the other queen bed. "Nope."
Patrick sits down too. Their knees almost touch in the narrow space between. "Dude, seriously," Patrick says tiredly.

"I just want to see," Pete says. "I've known you for eight years and I've never seen you with your shirt off, and now I can, so."

"You don't need to see me with my shirt off," Patrick says.

"But I want to," Pete says.

"You can't always get--"

"Shut up," Pete says. He pulls his white t-shirt off over his head and holds it in his hands for a moment before tossing it to the side.

Patrick blinks and says, "How many times have I seen you shirtless and felt totally uncompelled to take my shirt off?"

"I know this," Pete says, and gestures at his torso. "I've had it my whole life. I don't really appreciate it, except for the fact that everything basically does what it's supposed to and it looks--good, whatever." He grimaces and waves his hand. "I didn't have to work for it, know what I'm saying?"

Patrick nods.

Pete nods back and says, "I guess I just don't understand why you'd work as hard as I know you did to get what you've got, and then hide it for the rest of your life."

"I'm not hiding anything," Patrick says. "I just don't need to take my shirt off so everyone on the planet can see what they already know is there, what the fuck--"

"I'm not everyone on the planet, Patrick," Pete says reproachfully. "Am I?"

Oh, for fuck's--Patrick throws his hands up and pulls the zip of his hoodie down with an angry gesture. He throws the hoodie at Pete, who catches it and proceeds to throw it on the floor. Patrick pauses with his hands under the hem of his shirt.

"You know I haven't been with anybody since I broke up with Anna," he says, frowning, eyes on the bedspread just past Pete's right shoulder.

Pete nods impatiently, and then, "Wait. You actually--you haven't had sex in a year?"

Patrick says, "Anyway, basically nobody but my doctor has seen me without a shirt since then. So. If you laugh, I'll kill you."

Pete puts his palm on his forehead. "A year. Dude, I cannot. For real--"

"Do you want me to take my shirt off or not?" Patrick says.

Pete runs his index finger and thumb across his mouth and throws away the key.

Patrick shakes his head. He takes a deep breath and quickly pulls his shirt up and off. He straightens his hat and places the shirt beside his hip and leans forward, hands curled around the edge of the bed, shoulders slightly hunched.

Pete's forehead wrinkles and he rolls his eyes. "I can't see anything, Jesus. Stand up."
Patrick does, without really thinking about it, and Pete stands up too, and reaches halfway across the gap before letting his arm drop. Patrick stays still and waits, not watching Pete's face.

He knows what Pete's seeing: a chest, a man's chest, defined by two quarter-sized, flat nipples, and two long pink scars, one under each pectoral muscle. He looks at it in the mirror almost every morning when he's at home, checking the health of his nipple grafts and the slow fading of his scars from immediate, angry red to lifelong pink. Admiring Dr. Brownstein's work, if he's completely honest with himself.

Patrick reaches up to scratch his nose and Pete's gaze flicks to Patrick's. Pete asks, quietly, like they're whispering in a bunk early in the morning, "Did it hurt?"

Patrick thinks of weeks of swelling and drains and not being able to lift his arms and says, "I was asleep."

Pete gently smacks Patrick's arm. "After. Did it hurt."

Patrick shrugs. "Not--more than I was expecting. I had drugs. And my mom. And Anna."

Pete nods and looks back down. With two fingers, he touches the centre-most end of one of the long scars.

Patrick swallows. Logically, he knows scar tissue is dead to sensation, but the actual scars are thin stripes, and the skin on either side is fully alive and starved for touch.

"It must've hurt a lot," Pete says. He slowly moves his fingers across the scar. Patrick swallows again and blinks a few times, trying not to let his breathing get heavy. "And you wouldn't let me come see you." Pete's mouth tucks up in one corner, pained.

"I'm sorry," Patrick says. He means it. His recovery was long and no fun. His mom and Anna were amazing, because they are, but he knows he stressed them out, and that it was too much for them. He just didn't really want anyone to work on him, for him, harder than he could work for himself. He's just a shitty patient. "I know you would've helped."

Pete nods. He puts his hand over Patrick's heart, his palm heavy and hot. Patrick is vaguely glad that his nipples don't harden anymore. The first two fingers of Pete's other hand move over the other scar, and then his palm curves around Patrick's side, tucked under his arm, where the scar ends halfway across his ribs.

Patrick watches Pete stare at his own hands like he wants something from them and pretends his heart isn't beating quick. He wonders if Pete can feel it.

He says, "You can't know what it's like," and his voice sounds rusty.

Pete nods. "I know."

"No, Pete," Patrick says. Pete looks up. Patrick shakes his head. "Really. You can't."

"You can tell me," Pete says. His fingers twitch, press in on Patrick's skin. "Tell me."

"I can't," Patrick says, his voice hitching involuntarily. He makes himself smile and say, "You're the one with the words."

Pete bites his lip, his forehead scrunches tight. He looks like he wants to cry, or just might. "But I want--"
"But I can't," Patrick says. He quietly sings, "I can't always give you what you want."

"No Stones when I'm having existential angst," Pete says. He drops his hands and backs off, grabbing his shirt from the bed.

Patrick picks his up too and pulls it down over his head, around his hat. Clothed, he feels a little more solid, a little less--existential. "But Mick Jagger, dude," he says. "Ultimate existentialist."

"Roy Orbison," Pete counters, and ducks back into his shirt.

Patrick laughs. "Since when do you listen to Roy Orbison?"

Pete steps close again, puts his hands on Patrick's neck, and leans in, eyes closing. Patrick catches himself leaning too and then his eyes are closed and Pete's mouth is pressed to his, Pete's tongue swiping gently at his lips. Patrick opens a little and Pete tilts his head, a hesitant, pleased noise choked out of him into Patrick's mouth. Patrick breathes in hard through his nose; Pete tastes like Sour Patch Kids and Coke. Patrick is confronted with Pete's teeth on his lower lip at the same moment as his own sudden, aching want.

Pete's hand runs up into Patrick's hair, bumps into the back of his hat, and Patrick gasps, pulls back. Pete's hands tighten and then fall away; his eyes open.

"Dude," Patrick says. He moves to the side, away, to the other side of the bed. He tugs his hat back down. He wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. His hand is shaking.

"Patrick," Pete says.

"No," Patrick says, his chest and stomach tight, feeling hot all over. He looks at the damp stripe on his hand, thinks, nonsensically, magic spit, and wipes it on his jeans. "I don't like guys."

"But," Pete says.

"But I don't like guys," Patrick says, looking up at him. Pete's eyes narrow and Patrick wants to kiss him again and that's just--not going to happen. "And it's kind of funny you don't know that. Like, you should've hit on me years ago if you were going to. Know what I'm saying?"

"Oh totally," Pete says defensively. "I'm a fucking--homotransphobic gender fascist or what the fuck ever."

Patrick waves his hand and shakes his head, because he didn't mean to--. "I'm not trying to have a fight, I'm just--"

"Straight," Pete says.

"Yeah," Patrick says, heart pounding. He is, he is, he is.

Pete crosses his arms and nods once. "Okay, fine."

Patrick sighs and climbs over the bed to retrieve his hoodie from the floor. Pete just stands there, staring at his shoes. Patrick pulls on his hoodie and zips it up and sits cross-legged on the bed. Eventually, he reaches for the jeans he'd been folding when Pete came in. Eventually, his heart rate slows and his face doesn't feel on fire and he stops tasting sugar and sour and his hands stop shaking.

"Animaniacs," Pete says.

"What?" Patrick says, startled.
"Animaniacs. Steven Spielberg presents? I downloaded a bunch of episodes. Want to come watch?"

"Oh," Patrick says. "Yeah, sure." He drops the jeans and gets up. Pete goes to the door and Patrick picks up his laptop case. Pete wrinkles his nose. "For the video conference," Patrick says.

"Dude, you work too fucking much," Pete says as he opens the door, shaking his head. "You're going to end up with a goddamn ulcer."

Following Pete out the door, Patrick looks over his shoulder at his room, at the space between the beds where they were standing; where Pete kissed him. Belatedly, as the door closes behind him, he says, "Somebody has to run this circus you call a record label."

"Hello?" Anna says.

"Hi," Patrick says. "Uh, it's Patrick."

"Oh," Anna says, sounding surprised. "Wow. Hi. Where are you?"

Which is what she always used to ask when he called her from the road. Patrick looks through the bus window at a blur of countryside. "Belgium. I think. Or Ohio."

Anna laughs. "What's up?"

He picks at a stray thread on the cuff of his jeans. "Um." He's not sure why he called her, exactly, except that he doesn't have a therapist anymore and he can't talk to his mom about this, and he can't talk to Pete because Pete's the one who fucking kissed him. "Oh. I got Uma Thurman's autograph."

"Really? That's why you called me from Belgium-or-Ohio on a Thursday afternoon? Because I'm such a huge Uma Thurman fan?" She sounds skeptical. Patrick doesn't blame her.

"Pete kissed me," he says, and smacks himself in the forehead.

A long moment later, Anna says, "Okay. I've seen him kiss you a million times--"

"In private," Patrick says. "In a hotel room. After he groped my chest for like ten minutes."

"Oh."

"With tongue," Patrick adds, a little desperately. The more he articulates what happened, the less sense it makes--the less he knows what to do with it.

"And how did you feel about that?" she asks.

"It was," he says. He squeezes his free hand into a fist, painfully tight. "I don't know."

"Okay," she says calmly. "That's all right. It's okay to be confused, Patrick."

He remembers roleplaying active listening techniques with her when she was training to volunteer for the crisis hotline at her school. "Thank you," he says sarcastically. "I appreciate your youth helpline skills, Anna. So much."

She sighs. "What do you want me to do? You call me with this, after six months? The last time we talked was when I found those old posters in the back of the closet while I was moving, Jesus. I'm trying to help you not freak out, but if that's your plan--"
"I'm not freaking out," he says. "I don't have a plan. Why do I need a plan? A plan for what--"

"Your plan for dealing with having a homoerotic experience," Anna says.

"I didn't have a fucking homoerotic experience," Patrick snaps.

Anna scoffs. "So Pete isn't a guy? You're not a guy? You didn't kiss?"

"He kissed me," Patrick spits. "I didn't--" Except that he did; he kissed back. He closes his eyes and inhales deeply.

"Patrick?" Anna says. "I'm sorry, maybe--"

"I liked it. I kissed him back," he says quietly, slowly. It hurts. "I don't know. I don't know why. I never wanted that before, and--"

"That's not true," she says, but gently, and he curses himself for telling her everything when they were together. "I know you."

"Fucking. Fine. I never wanted to do anything about it," he says. "I don't want to deal with the--it's just easier this way."

"Right," Anna says. "It's so much easier to repress your sexuality."

"It is," he says. "And I'm not even doing that, so--"

"You are so," she insists. "Jesus Christ. You are the most frustrating person on the planet. Be honest with yourself, okay, I know it can be difficult. Tara struggled with herself for years--"

The name is familiar, but Patrick can't quite place it. "Tara?"

Anna exhales noisily. "Yes. My girlfriend. Tara. You've met her."

Tara. Tall and pointy and when Patrick first met her, her name was James and he played drums in a queercore band. She got utterly fucking hot when she started taking hormones. He clenches his jaw and thinks: you can't get much queerer than that. "Can we not fucking talk about your tranny girlfriend, Jesus Christ."

Anna makes a choked, disbelieving noise. "Fuck you, Patrick," she says. "Fuck you and your fucked up shit. I can't talk to you like a counselor, I can't talk to you about my fucking life, what the fuck do you want from me? Why did you even fucking call me?"

Because--he called her because those few times he told her about maybe kind of liking one guy or another, she always said it didn't matter. She always said that if he didn't want to be that--if he didn't want to be queer, he didn't have to be. She always said it was a choice he could make for himself. He just wanted to hear her say it again.

"You used to say it was okay to be straight," he says, like an accusation. "But I guess--"

"It's okay if you are straight," she says, frustrated. "But I think you're gayer than you know, okay, I think you always have been. I think you've been dishonest with yourself for a really long time. Just. Fucking deal with it, it's not that fucking hard."

"I'm not gay, I don't want--" all the shit, he thinks. He just wants to be unremarkable, normal, he just wants people to pass him over, pass him by.
"You made out with your best friend! Who is a man, mostly!" she shouts. "You're sure as hell not straight!"

He just wants to be safe.

"Do you remember," he says, hoarse. "Do you remember--Bride of Pride's last show? I couldn't go, because--"

"You guys were playing that showcase, yeah," she says, and then, "Oh. Oh, Patrick." The phone crackles on her end, pops with international static. He wonders if she's remembering the same things he is: her nervous shakes, her reedy voice, the bruises that could just as easily have been from a beating as from the pit. The bruises that could just as easily have been worse than bruises.

"That's life," she says after a while. "The world is a different place than it was even three years ago, but still. It's life. Life is dangerous. If you want to be happy, for real, for good, you have to live dangerously sometimes."

"But you, you guys, you do it all the time," he says.

She laughs, and it sounds kind of like a cough. "So do you," she says. "You just forget in between airport security and public washrooms and buying pants."

"Yeah," he says. She's probably right. "I guess." He presses the phone against his ear hard, like he's leaning on her shoulder, and he closes his eyes. "I'm sorry," he says.

"You're a brave man, Patrick Stump," she says tiredly. "And you're also a bit of an asshole."

"I'm really sorry," he says.

"Seriously? My tranny girlfriend?" she asks. "You're lucky she's not home, and that I understand how fucking distraught you are."

"Seriously, your wonderful, gorgeous, amazing tranny girlfriend," he says. "At least I didn't say what I was actually thinking?"

"Yeah," she says, and laughs a little, but not happily. "At least that."

It's painful, really, to watch Pete visibly restraining himself, retraining himself away from the extra physical contact he'd been bestowing on Patrick for the last few months. Pete sits on his hands during a radio interview and Patrick catches himself leaning so their shoulders brush when Pete shrugs. Pete says, "So, you know, I asked Patrick--" and looks over and he sort of raises his eyebrows at how close they are and Patrick blinks, like, what? and Pete looks away and doesn't even miss a beat. Patrick agrees with whatever Pete said and shuffles over so that they're actually touching, thinking: fuck two inches, fuck it. Because they would have sat like this before. It doesn't mean anything.

Pete leans into Patrick's shoulder a little bit and says, "It's gonna be big, but it's nothing we can't handle."

Patrick says, "That's what she said," just to hear Pete laugh.

In a dressing room in France or Indiana, Patrick is sitting on a couch in a quiet corner, his iPod on,
trying to get ready for the show. He's not quite progressed to actually warming up yet.

Pete sits beside him, carefully, his hands on his knees. Patrick looks over at him expectantly. People usually leave him alone pre-show, especially Pete. Especially lately.

"I wanted to apologize," Pete says. "For the other day."

"Oh," Patrick says. "You don't have to." Please don't.

Pete shrugs, mouth twisted a little bit, "Whatever, I didn't mean to, like, I didn't mean to be an asshole, I just." He spreads his hands between his knees and Patrick is about to tell him to shut up when he adds, "I just was a huge asshole, and I wanted to apologize, so."

Pete takes a deep breath and Patrick opens his mouth to tell him to shut the fuck up, but Pete says, "So, I'm sorry. It won't happen again," and looks up at Patrick sadly, hopefully.

Patrick smiles tightly and waves his hands, pushing the apology away. "You really don't have to do that."

Pete shakes his head. "But I--but you were right. You weren't wrong, about anything. About why it's--why it was okay for me to, um, when it wasn't before." He shrugs. "I'm an asshole, that's why." He looks down at his hands in his lap, the curve of his neck a study in misery.

Patrick clenches his jaw and gets up and walks away, breathing fast through his nose until he gets to an empty locker room, where he can close the door and wipe his damp palms on his jeans. There's a mirror on the other side of the room, showing him the panicked picture he makes, wide-eyed and twitchy.

Which is, of course, when the door opens behind Patrick, and Pete sticks his head in the room.

"Dude," Patrick sighs, and puts his hand on his forehead.

"Sorry, sorry," Pete says. "We just--we have to make up before the show, or it'll be another thing I've fucked up today, and I totally accidentally gave Andy caffeinated coffee this morning, so."

Patrick cracks a small smile. "You really don't have to apologize."

"Yes, I do," Pete insists. "I seriously do. You're just going about your life, being awesome like you do, and I come along with my fucking hands and my fucking face and act like a fucking skeeze when you share something personal with me, something incredibly--I don't know, incredibly intense, and I ruined the whole thing when I could've been learning something, when I should've been, like, appreciating what you were showing me, so--"

"So shut up," Patrick says. "If I say I don't need an apology, I don't, so fuck you and shut up."

Pete runs his hands through his hair frustratedly, looking like he's on the verge of stamping his feet. "Fuck you, man, you were right; I thought you being who you are would make it easier." He squeezes his eyes shut. "I thought it would make it less gay. And that makes me an asshole. And I'm sorry."

That's actually--Patrick doesn't really know what to say to that. "Well," he says. "Um. Do you still think that?" Which is the important question, as as soon as Patrick knows the answer, they can move on with their lives. If Patrick has to rethink his entire sexual identity because of one kiss, Pete's
goddamn well going to be doing the same fucking thing.

Pete opens his eyes and says fiercely, "Fuck no, I'm not stupid, I'm just--"

"An asshole," Patrick supplies, and smiles when Pete flips him the bird.

"Yeah, whatever, can you let me talk, I've had some serious thoughts happening and I'm just saying--"

"I'm just saying," Patrick says, getting desperate to close the subject, "I was there, and you didn't do anything wrong--you don't need to apologize for what happened. It wasn't your fault. We don't need to talk about it." Pete's eyes are narrowing and his eyebrows are making speculative movements, and Patrick finds himself talking faster, running over and pouring out reasons not to talk about it: "It was my--it wasn't anybody's fault, okay. It just happened. It was just some random shit. So leave it alone."


Patrick swallows. "I--"

"You did," Pete declares. "You totally did."

Shaking his head, ignoring the shaking in his breath, in his hands, Patrick focuses on the door and heads for it, trying to step wide around Pete, trying to escape again, but there's not a lot of room and Pete crowds into his flight path, pushing him against the wall beside the door without touching him.

"It's okay," he says, six inches away, a softer version of the familiar predatory gleam in his eyes; Patrick's never had it quite so particularly directed at himself. "You don't have to say it, Slump."

Patrick leans his head back into the wall, hoping Pete will do something stupid so he can punch him and get the fuck out of here.

"I just, because, I wanted. I have, for ever and ever." Pete leans in closer and Patrick closes his eyes. In a low, hoarse voice, Pete says, "I just want you."

Patrick breathes in deep and breathes out hard, because that wasn't stupid, because if he's going to, he's got to, right now. Pete's not going to wait for the movie-perfect moment and just ask if he can like a normal person so Patrick can have a perfect memory and just say yes and pretend none of this was his idea and that they're both normal people. This is, in fact, as close as they're going to get. He grabs Pete's wrist and reverses their positions, pushes Pete against the door, and kisses him.

Pete makes a muffled, desperate sound, and grasps at Patrick's waist with his free hand. It's nothing like the first time--the other time. Not to say Patrick isn't still terrified, but it's an exhilarated, joyous terror, completely and utterly worth the tachycardia. Pete opens his mouth eagerly and this time he tastes like Grey Goose and Doritos. Dimly, Patrick thinks this is a taste sensation whose time has most definitely come, and then Pete bites his lip--again--and Patrick gives up on thinking--again.

They're fifteen minutes late for stage call; the crowd's impatience is palpable, surging through the walls of the arena.

During the show, Pete keeps grinning into his mike, gripping it with both hands, addressing his canned banter directly to Patrick. Patrick takes every opportunity to walk away from the edge of the stage, so he doesn't feel compelled to make eye contact with Pete, respond to his teasing, or anything
else stupid. He's hopped up and itchy, but not for the show. The show could get itself over with any time, actually, thanks.

In the short break before the encore, Pete eats his fucking orange slices, still goddamn grinning across the room at Patrick, just about enough to make Patrick smack him or--something. Joe enters his line of sight, blocking Pete's lit-up eyes with a very serious expression.

"Are you fighting with Pete?" he asks.

"What? No," Patrick says, and forces an unconvincing laugh.

Joe shrugs. "Cause you guys--I don't know, you guys've had some stuff going on for a while, and, like, if it's starting to affect the band--" he glances over his shoulder, and Patrick spies Andy hovering six feet away, "not' watching their conversation.

Patrick laughs some more, but out of startled amusement. "Dude, no, really, everything's fine."

"Super fine," Pete corrects in a smarmy tone, sliding his arm around Patrick's shoulders. Yeah, he's definitely getting smacked later.

Joe frowns. "Andy thinks--"

"Andy is never right about anything, JTroh," Pete says. "He thought this band would crash and burn in six weeks." Joe's eyes narrow dubiously. "Seriously, dude, never ever listen to Andy Hurley. That's a rule for life."

"We're on!" Dan calls from the stage door. Joe shakes his head at them and goes, shooting speculative glances over his shoulder all the way to the guitar rack.

Pete grips Patrick's shoulders from behind and presses his sweaty cheek to Patrick's neck. "Fucking on," he whispers, and Patrick nods dumbly.

7. let me in.

Another hotel night; Patrick spares a moment between Pete shoving him against the door to close it and shoving Pete down on the bed to be grateful they didn't start with this until they'd got out of the van for good.

Pete whispers, "Oh," and, "Yeah," when Patrick pulls his dick out through the fly of his underwear--when Patrick, at a loss for words or action, smooths his palm down the familiar length of it. They're quiet after that, but for Pete's laboured, awkward-sounding inhalations, drawn at long intervals, like he has to remind himself to breathe, and Patrick's quick, nasal pants, and the squishing suction sounds like thunder in his ears mixing with the blood rushing under his skin. He holds Pete down, unnecessarily, with one hand on his hip, the thumb of that hand propped under Pete's dick, holding it upright and steady; Patrick's other hand wanders, mostly without his direction, between Pete's stomach and the warm skin of his thigh just under the hem of his boxer briefs.

There are intermittent and gratifying spurts of bitter precome, but Pete stays quiet, doesn't touch Patrick at all or move, or anything, and eventually Patrick is working his jaw from side to side to ease the faint ache--not really enjoying the pleasant, warm fullness of Pete's dick in his mouth any more--wondering what he's doing wrong, and then he's just pissed off. He lets Pete's dick fall out of his mouth and looks up. Pete looks down at the same moment, forehead drawn tight, sweat shining faintly in the bend between his shoulder and neck, the ends of his hair stuck to his face and ears.
"What the fuck?" Patrick says. "Am I really that bad at it?"

Pete's eyes go wide and he shakes his head. "No, no," he says. "Seriously--"

"Then," Patrick says.

"I'll show you how not bad you are at it," Pete adds quickly, sliding his hands around Patrick's and tugging, trying to pull him up, flip him over. Patrick frowns and sits back on his heels. "Come on," Pete says, "let me in your pants."

"I--"

"Patrick, I want to give you a blowjob," Pete says. "Don't argue."

The sensation of Anna's strong, narrow fingers inside him, and her hot mouth on him, and her sleepy smirk as she said, "I love blowing you," at the same time he's saying to Pete, "Fuck, no, I fucking told you--" and trying again, harder, to pull away.

Pete won't let go and Patrick falls over with Pete on top of him, Pete's warm, wet dick hard against Patrick's stomach where his t-shirt is rucked up. Pete releases his hands and touches his face, fingers on his mouth. Patrick keeps frowning, but opens his lips and lets Pete touch his teeth, his tongue, feel where his dick was only a few minutes ago. Pete leans down and mouths at Patrick's jaw, the corner of his mouth, against his own fingers.

"I want to suck your dick," Pete says. Patrick shifts restlessly, confused, and Pete's unoccupied hand slides roughly between them, over the fly of Patrick's jeans, over the bulge of his packer. Pete traces the shape of it and Patrick can feel the changes in pressure against his pelvis, his inner thigh. Pete rubs at the head and leans his hips in to Patrick's stomach, like it's a reflex. "Your dick," Pete says. "I want to suck it." His thumb presses the head of Patrick's dick into his skin and Patrick moans around Pete's fingers, feeling the heavy, hot itch in his junk, behind the base of his packer.

"Okay," he says around Pete's fingers, and it sounds more like an affirmative groan. He reaches for his belt and fly and meets Pete's free hand in its search for his dick. They pull him out and Patrick looks down his chest and belly at Pete's hand around the beige-pink silicone--his fingers swallow its floppy four inches.

Pete licks Patrick's neck and cheek. "I'm going to," he says, a promise, a threat, pulling his wet fingers from Patrick's mouth.

"Please," Patrick says. Pete meets his eyes again with an evil, anticipatory smirk.

"This is going to be so much fucking fun, seriously," he whispers, and smacks one last kiss to Patrick's cheek before sliding down between his thighs.

"It's easy to deepthroat when you're dealing with a fucking softpack," Patrick grouses. Pete's been boasting about his prowess for the last twenty-five minutes, and Patrick is frankly tired of it.

"Well, I mean, what've you got at home?" Pete asks, looking up from where his head is cushioned on Patrick's stomach.

Patrick shrugs, instantly uncomfortable. "Uh."

Pete's face lights up with glee. "Spill, Slump."
"A few for play, you know, um." More shrugging, and a desire to put his shirt back on, cover himself up. "Nothing, like--they're all normal-sized and everything."

Pete sighs and closes his eyes. "Can't wait." His hand steals over and he tangles his fingers with Patrick's.

Patrick rolls his eyes, but the blush stays. It's not like--it isn't like he's not looking forward to it too.

8. **are.**

After a half-bottle of an obscure dry red in Pete's backyard, Patrick finds himself saying, "So I'm fourteen and about to start high school and I'm completely fucking terrified, okay--" and Pete is quiet and nodding and leaning over the arm of his chair, eyes bright with alcohol and affection.

"Because," Patrick says, "like, it's a new school and I'm this new person, sort of, and my family is still acting weird, so, I don't know--" he remembers putting on his new school jeans and standing in front of his mom's full-length mirror and knowing it wasn't right. "So I looked it up online and found this, like, this recipe for a dick--" he snorts and giggles, and Pete sits back, laughing too.

"No, seriously," he says, covering his mouth with his hand.

"For fucking serious," Patrick says. "I made one, it's not that hard--" more nasal laughter from both of them--"hair gel and a sandwich baggie and some nylons, whatever, and wore it to school on the first day--" strange looks from his mom and Kevin on the way there; the cool, liquid feeling of the package against his skin--"and I must've sat down too fast in homeroom, or my underwear were too tight, I don't fucking know, man--"

"Oh, dude, no," Pete groans.

"It fucking burst, dude," Patrick says, making *splat* motions with his hands and fingers, and then the noise, just for fun.

"No way," Pete says, eyes wide with horror.

Patrick shakes his head at the kid he was, at the wet, sticky, lime-smelling mess in his pants, at the long walk from homeroom to the bathroom with his jacket held in front of himself. He shakes his head, and he smiles a little, because he hadn't even been smart enough to be scared. "Yes way. Totally."

Things with Pete aren't perfect, which is good. Patrick still wants to hit him sometimes, and still mostly manages not to. They still need to not talk or see each other for days and weeks at a time--maybe even moreso now, since when they do see each other, they, well. They see a lot of each other. Which is--okay. Pete automatically reaches for Patrick's boxers six or seven times out of ten, and while he nearly always catches himself back before Patrick has to push him away, it's annoying. It's annoying, and Patrick hopes it will get better. Not in the "okay for Pete to be in my pants" way, but in the "Pete's okay with not being in my pants" way. The boundary doesn't feel reactionary or panicked or malleable, the way "I don't like guys" was. It feels real, permanent, and Patrick is fine with that. If things change, if that feeling gets soft and wanting, he hopes he's learned enough to actually do something about it.
Three hours before they play a good old hometown show, Dre tugs Patrick out of the dressing room and down to the stage exit, where Anna is standing with Marie and a couple of girls Patrick vaguely recognizes as Fuck City affiliates of some kind.

"Hey," he says, and Marie smiles brighty.

"Hi, Patrick," she says. She takes the girls Patrick doesn't know by their hands and brings them inside, where one of them grabs Dre, and the four of them head past Patrick, back to the dressing room.

"Well," Patrick says to Anna.

She smiles sardonically. "Hey," she says. She's wearing dangly copper earrings--circles in circles in circles, like a wind ornament.

"I didn't know you and Marie still, uh," he gestures behind himself, where Marie went, where he'd like to be going very soon.

"We do still," she says, nodding. She looks around the doorway, hands in the pockets of her leather coat. "This is weird, having to sneak in and hang around the back door."

"Like being sixteen again," he offers and she lifts a shoulder in agreement.

"Yeah, I guess so."

"So," he says.

"So," she says, swallowing. "I just wanted to say hi. I'm going to the show. I thought it might be creepy to be there and not let you know." She laughs uneasily. "Maybe this is actually creepier, I don't know."

"No, no, um," he says.

"Pretty much," she says, laughing some more, but not as awkward.

"I'd invite you in," he blurts. "But. It would be--it'd be weird, you know, and--"

"Pete would kill me," she says, but she's smirking the old "like I give a shit about Pete Wentz" smirk, so that's okay.

"I wouldn't let him," he promises. He wouldn't.

She nods, scuffing her boot along the concrete outside the door, among the squashed cigarette butts and gum smears. "How's things, anyway? How are you? How's Pete?"

"We are, we're," he says, suddenly pained and embarrassed by the fact that he never called her again after his panicked confession. He shrugs. "I--um."

She smiles faintly and nods. "I'm glad," she says. "It's good to see you happy." She reaches out and pats his arm.

He wonders how she can tell he's happy from an intensely uncomfortable five-minute conversation. "Thanks, um. You too." He shakes his head. "I mean, you're happy too?"
"Oh, yeah," she says, and smiles, clean of irony or bitterness or nostalgia. He smiles back; he's missed her smile.

Inside, he catches up with Pete after a successful round of t-shirt cannon golf–he's unsure what constitutes "success" in this game, but it probably has something to do with Dirty's crotch, judging from the ice packs Charlie is shoving in the poor guy's shorts.

"I need a minute," Patrick tells Pete, and Pete nods, grinning and high on social sadism.

They go around the corner, where it's quiet, and Patrick says, "Anna's here," and watches Pete's buzz fade almost instantly. He doesn't reply, just stands there and watches Patrick, a little warily.

Patrick sighs. "Anna's here for the show, and I wanted," he shrugs. "I guess, like, five minutes before we do the encore?"

Pete's face hardens and he shakes his head. "Unless you're playing 'You Cheated on Me and Broke My Heart, so Fuck Off and Die (You're a Deathbitch from Hell),' the answer is no."

"She's not a deathbitch, asshole," Patrick snaps. "She was my--"

"She was your girlfriend," Pete says. "And she cheated on you and broke your heart. She doesn't get tribute solos at shows, okay."

"She was my first kiss," Patrick says, and he doesn't miss Pete's flinch, but he does ignore it. "She was my first date. She was my first--" he shakes his head, unable to find a word to encompass four years of his life--"she was my first everything, Pete, and it's not like she's going to get a chance to fuck me over again, so she gets something." He sets his jaw and crosses his arms firmly; he doesn't know what he'll do if Pete really wants to fight about this.

"Whatever," Pete mutters, turning away, waving his hand dismissively. "Do what you want."

Patrick drops his arms, watching him disappear around the corner. He has to tell Andy and Joe and the stage guys what's going on, and he has to re-memorize some lyrics.

They file off the stage after "16 Candles," and Patrick takes his acoustic from the guitar tech, ignoring Pete's baleful glare.

Joe gives him an understanding smile and a friendly high five as he goes back out.

The stage seems a hundred times bigger when he's on it by himself. He steps up to his mike and says, "This is, uh. This is from me to you." He nods and takes a pick from his stand. "Thank you for everything."

He finds the opening chord and strums, and smiles at the kids staring up curiously from the barrier.

He sings: "She packed my bags last night, pre-flight. Zero hour, nine AM, and I'm gonna be high as a kite by then."

Andy's out with his friends after the show, so Patrick is looking forward to a quiet post-show snack and some solitude to think about what Pete said earlier. He probably should've expected Pete to be
sitting on the couch in the dark back lounge, but he didn't nonetheless.

"Holy shit," he breathes when he turns the light on and Pete looks up, blinking in the sudden brightness.

"Yo," he says flatly.

"Hi," Patrick says. He feels clammy and gross in his sweat-soaked t-shirt, so he goes to his bag in the corner and fishes out a clean-ish shirt. He's trying to think of something to say while he tugs his shirt off, feeling Pete's eyes on him.

"Okay, look," Pete says in a low voice. "I could give a shit about whether or not you're still mad at her. I mean, I think you should be, but whatever. I just. Dude. She wasn't your first everything."

Patrick flinches and nods, comprehending. "She wasn't, no, I'm sorry." He pulls his dry shirt on and goes to sit on the couch beside Pete—within arm's reach, but not touching. "She wasn't my first blowjob," he says, hoping to make Pete smile, at least.

Pete doesn't smile, just cuts a glance over to Patrick and frowns. "She wasn't your first best friend," he says.

"To be fair, neither were you," Patrick corrects, gut gently.

"Whatever," Pete snaps. "It's not just--not all about sex, okay, I thought--I don't want to be your first guy kiss and your first guy fuck and all that bullshit, I want. I just thought." He falls silent and looks down at his hands.

Patrick slides off the couch and kneels in front of Pete. He looks at his hands on his thighs and Pete's hands in his lap and breathes in and out. He says, "You're the first guy I ever, you know, um, loved," which he hadn't even really been ready to think yet, let alone say, but it's the truth, and Pete needs it, so.

Pete exhales and says, "Me too," and Patrick inhales, nodding.

"This," he says, motioning between their chests with his finger, gently tapping the outline of New Jersey on his shirt and the batmond on Pete's hoodie. "This might be the most important thing that's ever happened to me." Pete's mouth quirks. "She could've been, but we fucked it up." Patrick shrugs. "Let's not fuck this up, okay?"

Pete cants forward and smushes his forehead into Patrick's shoulder, and Patrick catches him, one hand on the back of his head, one arm around his back. Patrick squeezes his eyes shut, a seed of hope lodging in his throat.

"Okay," Pete says into Patrick's shirt, and Patrick smiles, relieved.

"Awesome," he says into Pete's hair.

9. document.

When the red and blue lights come on behind him at midnight on a Tuesday, he double-checks his speedometer as he's pulling over, thoroughly confused. He pulls his registration from the glove box and his license from his wallet, pressing his thumb over "MALE" like it's a good luck charm.
The officer comes up to the car and takes his paperwork and goes away. He comes back and taps Patrick's license against the side mirror and says, "Do you know why I pulled you over?"

"No, sir," Patrick says, eyes on his face in the mirror and on the plastic.

"You've got a tail light out," the officer says.

"Oh," Patrick says, and smiles, "thank you, officer, I appreciate--"

"And your license is invalid," the officer adds, and Patrick's heart pounds.

"I--what do you mean?" he says, trying to keep his voice even. "It doesn't expire for--"

"You're a California resident?" the officer asks.

"Yes?" Patrick says, searching his memory for some obscure law about out-of-state sex changes and document revisions.

"Then you gotta be driving with a California license, sir," the officer says.

"Oh, really?" Patrick says. "I--did not know that." Which isn't strictly true, he's been warned about it a few times, but--whatever. He got that piece of plastic with blood, sweat, and tears, and he doesn't want to give it up.

"Really," the officer says. "You've been cited for this infraction before, as I'm sure you know, and there's a warrant out on you, Mr. Stump." He looks down at Patrick reproachfully.

"A--warrant? For?" The officer is already nodding as Patrick squawks, "An arrest warrant?"

The next morning, Kevin texts him:

"i guess it rly does stand 4 moron :)

End.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!