Jonathan Unruh

by wowbright

Summary

Jonathan Unruh is a teenager in a conservative Mennonite community that practices plain dress, simple living, separation from the world, and radical pacifism. In a culture that expects him to get baptized and married to a member of the opposite sex after high school, falling in love with a boy named Seth Groening is not part of the plan.

When Jonathan’s school choir goes to sing at a glee club competition in Lima, Ohio, he starts exploring the small city and its gay (and gay-friendly) community. For the first time, he has friends he can be out to. But he can't quite leave his Mennonite-i-ness behind.

Based on a rough draft also on AO3 that’s described as "A Glee WIP about a gay guy from the Mennonite group that competed against the New Directions at the 2012 Sectionals. In which Lima is some people’s Hell and other people’s Salvation."
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Here is my author's disclaimer to say that the Mennonite community depicted in this story is fictional. Mennonites vary widely in their religious practices. The practices included here are ones that occur in Mennonite and other Anabaptist communities, but that doesn't mean you will find a Mennonite community exactly like this one. While names of characters may sound like those of actual Mennonites, such characters are my own creation, and any resemblance to an actual person, living or dead, is coincidental.
Most Americans can be divided into two camps: those who’ve never heard of Mennonites, and those who lump them in with the Amish as bonnet-wearing, electricity-eschewing, horse-and-
buggy-driving proponents of simple living. And they wouldn’t exactly be wrong. They trace their roots back to the same fifteenth-century Swiss-German religious movement that birthed the Amish and share with them the core values of pacifism, simplicity, and community. But these days most Mennonites don’t see the need for special clothing or cultural practices to mark them as different from the rest of the world. Except for their commitment to pacifism, you’d be hard-pressed to tell the difference between them and your run-of-the-mill Baptists or Evangelicals.

Rosedale, Ohio, is a geographic center for one of these modern Mennonite movements. It’s home to the Conservative Mennonite Conference, a group formed from churches that broke off from the Old Order Amish in the mid-1800s, and Rosedale Bible College, a two-year Mennonite religious school. Here, “conservative” refers to belief more than lifestyle; women who are part of the Conservative Mennonite Conference don’t wear special bonnets and anyone who can afford a car probably has one. These are your ordinary, non-exotic Mennonites, the kind who listen to Christian rock and, in some cases, chain themselves to fences at military bases.

But that’s real life, and real life is boring. Fiction is better, because sometimes you can get at a deeper truth—or at least a more interesting one—by fudging the facts. Glee does this all the time by making Lima sometimes seem like a smaller, more remote, more podunk town than it is in reality, and by sometimes turning it into a thriving metropolis with every imaginable feature from a roller-skating rink to a gay bar to a thriving complex of crack houses.

Glee also transformed Rosedale into a center for the kind of Mennonites who are less common these days: plain-dressing Mennonites, the ones who—in their frumpy dresses and suspendered trousers—look to the untrained eye like Amish. Like the Amish, they tend to live in rural communities and have large families. But focus your eyes and you’ll start to notice the differences: The women’s bonnets may be more translucent or a different color; the married men are clean-shaven instead of wearing the Amish beard; the kids might run around in colorful sneakers that blink when they run, and their clothes incorporate buttons and zippers without apology. Open your eyes wider and you might notice more substantial differences: telephone lines running into the house, a car in the driveway, a truck or combine outside the barn, the glow of electric lights emanating from the kitchen at night.

Walk up to the side of the house and look into that window. You spy a woman in plain dress disassembling a Cuisinart and placing its parts into the top rack of an electric dishwasher before wiping down the motor with a damp sponge, all the while humming along to classical music. You’re hypnotized by the sight of her. She looks a lot like how you imagined Ma from Little House on the Prairie would be, if you ever read those books. But she’s in a clean, modern house with running water and a refrigerator. The walls are Sheetrock—not packed dirt or roughhewn slabs of wood—and instead of being coated in whitewash, they’re painted a bright, cheery yellow.

Either she’s an anachronism, or the kitchen is.

The woman turns off the lights and leave the kitchen, breaking your spell. A breeze picks up, rustling the leaves of the cherry tree overhead. It’s September, and on a cloudless night like tonight, the air turns brisk. You shiver and start walking to ward off the chill.

But you don’t get far. A light flicks on in a second-story window and, like a moth to flame, you’re drawn to it. You stop and look up.

A teenage boy stands inches from the glass as he looks out into the night. He is plain, and not just in dress: his face is unremarkable, his pale skin dull and without a hint of rosiness. His face is too thin, a sign either of under-eating or growing too fast. His hair is mousy brown. His gaze is set toward the barn, but from his expression you know that he doesn’t see it. His focus doesn’t go past
the window; it occurs to you he’s probably looking at the window, and particularly at his own face
in it.

He’s frowning. Why? Is he disappointed in what he sees?

You suddenly feel protective of him. He’s not ugly. He’s just not exceptional. But very few of us
can be, and as a Mennonite that’s what he should want, right? To blend in with all the other
Mennonites, to never stand out in the crowd.

He does stand out, though, even without trying.

Seventeen-year-old Jonathan Unruh wants nothing more than to be like every other Mennonite
man in this fictional Rosedale, Ohio, where the plain-dressing Mennonites outnumber the
mainstream ones by legions. He wants to follow the church: to get baptized after he turns nineteen
but before he turns twenty-five, to marry an obedient Mennonite girl, and to raise another
generation of plain people.

Or, he wants to want those things.

But his heart rebels against him. It keeps drawing his thoughts to Seth Groening, with his wide
shoulders and callused fingertips, his hair the color of a wheatfield in September, his lips that
redden to rose petals when he’s worked too hard or been kissed too much. Jonathan keeps thinking
of the last time he saw Seth—of the regret in Seth’s eyes that seemed to match Jonathan’s own, of
the words they didn’t say, of how hard it was not to nuzzle his nose into Seth’s damp neck when
they hugged. Of how hard it was to let go.

Jonathan didn’t let himself cry then, and he doesn’t let himself cry now.

Watching a person not fall apart can be more painful than watching them crumble. There is no way
to offer comfort to the Stoic. Of course, you couldn’t offer comfort to Jonathan Unruh if you
wanted to. You are, after all, spying on him, peeking in on a stranger’s most intimate loneliness.

You come to a sudden awareness of where you are, and that you don’t belong. You turn again to
go, but as you reach the driveway you drop something you always carry with you—your phone
maybe, or your wallet, or a keychain with too many clanking keys. It hits the asphalt, then skitters
across it. You can’t see where it went. You curse.

Behind you, you hear a window sash scraping against its frame. Fuck. Someone heard you. You
duck behind the car in the driveway so they won’t also see you.

“Seth?” It’s an older boy’s voice, low and raspy, but still soft with youth. “Seth? Is that you?”

Jonathan’s tone is of a whisper, but it’s loud enough to carry to you. You hold your breath in case
your quietness is just as noisy. You count the seconds as they pass. Too many go by. You have to
breathe again. You start counting breaths instead, focusing on each inhalation and exhalation to
make sure they’re silent.

“Seth? Where are you?” His voice cracks on the last word.

You wish Seth would answer.

Instead, a child speaks—boy or girl, you’re not sure, but the voice is coming from inside the house.
“What do you have the window open for, Jonathan? It’s freezing!”

“It’s not freezing,” Jonathan answers. “By April, you’ll be calling this weather warm.”
“It’s not April yet.”

The window closes anyway. You resume your search for the thing you dropped. Now that you’re on the ground, it’s easy to locate it. Your part in this story is complete. You found your lost thing.

But Jonathan’s story is just beginning. He’s nowhere near recovering what he lost. He has a hole in the center of his chest that probably won’t ever be filled again.

There’s no turning back.
Unlike Amish seventeen-year-olds, Jonathan goes to school five days a week. His Mennonite community could have sought a religious exemption from secondary education like the Amish receive, but they don’t think secondary education is worldly in and of itself. It’s the way in which it’s conducted that worries them. The closest public high school has an active Junior ROTC and assigned military recruiters who visit the students there weekly. The school’s mascot is a Spartan soldier. In civics classes, kids are required to write essays about the importance of voting in participatory democracy. The Fellowship of Christian Athletes teaches self-improvement as a way toward God. Sex education is taught in health classes. Sports teams and academic leagues foster the cult of the champion over meekness and humility. Students say the Pledge of Allegiance each morning as if it’s a prayer.

In other words, public education leads children far from God.

Education is not an end to itself. Nor is it a means to independence or self-fulfillment. It should prepare students for honest, productive work; inculcate an understanding of God’s will; and build them up so that they will be ready to dedicate their lives to the community and the church upon becoming adults.

There are about thirty students at Rosedale Mennonite Secondary School and three teachers. The kids study math, English, German, history, and science. In biology, they learn practical things like plant life cycles and diseases—information that’s useful in farming and gardening. They don’t study evolution. Three days a week, they have music lessons; twice a week is phys ed, which usually means a co-ed game of softball. There’s a computer lab, too. Kids whose parents don’t have a computer in their business learn how to do word processing and financial spreadsheets, and how to build a basic website. The computers are rarely connected to the internet, though. It’s not a sin to have a storefront on the web, or a site for your church or school. People need to find you somehow. But it’s best not to wander around among the sites of Gentiles. Too much worldliness, too much temptation.

Two weeks into the school year, Harry Thiesen walks into music class, pulls a folded-up piece of paper from his pocket, and hands it to the teacher, Mr. Shenk. Tall and blond and handsome, with wide shoulders and stubble that grows so fast he looks closer to twenty-eight than his actual age of eighteen, Harry has the hearts of half the girls in the class, and he isn’t even aware of it. Jonathan’s noticed him, too, though today he’s too forlorn to give him a second glance. “You know how we were talking about going out into the community more to perform? Here’s our chance.”

Mr. Shenk unfolds the paper while the other students look on. Class hasn’t started yet; kids are still getting out their hymnals and sheet music and a few are off in the bathrooms. Jonathan’s sitting in his chair, his hymnal open to “Praise God From Whom,” which they usually use as a warm up. He knows what this is about already. All the students do. Harry posted the flyer to his Facebook page yesterday. An open competition for local high school choirs. Harry posted it with the comment, “A great evangelism opportunity!” It made Jonathan feel weird.

One of his suspenders feels like it’s slipping down his shoulder. He tugs it back in place.

“A competition? I don’t know, Harry,” Mr. Shenk says. “That’s not what we’re about.”

“The competition part is kind of beside the point,” Harry says. “Sectionals is open to whatever choir wants to perform, as long as they have enough members. It would give us practice performing for an audience, and a goal to work toward. And we could sing hymns, so it’s a way to
witness to Christ. Besides, we participate in softball tournaments.”

People like Harry. His dad has one of the biggest farms in the county, and the biggest house of any of the Rosedale Mennonites. Harry was the oldest and would probably inherit both by dint of his labor. That doesn’t make him better than anyone else, of course, but it certainly doesn’t make him a poor prospect, either.

Mr. Shenk puts the piece of paper on top of the piano. “I’ll think about it.”

A week later, after talking to the bishop and the parents, Mr. Shenk announces that they’ve got the go-ahead to perform at Sectionals if they want to. Harry Thiesen puts forward his argument about it being a missionary opportunity, that simply by being there in plain dress and performing wholesome music, they would be witnessing for Christ.

It’s one of the stupidest things Jonathan has ever heard. Harry’s always saying stupid things. Clearly, you can’t judge a book by its cover.

Naomi Pfeiffer pipes in. “Besides, it would be fun.”

So was spending time with Seth, Jonathan thinks, and where did that get him?

But Jonathan isn’t going to argue against Harry’s idea. He doesn’t care. He’s exhausted, running on too little sleep, and feels sick to his stomach for the umpteenth day in a row.

Seth got married last weekend. That’s the only thing he can focus on right now—Seth in his new house and his new bed with his new bride.

Jonathan only vaguely remembers Martha Ens from when her family lived in Rosedale, but he’s seen enough photos to make up for everything he’d previously forgotten. She’s pretty enough and soft around the edges, with a cute upturned nose and a bowed mouth. She has nothing like the hard, angular planes of Jonathan’s body. Jonathan spends half his time trying to imagine Seth wrapped up in her and the other half of the time trying not to.

Maybe they haven’t had sex yet, though it wouldn’t matter either way. Divorce would be prohibited in either case.

The class puts going to Sectionals up to a vote. Majority doesn’t rule here. Doing something new requires consensus. Jonathan doesn’t stand in the way.
A few days later, Mr. Shenk comes in with a list of Sectionals show choir rules. It turns out that explicitly religious songs are no longer permitted in competition, after a scandal a few years before in which a show choir performed an all-Jesus setlist in an attempt to gain favor with Christian judges.

“But that’s all we know how to sing,” says Sarah Yoder. She’s a plain, flat-chested girl with bird bones and mousy brown hair under her prayer cap. A playmate and friend of Jonathan’s since they were little, she has a fair but innocuous face that does nothing to tempt him. When they were little, strangers at the Relief Sales would see her dragging Jonathan from auction item to auction item by the hand and comment that they were the cutest pair of twins. They look less alike now than they used to, but he still thinks of her as a bonus sister.

“Not all,” chimes in Laura Dyck, an irritatingly chipper smile on her face. She’s obnoxiously pretty, thanks to her mother being a convert and bringing a whole slew of non Swiss-German genes into the local pool. Brown skin, creaseless eyelids, a small—but not upturned—nose, and two gorgeous rows of straight, square teeth. On the other hand, she’ll never completely fit in. “What about campfire songs? And folk songs?”

Short and squat Naomi Pfeiffer jumps up in her seat like someone just goosed her. The ribbons of her prayer cap go flying about her square shoulders. “I love ‘She’ll Be Coming Round the Mountain!’ And it’s got great lessons in it about patience and non-resistance, because you don’t know when she’ll arrive, just that she will at some point, and you look forward to it anyway.”

Sarah scoffs. “How are we supposed to sing that in four-part harmony? None of us know how to write vocal arrangements.”
They all look at each other, stymied.

“Well, maybe we could play instruments,” says Harry.

Jonathan would gasp, if he were the kind to wear his emotions on his sleeve. Instead, he lets Sarah do it for him. “We’re Mennonites.” She practically hisses the words.

“But it’s not—” Harry looks at Mr. Shenk for back up. “Playing instruments isn’t a sin. We just don’t do it in church. Right Mr. Shenk?”

Sarah jumps in before Mr. Shenk gets a chance. “We don’t use instruments in church because they distract from our focus on God. If they would do that in church, wouldn’t they do that even more outside of church?”

Mr. Shenk clears his throat and hold his hand up over the sitting students. “In our community, we leave it up to each individual’s discretion as to whether to allow musical instruments in the home. You know that, Sarah. King David played the harp.”

Sarah crosses her arms over her chest. “We don’t play them in my home.”

“And that’s fine. Your parents have discerned what’s best for your family’s home life. And I haven’t taught musical instruments because it’s really not in our school budget, and I don’t have the necessary background. But right now, we’re talking about what’s best for Sectionals. How can we most effectively witness to our audience there? And how can we best use the talents from within our group to do that?” Mr. Shenk turns away from Sarah to skin over the rest of the class. “How many of you have played a musical instrument?”

Jonathan watches in silent shock as more than a third of the students raise their hands. Even the hand of Edna Groening—Seth’s sister—goes up. Seth used to grumble about his family having a lack of commitment to plainness, but Jonathan had always thought Seth was referring to little things, like Edna’s collection of offensively fluorescent shoelaces and his parents’ subscription to National Geographic. How did Jonathan not know Edna played an instrument?

For the next few minutes, they discuss the pros and cons of playing instruments as part of their performance. It quickly becomes clear that Sarah and Jonathan are the only ones with any real objections—because Mr. Shenk says, “Is there anyone who thinks it’s a bad idea to play instruments?” and they’re the only two to raise their hands.

They’re asked to state their reasons. Sarah repeats what she said earlier. Jonathan says, “It could be the slippery slope into sin.”

Harry looks at him. “Do you think it’s a sin for anyone to play an instrument?”

Jonathan cringes. Of course he doesn’t. If it was, then his mother would be propping up sin whenever she listened to classical music. But it’s wrong for Mennonites to play instruments. They’re supposed to focus on work and God, and things like musical instruments take away time from that.

Of course, so can smartphones, and Jonathan’s not about to give up his until he absolutely has to. But that’s different, isn’t it? If he didn’t have a smartphone, if he didn’t have access to the world out there, to the fact that there are other people like him and that they’re not all debauched sinners, if he didn’t have sites like Gay Christian 101 and Gay Christian Net to tell him there’s a place in God’s kingdom for him … he’s not sure he would still be alive. God wants people to live long enough to serve him, first and foremost.
Do musical instruments save lives? Jonathan can’t see how they would.

But they can draw people closer to God. He sees it in his mother’s eyes whenever she listens to Bach’s Jesu Joy of Man’s Desiring for pipe organ, or sings along with Handel’s fully orchestrated Messiah.

“I guess not.”

“Then let those of us who feel called to play, play.” Harry says. “And if you feel it’s a sin for you, that it would distract you from the church or your obligations to your parents, then don’t.”

Jonathan looks over to Sarah. She give him a small shrug. “Fine,” she says. “But we need to do this conscientiously. We shouldn’t put the instruments ahead of the voices God gave us.”

Jonathan withdraws his objection, too.

Three of the students show up at school the next day with instruments. Kevin Phelps brings his dad’s banjo; Naomi Pfeiffer, an autoharp that’s been gathering dust in her family’s linen closet; and Alfred Stoltzfus, an electric guitar of all things.

The Rosedale Mennonites don’t have prohibitions against electricity, but still. And electric guitar? Maybe that’s not the most prudent use of resources.

“Where did you get that?” Jonathan says.

Alfred looks down at his guitar as if he’s surprised to see it as Jonathan is. Alfred often has that way about him, like his mind is off somewhere else and everything around him is startling.

Alfred’s terrible at keeping track of what’s going on around him except when he’s playing softball, and then he’s got this singular, laser-like focus, as if he and the ball are the only two things in the world. With his mop of brown hair, he looks and acts a lot like those California surfers Jonathan’s watched on YouTube, who are similarly obtuse except when they’re on the board. It’s cute sometimes, and at other times it’s terrifying. Jonathan went hunting once with Alfred, and the kid accidentally shot a hole right through the bottom of their deer blind. Alfred’s dad took his rifle away after that, and Rosedale instantly became a safer place to live.

“This? Picked it up at the flea market at the upstate Relief Sale last year. It’s pretty quiet unless it’s plugged into an amp, so my parents are okay with it. I had an acoustic one before that, but they said it was too noisy. So it’s, like, worldly and not worldly at the same time, bro.” Alfred talks a little like those California surfer dudes sometimes, too—or at least not like a Rosedale Mennonite. He used to go to public school, so he’s a little weird.

“Huh,” says Jonathan. “Or, so worldly that it’s suddenly not?”

Alfred laughs and jostles Jonathan with his elbow. “Yeah. Full circle, man.”

Jonathan doesn’t have a crush on Alfred, not really, but the touch still makes him feel warm. Since Seth has left, the only person who ever really touches him is his little sister Marilou, who’s always looking for hugs and an excuse to sit on someone’s lap. But she’s a tiny thing. Jonathan misses the feel of someone his same size leaning against him or holding him. Last week, he found himself hugging one of the cows as he went on his rounds.
On Monday, Edna Groening shows up with a double bass that’s taller than her. It seems impossible to Jonathan he couldn’t have known about something so large in the Groening house. She catches him staring. “We rented it from a music store in Columbus.”

“But … how do you know how to play it?”

“Cousins,” she says, as if that’s a perfectly adequate answer.

“Is that it for the instruments?” Mr. Shenk says, looking around. “We should probably have percussion. Does anyone—?”

Harry’s hand shoots up. “I play spoons. I mean, I know it’s not really an instrument, but maybe that’s good because it’s a witness to plainness?”

If Jonathan hadn’t been raised Mennonite, he would have rolled his eyes. He definitely has the urge to kick the leg of Harry’s chair. Harry’s the one who first suggested instruments, and now he’s getting all high and mighty about it. He’s trying to have his cake and eat it.

You can’t sit on both sides of the fence in this world. You’re a sheep or a goat; you live one way or another. That’s what Jesus said.

It’s what Seth said, too.
The instruments aren’t terrible. Edna is shockingly good on the bass, and Alfred nods his head up and down like one of those bobblehead dolls when he plays the guitar. It’s sort of adorable. If Jonathan weren’t so heartbroken, he might even get a full-fledged crush on the kid. Kevin Phelps grins like a Muppet when he plays the banjo, and even though Naomi’s autoharp is out of tune for the first week, she looks so happy when she’s playing it, it’s hard to resent her.

But even with their little orchestra of five, the music lacks the fullness of their hymns.

“We need some solos,” says Harry. “You know, how choirs do.”

Mr. Shenk doesn’t think it’s a bad idea. But when he asks for volunteers, no one steps forward. So they draw lots instead, the way the men in the congregation do when it’s time to pick a new pastor or deacon. The boy and girl with the shortest slip of paper gets the solo. Laura Dyck and Jacob Friesen win. God’s hand must be in there somewhere, because Laura’s got a really good voice and is the only one who has much experience with singing stuff that’s not hymns. Her mom used to be a peace-love hippie and has taught her kids half of the twelve hundred songs in her worn copy of Rise Up Singing: The Group Singing Songbook. And Jacob will do fine, too. At least Jonathan doesn’t have to do it.

“I can’t believe we’re having soloists,” Sarah Yoder grumbles when she climbs into Jonathan’s truck that afternoon to head home. She gets a ride from him every Wednesday and Friday, since her house in on the way to the gas station where he works. “I knew as soon as Harry first posted that thing on Facebook about Sectionals, it was just the beginning of a slippery slope. Next thing you know, he’ll say we need dancing.”
Seth used to talk about the slippery slope too, after the spring turned to summer and everything good and new became too much for him to bear. “Look how far we’ve already fallen,” he’d say. “And half the time, I don’t even care. I want to fall farther.”

Jonathan turns the key in the ignition. “We shouldn’t speak ill of Harry. He’s not the only one who wanted to do this.”

“You didn’t.”

“No. You’re right. I didn’t. But we didn’t object, which means we agreed. Besides, Harry’s not the only one who wanted to compete in Sectionals.” He glances over at Sarah. Her arms are folded across her chest. She’s scowling at him.

“Why are you defending him? You don’t even like him.”

Jonathan’s hands tense on the steering wheel. He hates that she can see right into him. “Are you on your period?”

“Jonathan!” she squeals, though she shouldn’t be that surprised. It’s not the first time he’s said it. It’s one of his most surefire ways to derail a conversation. “I hope you’re not planning to talk to your wife that way.”

Your wife. She says it like it’s inevitable. Maybe she doesn’t see into him that well after all. His grip relaxes. “My wife won’t ever be on her period. She’ll be pregnant all the time, the way a woman should be.”

“Ugh. Remind me not to marry you.” She looks out the passenger side window, which is usually the signal she uses to indicate she’s too disgusted to look at him and the conversation is over. Except that she’s terrible at keeping silent for long. Only five seconds pass before she speaks again. “Is that really what you want?”

“What?” He’s not sure if she’s talking about the choir or his future wife. Heck, she could even be referring back to some conversation they had two weeks ago. Sarah’s got a long memory.

“A wife who’s unhappy and more kids than you can afford to feed.”

He looks out at the road ahead of them. The corn and hay have all been mowed, and he can see all the way to the horizon. “No.” He thinks of saying more—maybe I was just trying to get your goat—but if he says that, he’ll want to say the next thing that’s on his mind (I don’t even want to get married), and then the next thing (Because I’m in love with someone who already is), and he won’t shut up until Sarah knows far more about him than anyone has a right to.

“I didn’t think so,” Sarah says quietly. She’s silent for a long while—unusual for her. They pass the entire length of the Boehm’s pumpkin field before she speaks again. “I’m thinking about going to school.”

“Um, you’re already in school.”

“Not—” She lets out a flustered sigh. “College, I mean. After I graduate.”

Sarah’s smart. Too smart for her own good, Jonathan’s always thought. And maybe this proves it. The Rules & Discipline don’t forbid college, but they do talk about the detrimental influences that both church-related and secular institutions can have on faith and discipleship, and requires any member considering higher education to seek counsel from the elders and brethren of the church.
Besides, higher education isn’t needed for the kind of work people do around here. They learn the basics in school and helping their parents out, and the rest through apprenticeships and on the job. So going to college isn’t a step toward success. More often, it’s a sign of failure to teach your children the right way to live.

“Do your parents know?” Jonathan says.

“Yes.” Sarah looks down into her lap. “My mom thinks it’s a good idea. She thinks I’d go crazy getting married straight after high school.”

“You wouldn’t have to get married yet. You could stay with your parents, help out in your mom’s business.”

“Yeah, I know. But I don’t want to sew for the rest of my life.”

“And your dad?”

“He’s open to it, if we can afford it. And if I study something useful.”

“Like what?”

“I was thinking of nursing. Or midwifery.”

Jonathan chuckles. “But you don’t think women should be pregnant all the time.” He realizes he’s being a complete asshole almost as soon as the words come out of his mouth, but it’s too late.

“Don’t be stupid. There’s a difference between having four children and forty.”

“I guess. Ten’s probably the perfect number for running a farm.”


Maybe not, but someone’s got to see to the practical side of things. His older brother Alvin always said that’s what men are for. God made men to count things. God made women to daydream.

“You have to admit it makes a difference, though. A farm without kids wouldn’t even be able to run. Farmers need children.”

“Fine, Jonathan. Let me speak your language. Farmers need families to run things. Things run better if the kids are healthy and the moms are alive.”

“Yeah, but there’s a clinic over in Irwin.”

“None of them are Mennonites. They don’t really get what our lives are like.”

That was true enough. Besides, it wasn’t like it was a sin to become a nurse. It was just … unusual. But so was Jonathan, as much as he didn’t like to think of himself that way. “So how are you going to do it? Go to school, I mean?”

“I guess I’ll have to start applying for scholarships. And if I can bring more business in for my mom, they’ll split the difference with me. So I’ll do some sewing and I’ll work on her website. That thing is from the dark ages, and not in the ‘quaint Amish’ way that her market demographic goes for. It might be a while before I save up enough. But I can do one class at a time at the community college if I need to.”

They reached the Yoders’ driveway. Jonathan started to pull in, but Sarah told him to stop. “It’s a
nice day. I’ll walk down to the house.”

Jonathan can’t resist getting one more ribbing in. “Good. Keep yourself strong for your childbearing years.”

“Ha ha,” he says sarcastically as she slams the door shut much louder than necessary. He deserves it, though.

Jonathan gives her a little wave and a beep as he turns back out on the road. She looks over and sticks her tongue out at him.

She’s one of his favorite people in the world.

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That night when he gets home from work, most of the family is already in bed. Hope, one of the twins, is in the kitchen with a glass of sweetened warm milk.

“Trouble sleeping?” Jonathan says when he sees her at the table, her hands curled around her mug. The room smells of nutmeg, cinnamon, and sorghum molasses.

“Math test tomorrow. I’m nervous about it.” She stands up to fetch his leftovers from the fridge. The plate is piled high with meatloaf, squash, greens, two rolls, and a slice of pie. She starts removing the cellophane, but he takes the plate from her. She always overheats his food.

“I’ll do it. You enjoy your milk and stop worrying.” He removes the rest of the cellophane from the plate. “It’s not like you’re future’s riding on it.”

Hope lets out a frustrated sigh. “I know. But this is my last chance in life to study geometry. I want to get it right.”

Jonathan thinks about the conversation he had with Sarah earlier. *I’m thinking about going to college.* If Hope went on to college, this wouldn’t be her last chance. But he doesn’t say so. It’s late, and he doesn’t need to open a new can of worms. “You’ll do fine, Hope. And it’s not your last chance. There’s always the internet.” Jonathan slides his plate into the microwave and sets it to cook for two minutes. He likes his food tepid.

She purses her lips. “There’s not *always* the internet.”

“Of course there is. You can still use the internet after you’re baptized, if it’s for something useful and doesn’t draw your attention away from God.” Jonathan’s dad has a computer for recordkeeping, and while he mostly uses it offline, he’ll dial in once a day to check his emails and market reports.

Hope doesn’t say anything, but from the look on her face, she’s clearly not satisfied with the answer. “Speaking of no internet ...” She goes over to the sideboard, where the mail is sitting. She picks up two envelopes and brings them over to Jonathan. “We got a letter from Alvin today. And there’s one from Seth for you.”

Inside, Jonathan’s heart thumps so hard it feels like it’s getting ready to switch places with his stomach. Outside, he keeps his composure, turning to Hope and nodding his head. “Could you put them on the table for me? I’ll read them later.”

“Sure,” she says. She sits back down with the letters and her milk. “I can tell you what Alvin’s said, unless you want to save it.” Alvin’s their older brother. He left Rosedale for an Amish community
in Indiana. He wanted a simpler life, one reined in by fewer choices and more rules. He was like Seth in that way, though for different reasons.

“Tell me.” Jonathan will still read the letter, but this will give him something to pay attention to other than his nerves. It’s not as difficult to talk about Alvin as it used to be. He’s been kinder in his more recent letters. He no longer tries to convert them. He’s even invited them to come out and visit, though since he doesn’t have his own house yet, it makes things complicated.

The microwave beeps. Jonathan brings his plate over to the table and grabs a fork and knife from the caddy that doubles as a centerpiece. Hope bows her head even though she’s already halfway through her snack. Jonathan bows his, as well, and mumbles a quick prayer.

“Amen,” says Hope, and looks up. “Just the normal stuff. He’s still living with the Hershbergers and helping out on their farm.” Alvin’s mentioned the Hershbergers before, of course—an older couple with only two sons still at home, so they have plenty of room and work for a convert like him. “He says his Pennsylvania Dutch is getting better, and that he finally remembers most of his verses now better in German than in English. He specifically thanked Mom and Dad for making sure his education included German. I thought that was a nice gesture. You know how hard this has been for them.”

Jonathan nods, but says nothing around his mouthful of meatloaf and squash. Hard was an understatement. Alvin had been rebellious as a teenager, though not in the usual sense. After a couple of weeks in which he tried everything from buying zipper-fly jeans to going to a Buckeyes game to smoking cigarettes, he went the opposite direction. He asked his mother to replace the zipper in his winter coat with snaps and hooks. He traded in his gray hiking boots with the showy yellow webbing for plain black ones. He stopped driving to work or school, instead getting around by pedaling a one-speed bicycle he’d found at the county dump and painted black. In the evenings, he read by candlelight, which drove their parents crazy. “You’re going to burn down the house one of these days,” Mom would say. But he never did.

But that all would have been easy, if it hadn’t been for the constant talk of how worldly Rosedale had become, how the Mennonites here had made one accommodation after another until they were virtually indistinguishable from their heathen neighbors, how speaking English at home and in church had made it too easy for children to leave the community, how Rosedale should bring the practice of shunning back so that those who strayed too far from the fold would feel the consequences of their sins and, perhaps, return.

Hope drains her mug of milk, then sets it down decisively. “And he mentioned a girl.”

That gets Jonathan’s attention. “Already?”

“Nothing official. But he’s given her a ride home from hymn singing twice.”

“Isn’t that like being engaged for the Amish?”

The corner of Hope’s mouth curls. She has a lovely, lopsided smile. “Not that serious. Maybe like going steady? I was surprised though. He’s not even baptized yet.”

“Did he say how that was going?”

“No. But I looked it up on the internet, and a convert usually has to live with the Amish for a couple years before they can get baptized. Of course, they’re not usually already coming from Plain communities. Maybe with him being Mennonite, it would take less time.”
“I doubt it. They probably look down on Plain people who drive cars even more than they look down on the average Joe.” Jonathan scoops a forkful of peas and squash into his mouth and chews thoughtfully. “Two years? You think that girl will wait that long to marry him? Wouldn’t she be looking to get married as soon as she could?”

Hope shrugs. “If she’s in love with him, she will. It’s worth waiting for the right man, since you’re going to spend the rest of your life with him.”

Jonathan glances at the envelope from Seth. Silly, imprudent, infuriating Seth. He’d been in a rush, and telling him to wait for the right man … well, it would have done no good. “I suppose,” Jonathan says.

“And if she’s not, I’m sure there are plenty of nice Amish girls around Shipshewana.” Hope looks down into her empty mug. “I should go back to bed. Unless you need anything?”

“No, thank you.”

When he hears her bedroom door close upstairs, Jonathan pushes aside his plate and reaches for Seth’s envelope. He tears it open along the flap, imagining Seth’s hands on the paper, his tongue against the glue. Are Jonathan’s fingers pressing against the same spot where Seth’s lips once were?

It’s pathetic, but the thought makes Jonathan shiver.

There’s only one piece of paper inside the envelope—a small, narrow piece the perfect size for making grocery lists. Jonathan’s heart sinks. He wants to know everything, even the pieces that hurt. He wants to know what the sky looks like when Seth steps outside each morning; if the air is as cold and unforgiving as Jonathan imagines it; if Martha snores and whether her cooking makes Seth feel at home. Jonathan wants Seth to tell him what it feels like to sleep next to her. Does her weight settle differently in Seth’s arms? Are her hands callused like Jonathan’s, or unforgivably soft? When he’s inside her, does it actually feel like they’re one person? Or is it only love that can join two people? And if so, why wasn’t Jonathan’s love enough?

But Seth never was a man of many words. Most of what Jonathan knew of him, he’d learned by reading between the lines.

_Dear Jonathan,_

_There’s a pond not too far from where we live. Had a chance to sit by it today. Thought of our creek. A red-winged blackbird made a fuss about me being there, but I held my ground. It’s late in the season, and he didn’t have the drive they do in the spring. He eventually forgot about me. Not like that guy last spring who decided our tree was his and would dive bomb us to no end._

_I don’t suppose I should miss that, but I do._

_Martha is a good wife. I will settle in here. Pray for me. I always do for you._

_Your in Christ,_

_Seth_

Jonathan can barely make out the final words. His eyes are blurry with tears. His head throbs. He’s back on the cash of the creek, lying in the matted-down weeds, Seth right next to him, smelling sweetly of spring and work-hewn sweat, his hat tossed to the side and the sun combing through his hair. The smile on Seth’s face is one that only breaks out when the two of them are alone.
He never saw Seth smile at Martha that way.

Jonathan didn’t go to the wedding. Not many people from Rosedale did. It was in Wisconsin, at Martha’s family’s church, with the congregation the Ens decided to move to when they decided Rosedale was too liberal for them. And it was right in the middle of harvest season. It was difficult to get away.

But Jonathan went to the engagement party the day before Seth left for Wisconsin. Martha was there, by Seth’s side. They held hands as they went from table to table to greet the guests. Jonathan could barely swallow his zwieback—not the dry melba toasts you buy in the grocery store, but buttery yeast rolls that Jonathan can usually shovel into his gullet by the plateful. But that day, his mouth was dry and his throat smaller than the eye of a needle. He got up when the happy couple moved toward his picnic table and found Seth’s mother in the kitchen. He asked her if there was anything he could help with.

“Don’t be silly,” Mrs. Groening said, filling another basket with zwieback fresh from the oven. “This is women’s work. Besides, the important thing today isn’t the food, it’s the fellowship. You know how much Seth values yours.”

Jonathan felt like a pebble had lodged in his throat. “Thank you, Mrs. Groening.”
Twice in the previous week, Jonathan had woken to his cell phone vibrating under his pillow and a message: *Meet me outside?*

And both times, despite knowing better, Jonathan had snuck out into darkness to find Seth behind the dairy barn, trembling.

“I can’t do this,” Seth said when Jonathan put his arms around him that last night. At first, Jonathan thought Seth meant the hug. He drew his arms away. But Seth pressed right back into him, his head on Jonathan’s shoulder.

“Then don’t.” Jonathan pressed his nose into Seth’s hair. It smelled like shampoo and leaf fires, and Jonathan wanted to kiss it. But he didn’t. He just stroked it the way he stroked his little sister Marilou’s hair when she woke up from a nightmare. Seth was three years older than him, but here behind the dairy farm, he seemed almost as small as Marilou.

“I’m a member of the church now.”

“That doesn’t mean you have to get married yet, or move away.”

Seth had looked up then, his eyes filled with tears. They had looked like quicksilver in the moonlight. “But it does. Because if I don’t—”

A clatter of metal against wood jolted Jonathan out of the memory. Edna, Seth’s younger sister, had just dropped one of the baking sheets to the floor, zwieback and all. “Oh, heck!”


“Just a little burn.” Edna held out her finger. “I let the hot pad slip.”

“Get that under water,” Mrs. Groening clucked, then turned to Jonathan, who hadn’t moved from his spot in the kitchen doorway. “I guess you could help clean up this mess if you don’t mind.”

“Of course, Mrs. Groening.” Jonathan felt suddenly self-conscious. He should have leapt to Edna’s aid at the first sign of trouble, shouldn’t he? He would have if Seth had been in the same situation.

He always had, even if it meant getting burned himself.
Don't be silly. This is women's work.
Mr. Shenk breaks his ankle two days before Sectionals by making a misstep in his brother’s grain silo. He has to stay in the hospital overnight to get the bones pinned and is supposed to keep it raised above his heart as much as he can over the next few days. Sarah grumbles privately to Jonathan that it’s a sign from God. To the choir, she says, “Obviously we can’t compete now.”

The other choir members see no logic in her statement. When adversity strikes, the thing to do is to keep trudging along. It would be most un-Mennonite of them to drop everything over something like this.

Anyway, Harry Thiesen is eighteen and has a commercial driver’s license. He can drive the school van to Lima.

So he does, with all twelve of them piled in and Edna’s upright bass shoved behind the back seat. They sing warm-ups on the way, mostly the hymns that Jonathan wishes they could perform at Sectionals.

They’re up after a group called the Dalton Warblers. Jonathan watches from backstage while Naomi, Alfred, Edna and Kevin tune their instruments off in a room somewhere. Sarah squeezes next to him in the wings, her upper arm brushing against his. It’s warm and grounding. He’s glad she’s there, because without that bit of solidity he thinks he might vomit from nervousness.

And hormones.

Because the Warblers are all boys and all gorgeous, strong enough to do cartwheels and backflips and zip across the stage as fast as a belted kingfisher diving in for its prey, all while singing. And they look as sharp as that kingfisher, the streaks of red and white on their chests contrasting with the blue and gray covering the rest of their bodies.

The song they’re singing is ridiculous, an odd cross between pop and rap, with lyrics that vaguely sexual lyrics and a dance that’s less subtle than a wild tom turkey’s mating display.

But Seth had less subtlety than a wild turkey sometimes, too, and he was … sizzling.

Who knows what their bodies are actually like under those clothes, but in their blazers and striped ties and carefully creased pants, they look wide-shouldered and slim-hipped with thick, muscular thighs. Jonathan has the urge to grab onto one of those boys by the necktie and reel him in like a fish.

Sarah gasps. “They’re …”

Amazing, Jonathan wants to say. Hot.
“They’re singing a cappella.” It’s almost a growl.

Are they? Jonathan leans forward, like that will help him to hear better. Suddenly realizes that the accompaniment that he’d heard as synthesizer and guitar are actually finely tuned human voices, hitting notes with the sharp clarity of a hammer on a string. “Oh my gosh. They’re good.”

Sarah grabs Jonathan’s arm and digs her fingers in, nails first. “We’re playing instruments and the secular choir is singing a cappella.”

“Oh,” Jonathan says.

Sarah looks down at where she’s grabbed Jonathan, lets go as fast as if she’d touched a hot poker. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean—”

“It’s okay.”

“It’s just that—” Sarah looks up at him. Oh crap. Her eyes are brimming with tears. “All this compromise, and we could have—”

He grabs her by the elbow and drags her deeper backstage, out of sight of the enormously talented and sexually appealing toms. He remembers seeing a box of Kleenex back here somewhere. They might need it. “Take a deep breath, Sarah. It’s not worth crying over.”

She pushes him away. “Of course it’s worth crying over!” She whisper-yells it at him to avoid being heard above the singing on stage, but it’s still too loud.

“Sarah,” he whispers sternly.
Which turns out to be both the perfectly right and the perfectly wrong thing to say. Because she shuts up, but only because she’s crying too hard to speak.

“Sarah,” he whispers again, but gently this time. He’s not sure how she ends up crumpled in his arms, her face planted against his chest, the tears soaking all the way to his skin. “Sarah.” He rubs her back. She doesn’t move.

He wishes they weren’t the only people back here, that some of the girls had followed them from the wings. They would know how to get her to stop crying. Jonathan’s never been good at helping anyone that way but Seth and Marilou. “Sarah, we’re going on stage in a few minutes. Take a deep breath for me, would you?”

She nods into his chest. Steps back with her eyes closed. Inhales. Follows him without protest when he guides her out into the hallway.

“You should probably go wash your face,” he says. There’s a girls’ room right across from where they’re standing. He points to it.

“I know,” she says, her breath stuttering. “But couldn’t you at least say something comforting to me first?”

“Like what?”

“Like, ‘You’re right. They’re doing a cappella. We’re not. It sucks.’”

He shrugs. “It kind of goes without saying that I agree with you on that, doesn’t it?”

“It would be nice to hear it.”

He doesn’t get what difference it would make, but he also doesn’t want Sarah to start crying again. “It kind of sucks.”

“Thanks. You’re a great friend.” She turns and opens the door to the bathroom. He wonders if she’s being sarcastic or sincere.

He sinks to the floor and blows on tears that stain the front of his shirt to dry them while he waits for Sarah to do whatever girls do in the bathroom. He can hear the Warblers still singing strong, though the tune is lost through all the layers of cinderblock and wood. The lyrics from earlier go through his head. Can you blow my whistle, baby? … You just put your lips together and you come real close … My whistle ready to blow.

His cheeks flush red. Those lyrics aren’t vaguely sexual. They’re—

The bathroom door swings open. Sarah’s still a little pink, but nothing that anyone will notice from out in the audience. Actually, she’ll probably look better than the rest of them except Laura Dyck, since she has a little color in her face.

“What?” Sarah says, eying him suspiciously.

“What ‘what’?”

“You’ve got a guilty look about you, Jonathan Isaac Unruh.”

He dips his head. Sarah knows him too well. “You don’t want to know.”

“Yes I do.”
He looks up, tries to meet her eyes. Focuses on her nose, instead. “I wouldn’t worry about being more worldly than the a cappella boys choir.”

She arches a brow. Looks like she’s considering crying again. “No?”

He shakes his head. “Did you listen to the lyrics?”

“I know I should’ve, but—” She sighs. “Too angry, I guess.”

Jonathan takes a deep breath. Looks at the floor. “Blowjobs, Sarah Jane. They were singing about blowjobs.”

Sarah’s laugh is like a donkey’s braying. It fills the corridor. Jonathan can’t help but laugh, too.

Sarah puts on her show face for the performance. So does Jonathan. And the audience seems to like it. They clap along, and no one boos them for not dancing. Nor do any stage lights fall on them to punish them for their sinful ways.

It’s over almost as soon as it starts. Time always moves too fast when you least want it to. Hugging Seth for the last time was like that, too. The people out in the theater keep clapping and hooting as they file backstage. It shouldn’t feel good to get their approval, but it does. Jonathan feels as light as if he just drank three cups of coffee. He feels as happy as he did last summer, lying next to Seth in the grass.

“Good job, everyone!” says Harry, who’s the de facto teacher now. Even that praise feels good, despite the person it’s coming from.

They find seats in the theater and settle down for the next group, called the New Directions. Jonathan has to keep his eyes closed for half of it. The girls start out in a humiliating position on all fours, thrusting their butts into the air. “Awesome!” Alfred Stoltzfus mutters next to him, but all Jonathan can think about is whether their mothers are watching this. They’re all skinny—even skinnier than Jonathan, and that’s saying something—and bare-shouldered, too, except for one black girl in more modest cap sleeves he notices when he’s brave enough to open his eyes again. Good for her, Jonathan thinks, and she immediately becomes his favorite.

Even so, her knees are showing, and it’s embarrassing to see that. At least the boys and girls don’t touch much. He keeps his focus on the boys, especially this one tall boy at the front with skin the same color as Laura Dycks, only delicious-looking, like warm milk sweetened with sorghum molasses. The boy dances the way that Mennonites aren’t supposed to want to dance, free of self-consciousness and inhibition. It makes Jonathan want to dance, too.

The song ends and the stage lights dim. Just before they go completely dark, Jonathan hears a loud bang on stage and the members of the New Directions swirl around—it’s no longer a choreographed dance, but chaos. Squinting, he sees two boys lift one of the skinny New Directions girls off the floor. She must have fallen. He sees them carrying her off as the curtains close.

A few minutes later, a woman in a tracksuit steps out in front of the curtains. “No one will be shocked to hear that a member of New Directions collapsed under the strain of that lackluster performance.” A murmur breaks through the audience, but the woman seems unfazed. “And as tempting as it would be to root for those quaint little Mennonite underdogs, you have to admit that Mennonites who don’t even bother to sing in harmony aren’t worth the name. So, ladies and gentlemen, I present this trophy—Becky, where’s the trophy?” A girl half the presenter’s height
appears through the curtain, wrestling with a trophy taller than herself. “I present this year’s Western Ohio Show Choir first-place trophy to the Dalton Academy Warblers!”

The audience roars. The boys in navy-blue blazers rush the stage. And Jonathan can’t be jealous of their success—watching them hug and kiss each other, he wants to be them more than anything else. He wants to feel what it’s like to move about in a blazer that makes his shoulders look strong and his waist trim instead of wispy. He wants to wear that flamboyant bit of color around his neck. He wants inside that throng of male bodies. He wants a boy’s lips against his cheek, even if it means only friendship.

He wants to be loved again.

*

The Rosedale Mennonites drive by Scandals on their way out of Lima, but Jonathan Unruh is the only one to notice it. The rest of the kids in the van are politely bickering about why they lost Sectionals.

Losing shouldn’t have come as such a huge shock—this is their first competition, after all—except that it is. After all the sacrifices they’ve made; after all the arguments about whether to stick to their traditional a cappella church singing or try something more modern, if not exactly sinful; after months learning to play those stringed instruments and developing calluses as thick as nickels on their fingertips—they should have done better.

Harry Thiesen is in the driver’s seat, both literally and metaphorically. Even though he convinced the choir to sing secular Appalachian folk songs accompanied by instruments, now he’s talking about the whole thing like he was pressured into it. “We should have stuck with four-part harmonies,” he says. “Musical instruments are worldly.”

Jonathan is in the front passenger’s seat. He turns to look at Harry, but only for a fraction of a second. He’s a gorgeous chiaroscuro in the blue light from the overhead street lamps filtering through the windshield; the shadows make the outline of his nose and jaw stronger, and the hairs of his five o’clock shadow longer.

Jonathan wonders what they would feel like against his chin and cheeks. His heart clenches. It makes Jonathan feel superficial and a little filthy, like his longings are driven by lust and nothing else. Because Harry’s kind of a dick. Who else would sweet-talk the group into playing musical instruments, but now imply they were sinners for doing so?

“I’ve been thinking,” Sarah pipes in from the van’s second row. Jonathan turns to look at her. She’s safer than Harry. One of her bobby pins has fallen out and set a mousy brown tendril loose against the nape of her neck; she valiantly tries to wrangle it back under her prayer cap as she turns to look at Laura Dyck, their soloist. “Laura, you have a beautiful voice, but all the other groups do solos, too, and what makes us different is that we know how to sing as a group, and make something beautiful from the whole, without drawing attention to any one person.” It’s clear what Sarah means: Laura’s vanity destroyed us.

But Laura merely smiles and says, “You’re right, Sarah,” because passive-aggressive humility is always the best way to disprove such allegations.

Alfred Stoltzfus says they should have sung in German because the judges seemed to be impressed by that one group singing in Korean; and then Edna Groening says they should stop bickering and pray for the girl who collapsed and send her a get-well gift or maybe even visit her in the hospital; but then they start bickering about what the get-well gift should be and how best to present the
Gospel in deed not word …

Jonathan stops listening. They’re waiting at a traffic light, and he looks to the right side of the road, through the sidewalk poplars to a miniscule parking lot and a brick building with a bright pink neon sign over its doorway: Scandals, it says in a swooping cursive.

Two guys, holding hands, step out of the door. They’re definitely guys. He can tell that despite the way their winter coats—one a dark peacoat, the other a fluffy parka—obscure their bodies. It’s in their posture: the fact that they are both men, and the fact that they’re attracted to each other. Jonathan can’t help but think of Seth, how sometimes the world would stop spinning for a second when he looked at Jonathan; how Jonathan’s hand would itch to touch Seth everywhere they went, and he’d have to shove it in his pocket to keep it from betraying him that way.

One of the men in front of Scandals is slightly taller than the other, and when they turn to look at each other their faces are close, so close, noses not more than two inches apart.

Jonathan forgets to breathe. He’s seen men kiss before, but only on YouTube. He can’t tear his eyes away.

The van jolts forward. Scandals and the imminent kiss disappear from sight. But it’s still there in his mind, latched in deep, bigger and more real than the cacophony of polite bickering behind him in the van. He can feel that kiss all the way down to his toes. He suddenly remembers what Seth used to smell like, a curious mix of hay and sunshine and sweat, as clearly as if Seth were sitting next to him now.

A wide hand falls on Jonathan’s thigh, just above the knee. His heart almost leaps out of his throat.

“What do you think, Jonathan? Your mom could make those raspberry bars again. They’re amazing.” Harry squeezes Jonathan gently as he speaks. His hand is so large, wrapping halfway around Jonathan’s leg without even trying. Jonathan can only imagine what it would feel like around his— No. He can’t let his thoughts go there. At least not right now, in a van full of Mennonites, and not with Harry’s hand close enough to Jonathan’s crotch that he’ll feel the shift in the fabric if Jonathan gets hard.

He can’t give Harry that kind of power over him.

Jonathan coughs. He makes it a big one, twitching his muscles to go along with each hack. Harry’s hand slips from his thigh and back onto the wheel.

“You okay, Jonathan?” Sarah chirps from behind them. “I’ve got more water back here.”

“I’m fine,” Jonathan says, letting the cough slow. His throat tickles from hacking so hard. It takes a while to get it under control. “What was that about my mom’s raspberry bars, anyway? I drifted off.”

“We’re just brainstorming things we can bring to that girl from McKinley who fainted during Sectionals,” Harry says.

“Nothing is as good as homemade.” Edna Groening bounces in her seat. “Besides, she’s so skinny. She could really use it.”

Sarah glares at her. “Way to judge someone on her appearance, Edna.”

“Which one was it again?” says Naomi Pfeiffer. “They all looked so much alike.”
“The girl with long brown hair,” says Laura Dyck. “The white one.”

“Oh. But she was kind of skinny,” says Naomi.

Gears move in a rusty corner of Jonathan’s brain, and a few things click together. His uncle has a piece of furniture to deliver in Lima, and the girl from McKinley must live in Lima, and the place where those two men were just about to kiss is in Lima, too.

“Drop it off at my house and I’ll deliver everything to her on Saturday,” he says.

Of course, the next thing that happens is that everyone starts volunteering to make the trip to Lima with Jonathan because they’re Mennonites and they always want to do everything in a group because they take the “community” in “community of Christ” very, very seriously.

But Jonathan says he’ll probably have to take the pick-up and there’s only one passenger seat in it, and that will be taken up by the food, obviously, and anyway the idea was to give her some get-well gifts, not to overwhelm her with a large group of pushy Mennonites.

"Wait," says Alfred Stoltzfus. "Do you have a crush on her? Is that why you don’t want any of us to come with you?"

Lisianne Pfeiffer lets out a low hoot. “Look at Jonathan, going on a Rumspringa with an English girl!” She’s teasing, of course. *Rumspringa* is the Pennsylvania Dutch word for adolescence, a time when some Amish kids go a little wilder than they ought. But the Rosedale Mennonites aren’t Amish, and though a few generations ago many Mennonites spoke Pennsylvania Dutch in church and at home, none of the Rosedale Mennonites’ current generation do except when they’re being dramatic.

Jonathan rolls his eyes. “I could never be into that McKinley girl. If God’s willing, I’d like to have at least seven children someday, and it’s obvious her fragile little bird bones couldn’t handle even one.”

Sarah’s jaw drops open. Once she regains her powers of speech, she says, “Jonathan, don’t talk about girls that way. She’s not one of the pigs in your barn.”

Jonathan smirks. “Clearly. If she was one of the pigs in my barn, she’d be much better fed.” He knows he’s being an asshole, but he also knows it’s true. Besides, he figures being a jerk is a pretty good way to keep any of the Rosedale girls from developing crushes on him. And it’s always fun to get a rise out of Sarah.

Sarah pretends he’s invisible for the rest of the ride home. She and Edna get on their cellphones and log into Facebook. They look up the New Directions Facebook page and start sending friend requests to all the members so they can ask what foods the girl—Marley, her name turns out to be—likes best, and so they can find out where Jonathan should deliver it all on Saturday.

Jonathan stays silent during the rest of the bickering and plans. Because he is going to come back to Lima, and he is going to get into Scandals because obviously it is *that* kind of bar, and he is going to find people who are like him, even if they’re not like him at all.
Jonathan can’t sleep when he gets home. In the bunk above him, his younger brother Mark snores.

He keeps thinking about those two men outside of the gay bar—Scandals, he reminds himself. They become clearer to him every time he closes his eyes, closer to him than the ten or so yards that separated him from them when he was inside the van. Jonathan can see the fine lines around their eyes when they smile, and a certain softness in their pupils when they look at each other, and the way their fingers curl tighter—with pleasure and excitement and something like praise—when they look at each other’s faces.

He remembers the feel of Seth’s callused palm against his the afternoon Jonathan’s older brother, Alvin, left. They were sitting under an ash tree by the creek, their hats on the ground, Jonathan’s head feeling like it was about to explode from all the tears he couldn’t cry. They’d been building up in his eyes and his brain ever since he’d woken up that morning—through breakfast and the drive to the Greyhound station, through watching the bus disappear down the road, through the torturous drive back in the empty truck, through chores and lunch and the whole walk to his private meeting place with Seth—but they were trapped in there, some kind of overbuilt dam holding them back.

“It’ll be okay,” Seth said, stroking his thumb over the back of Jonathan’s hand. “Let me be your brother for you.”

They were the kindest words Jonathan had ever heard, and they also broke his heart.

The damn fissured. The tears started pouring out—a slow trickle at first, and then a torrent. Seth pulled Jonathan close, both hands around Jonathan’s waist, Jonathan’s face pressing into his shoulder, Jonathan buried in Seth’s scent. The shoulder of Seth’s blue workshirt went dark with
tears, so wet he might as well have fallen in the creek.

“I love you, Jonathan.” Seth whispered the words into Jonathan’s scalp, but they only made Jonathan cry harder because of what they couldn’t mean.

He shook his head against Seth’s shoulder and gripped his waist like a lifeline.

“But I do.” Seth kissed Jonathan’s forehead the way his parents used to when he was younger and shorter than both of them.

The kiss startled Jonathan. He looked up, blinked. Seth’s face was a gauzy blur. Jonathan kept blinking until the gauze melted away. Seth’s left cheek was doing that twitch it did when he got nervous. His eyes held every shade of amber, bright like sunshine and deep like earth.

“Seth?”

Seth lifted his fingers to Jonathan’s face. He wiped away a few tears with his calloused fingertips. More fell out onto Jonathan’s cheek.

“I love you,” Seth said again. His chest trembled under the weight of the words. His face moved so close that Jonathan could no longer focus on it.

Jonathan felt the kiss before he understood what it was. A soft pressure on his cheek, as light and clean as a freshly washed blanket. But Seth’s lips were rougher than cotton, chapped from the late winter winds and early spring sun. His touch was more delicate, too—restrained and careful. They lingered, but didn’t push. They were like strands of spider silk dangling in the breeze.

Jonathan heaved a sigh of sharp relief and clenched his fist in Seth’s shirt, pulling the fabric loose from Seth’s waistband. He turned his face—or did Seth turn his own? Their noses brushed. Seth’s breath was warm and peanuty. “I love you,” Seth said again, and this time his mouth didn’t close on the last word, but stayed slightly open as it met Jonathan’s for the first time.

The inner part of Seth’s lips hadn’t been exposed to the sun. There, he was smooth and plush, damp like the earth after a good rainfall. His tongue was as sweet as spring water.

Jonathan’s nose was still full of tears. He couldn’t breathe through it, but he couldn’t stop kissing Seth either. He grew lightheaded and dizzy, finally tilting his head to that he could breathe through his mouth while Seth held on to his lower lip. Seth’s hand moved from Jonathan’s waist to the back of his neck, cradling Jonathan like a newly hatched chick.

Jonathan didn’t need to be handled so delicately. He pulled Seth as close as he could get him, felt Seth’s trembling heartbeat as they tumbled to the ground—Jonathan on his back, Seth half on top of him, every place they touched hotter the sun.

“Don’t bump your head,” Seth said, slipping his hand between the curve of Jonathan’s skull and the cool earth. The words brought their lips apart, and Seth’s eyes far enough away that Jonathan could focus on them again. Seth looked back at him, surprised and startled, and for a moment Jonathan thought he was going to leap up and run away.

Instead, Seth smiled, something like relief washing over his face. “I never thought …”

Jonathan stroked his thumb over Seth’s jaw, made rough by the barest hint of stubble. “Always.”

Seth’s eyes grew bright, like he was holding back tears. “Yes,” he sniffled. “Always.”
It was a covenant sealed with a kiss.

Last week, when Jonathan saw the sandhill cranes high in the sky overhead, the tips of their wings touching the clouds and their strange calls filling his head like something ancient and everlasting, he set down the buckets he was bringing back to the barn and forgot the detritus of his days. He remembered that he was creature just like them, with a body made from dust and destined to return to the earth, and he felt something—it must have been God’s love—swell in his heart. He wanted to fly up there with them, to praise the sky and the air and everything that God had created, and he lost himself in that longing until they were gone, far past the treeline, their odd call drowned by a tractor motor spitting to life.

That’s the feeling he had that day with Seth, and it comes back into his heart now when he remembers the two men in front of Scandals—and if it was God’s love when he watched the sandhill cranes, could those things be God’s love too?
Chapter 4

Jonathan’s parents gave him permission to sleep in today because of Sectionals last night, but he automatically wakes up before 5 a.m. anyway. He keeps his eyes closed as Mark climbs out of the bunk and shuffles back and forth between the closet and dresser. He can hear the other kids stirring in their rooms, and little Marilou is singing to herself as she walks down the stairs to join their mother in the kitchen. You’re not supposed to have a favorite among your family members, but Marilou is Jonathan’s. If he were out of bed he would hold her hand as they went down the stairs together, and when he dropped her off at the kitchen before heading out to the barn, he would give her a goodbye kiss and, at her insistence, one to the little ragdoll she carries with her everywhere.

But not today. Jonathan pretends to be asleep until Mark clomps down the stairs and shuts the front door behind him. Jonathan never gets this room to himself, and it’s a sweet, indulgent pleasure just to lie here and do nothing and answer to no one.

He thinks about touching himself—not because he’s got any particular fantasy in mind, but because his morning wood is an embarrassing inconvenience and it would be nice to turn it into something pleasurable. But he’s not dumb. The bedroom door doesn’t lock, and with seven people in the house there’s always the risk of someone suddenly barging in. That thought alone is enough to make his hard-on shrink.

Besides, even when he starts out not thinking of anything, his mind too often turns to Seth halfway through. There are few things more depressing than getting off to thoughts of a married man.

Jonathan grabs his phone. Maybe he’ll read the daily Bible passage on GayChristian.net or play Mahjong until he’s tired enough to fall back asleep. But as soon as he turns it on, he sees he has a notification from Facebook, so he goes there.

He was up late last night, trying to distract himself from memories of Seth by going to the New Directions Facebook page and friending its members. He tried not to linger too long on the page of Jake Puckerman, which turned out to be the name of the gorgeous dancer. He would have friended the Warblers, too, but they didn’t have a Facebook page, and the Dalton Academy page was set to Private.

One of the kids from New Directions has already accepted his friend request, and Jonathan’s heart does a little leap. He’s never going to be able to get back to sleep now, because it’s Jake Puckerman. He’s not only accepted Jonathan’s friend request, but he’s sent a message, too.

So you’re the third friend request I’ve gotten from one of the Mennonites tonight. I thought the first one was a joke because you guys don’t use computers and aren’t allowed to take pictures of yourselves, and then the second one came, and then there’s this one from you, so then I googled Mennonites and found out they were different from Amish and I felt kind of ignorant. People make all kinds of assumptions about me, too. I like our President, but I get tired of people calling me Barack Obama. Which I guess is my way of saying I feel stupid for stereotyping.

Tell me more about your non-Amish life.

Jonathan smiles so big his cheeks hurt, and he feels himself blushing, even though he really knows he can’t hope that Jake is … like him. It’s still nice to have someone gorgeous be nice to you, and to be able to gaze at all those pictures of them in their Facebook photo album, and Jonathan doesn’t frown when he sees that Jake is “in a relationship with Marley Rose,” because of course Jake
would have a girlfriend, because Jake is stunning, and maybe since Jake’s girlfriend is the girl who fainted …

Jonathan bites his bottom lip and pictures Jake answering the door tomorrow when Jonathan arrives at Marley’s house with the food. Jake inviting him in, and the three of them sitting at the kitchen table and playing Rook and the color returning to Marley’s cheeks as she eats plate after plate of shoofly pie and pumpkin bread and apple slump. And after they’re done, Jake would offer to show Jonathan around Lima, and Jonathan wouldn’t go to Scandals at all, because he’d be with Jake, and maybe they’d go to the batting cages or to a basketball game if the school had one, or maybe they’d just sit on the river and talk about things they don’t talk about with anyone else.

And eventually Jake would break up with Marley, or Marley would break up with Jake, and he and Jonathan would spend even more time together. And one day, Jake would look over and the look in his eyes would be different than any that Jonathan would ever have seen before, even when Jake had been looking at Marley.

And he’d know in that moment that Jake loved him more than anyone else in the world.

Jonathan bites his bottom lip again to keep himself from getting too carried away. He got too carried away with Seth Groening, and then Seth got married and moved away.

It’s hard, though. In these first moments of falling, Jonathan always feels so alive.

Jonathan isn’t sure what to say in his answer to Jake. He summarizes his “non-Amish life” with

*I am the second of six children. I’m not technically a Mennonite because I’m not baptized yet. We don’t get baptized and join the church until we’re adults. That’s one of the things we have in common with the Amish. The other main things we have in common with the Amish are pacifism, not swearing oaths, weird clothes, and sometimes Pennsylvania Dutch. But otherwise we’re different. My family doesn’t own a horse and buggy and that’s not how our group got to Sectionals, either. I’m not sure where the emcee got that idea. OK, well, I guess I know where he got that idea. He looked at our clothes and thought “Amish.” Anyway, my family has a van, a farm pick-up, and a couple of project cars that we can barely keep running. I have a gray pickup that’s in decent shape. Got it on auction and my friend Seth helped me fix it up.

We have a farm, so I spend most of my time helping out when I’m not in school or at my job. I like playing Bejeweled and Angry Birds on my phone though. Who doesn’t, right?

Anyway, I hope your girlfriend is feeling better. We have some get well gifts for her and I could drop them off tomorrow, do you think that would be okay?

Jonathan knows he’s not going to get an answer soon—city kids don’t wake up at 5 a.m. ever, much less on long weekends (and anyway he cheats and checks to see if Jake is online, and he’s not)—so Jonathan switches out of Facebook and clicks on his Bible app, which is bookmarked to today’s reading, to get his mind off of Jake’s beautiful brown eyes—which he didn’t know for sure were brown when they left the competition last night, but now that he’s spent an inordinate amount of time gazing at Jake’s Facebook photos, he totally *does* know.

The Bible app fails to distract Jonathan from his pining. It’s the first two chapters of Song of Solomon today, which is basically erotica. It starts with “Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth—for your love is more delightful than wine,” and Jonathan hasn’t technically even met Jake yet and he’s already thinking about what the guys lips would feel like. He’s a city boy, so probably
smooth instead of chapped like Seth’s. Jonathan wonders if he’d like that, or if it would be too much like kissing a girl.

Not that he knows what it’s like to kiss a girl.

Given that Jonathan’s dick is again at half-mast, he thinks he probably would like smooth lips as long as they were on a handsome face.

Getting a hard-on while reading the Bible is the worst.

And to continue the torture, the book goes on with “Pleasing is the fragrance of your perfumes; your name is like perfume poured out,” and Jonathan remembers how Seth used to smell—like skin and grass and Dial and, sometimes, when they’d been outside a long time, something headier and sharp but not any less pleasing. Jonathan wonders if that’s what Jake smells like, or if guys who live in the city smell different up close—more perfumed and less like earth and sweat.

Jonathan desperately needs to find someone who smells as good as Seth, so perfect that it blots the memory of Seth from his brain.

Jonathan blinks his eyes and tries to clear his mind, but Song of Solomon won’t let him; its words keep barraging him with more and more desire, with images of “verdant beds” and a beloved like a cluster of henna blossoms (and Jonathan has never seen henna blossoms, but he’s seen witchhazel bloom in winter when everything else seems dead, and that’s how his heart felt in those fleeting days with Seth, and how it’s going to feel again when he falls in love with someone who can love him the way he needs).

Jonathan gives up. He closes his Bible app and locks his phone and gets out of bed. From the sounds below in the kitchen, breakfast is only partway through. He can go downstairs and get some bacon while it’s still a little warm and drink half a pot of coffee and draw smiley faces with syrup on his pancakes to amuse Marilou.

It’s a hassle, sometimes, to have a large family. When you want to be alone with your thoughts, you hardly ever can.

But when you don’t want to be alone with your thoughts, there’s always someone around to rescue you.
Later that afternoon, when his mother and sisters are making supper and his brother Mark is outside raking leaves for the compost pile, Jonathan goes up to his room to change for his shift at the gas station. Once he’s in his polo shirt with the gas station logo and a clean pair of trousers, he listens to make sure that no one’s come up the stairs, then pulls out a locked cash box from under the bed.

It’s a bunch of mementos his older brother, Alvin, left behind when he abandoned them for that Amish community in Indiana. The night before he caught the bus to Indiana, Alvin threw away his driver’s license, his battery-operated radio, and (for reasons that Jonathan still can’t fathom) the set of Rook cards that he used to carry around constantly in his front pocket. Jonathan fished them all out of the trashcan as soon as Alvin left and put them in this cash box. He’d already used it to hide Alvin’s childhood photos, afraid that Alvin would throw those away too if he’d found them.

Jonathan looks a lot like his older brother. Alvin is skinny as a rail, with dark eyebrows and large white teeth and high cheekbones that would make the models on the magazine rack at Jonathan’s work jealous. It’s not a look that Jonathan finds appealing, but that makes sense since it’s practically like looking at his own face.

That spring when things were still easy between him and Seth, Jonathan told him how once, Alvin had hid in the top bunk to scare him, and when Jonathan climbed up, Alvin jumped out from under the covers with a *boo*!

“I didn’t realize it was him at first,” Jonathan said. “I thought I was looking in a mirror.”

“But how? You don’t look anything like your brother.”
“Um. I look *exactly* like him.”

“Let me see.” Seth rolled over and bent his elbow to prop his head up and looked down at Jonathan’s face. They were by the creek again, lying in the grass. Every time they tried to sit or stand, a territorial red-winged blackbird dove at them from the tree above. Fine with them. They liked it better down here, anyway.

Jonathan held his breath while Seth studied him. Not on purpose. It was just an instinctive reaction to time standing still. That’s how it felt every time Seth looked at him this way.

Seth traced a finger over Jonathan’s cheekbone and down his jaw. His eyes followed the line, his pupils dilating and contracting as his focus shifted from one point to another. Jonathan felt like he was the only thing worth looking at in the world. “No. I’ve known Alvin for twenty years and you for seventeen, and I’d never confuse the two of you. Yours is the face I fell for.”

Jonathan’s mouth twitched into a smile. “Only my face?”

Seth didn’t laugh. His eyes went still. “No. Not only your face.”

Jonathan didn’t kiss Seth right away. He kept looking at him, letting the tension between them grow more taut. Jonathan was half-hard already and growing harder by the second, and it didn’t feel shameful to him at all. It was swelling right along with his heart.

Seth made a little groan when their lips touched. Jonathan pulled him closer, felt the air moving in and out of Seth’s chest, felt Seth’s heartbeat hammering against his own. They kissed until the sun slanted under the tree canopy. Jonathan reluctantly looked at the clock on his phone. “I should get back. Time to milk the cows.”

Jonathan’s cock ached. Seth pulled him closer for one last kiss, nudging his own erection against Jonathan’s hip for the briefest second, making Jonathan’s heart stutter. What a wonderful feeling that was, this terrible, ecstatic *wanting*, and knowing that he was wanted the same way. “Jonathan,” Seth whispered, his voice low and raspy the way it got at times like these, “you are definitely, positively nothing like your brother.”

Jonathan blinks at the memory, vivid and unwanted. He looks at the license and then at his own reflection in the sleeping screen of his smartphone.

Seth was full of shit. Jonathan and Alvin are practically twins.

Only difference is that Alvin’s twenty-two now, and his driver’s license doesn’t expire for another three years. Jonathan sticks it in his wallet.
The gas station is right off the highway and so big it’s got its own mini-grocery store inside. Jonathan’s in charge of restocking the coolers and the self-serve bakery displays, making sure the soda fountain doesn’t run dry, refilling the coffee beans into the grinder. It’s mind-numbing work, tedious and repetitive without the distraction of being either outdoors or surrounded by animals.

Sometimes he has to ring up customers when it gets really busy, which should be a relief from the tedium, but can be its own kind of torture. Every week, there’s something special that the cashiers are supposed to try to entice the customers into buying. The hard sell isn’t technically against his religion, but it feels dishonest to Jonathan to try to get people to buy things they weren’t thinking of getting in the first place. He usually skips the spiel or, if he’s working with someone other than Carlene, says it robotically so he won’t get into trouble.

Today, though, he’s working with Carlene, so all he has to do is ring up the goods, take the money, and engage in small talk if the customer starts it. This is the other awful part about cashiering. He was raised with a disdain for idle talk, which means he’s terrible at schmoozing with strangers. Especially when they bring up football or, worse, politics.

“You looking forward to the game tonight?” the current customer says.

“I don’t follow football.” Jonathan’s never learned how to answer with anything but the truth.

“Who doesn’t follow football?”

“Me.”

“Aren’t you the wiseacre?”
“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean it that way.” It’s true. Jonathan rarely means to be a smartass. He just doesn’t want to get into the whole sociology of it all. If he answered We don’t have a TV or It’s violent that would just lead to more questions, and then he’d have to tell them he’s a Mennonite, and then their eyes would bug out and they’d say A Mennonite in a gas station? But you’re not even supposed to drive!

The flood of customers slows to a trickle. Jonathan goes back to stocking.

“We’ve got a special treat this week—two regular-size M&Ms for a dollar,” Jonathan overhears Carlene say for the hundredth time today while he tops up the dwindling supply of bananas by the cash register. “You interested?” She sounds chipper and excited, like no one’s ever offered M&Ms for a dollar before.

“No thanks,” says the customer.

“Alrighty then!” She swipes the customer’s card and makes small talk about the weather that’s very similar to the small talk she’s been making all day, and yet sounds fascinated by the whole thing. Jonathan doesn’t know how she does it.

The customer leaves the shop. Carlene groans and slumps against the counter. “Oh my god, I’m so exhausted. Nevaeh had night terrors again last night.” Nevaeh is Carlene’s five-year-old daughter, and Carlene is a single mom on top of working thirty hours a week at the gas station, another thirty at WalMart, and going to school part-time to get her degree. She lives with her mom in the apartment she grew up in, working opposite shifts to make the childcare work. Jonathan thought she never slept already as it was.

“Here, I’ll get you more coffee.” He grabs her mug from behind the counter and goes to the bank of coffee dispensers. “You want hazelnut or vanilla today?”

“Hazelnut’ll be perfect. Thanks, hun.”

He screws off the lid before pouring two creams and a packet of non-sugar sweetener into the bottom of the mug. He has her order pretty much memorized by now.

“You’re good people, you know that?” Carlene pushes herself off the counter and stands straight when he delivers the coffee to her.

“It’s just the way I was raised.” Carlene’s family were Mennonites a couple generations back. Jonathan often feels sorry for her that she no longer has that. But sometimes he’s jealous of her, too.

“I don’t just mean the coffee.”

That piques Jonathan’s curiosity, but he doesn’t ask. It’s vain to seek out compliments. Besides, five cars are lined up at the pumps outside, and Jonathan can see on Carlene’s screen that one of them has just elected to pay cash. He wants to scoot. No one ever pays cash except for drug dealers and Mennonites, and around here the latter is more likely. He peeks out at the pump to see if he can recognize the car. A blue hood is sticking out the front that looks an awful lot like the Thiessen’s sedan. And then a blond head rises over the pump that Jonathan immediately recognizes as belonging to Harry Thiessen.

Crud.

Carlene catches Jonathan looking and laughs. “Friend or enemy?”
“Mennonites don’t have enemies.” He turns to head back to the stockroom. He can’t deal with Harry today. It’s too confusing. The constant, magnetic pull he feels toward someone he doesn’t even really like. He never felt drawn toward Harry before Seth left. He knows his attraction isn’t real, is just something to fill the void of Seth’s loss. Personality-wise, Alfred Stoltzfus and Jacob Friesen are more attractive. But Harry just smells good. He’s got wide shoulders and heavy bones. If Jonathan half-closes his eyes, he can feel a little the way he used to feel near Seth.

Even with his eyes wide open, he sometimes wants to drag Harry to the back of the school’s toolshed and pin their bodies together. He wants to hear the sounds Harry makes when he’s turned on.

He misses the way Seth used to whisper his name.

“I’ll let you hide back there for now, but in twenty minutes I’m going to need relief.” Carleen lifts her coffee mug and jiggles it like she’s ringing a bell.

Jonathan can’t help but laugh. Pee jokes will never cease to be funny to him. “Alright.” He lets the stockroom door swing shut behind him, goes into back of the cooler to get his blood flow to slow down. Against his better judgment, he peers through the cooler’s glass doors as he restocks the shelves full of milk and soda. Harry is up at the register, his black hat now on his head, handing money to Carleen and avoiding eye contact. Next to Carleen, Harry looks like a different person—younger and smaller somehow, even though Carleen’s only five feet tall. His cheeks are ruddy—whether from the cold outside or from being near Carleen—she’s cute, with a button nose and curly red hair that cascades to her shoulders—Jonathan can’t tell. But Harry is clearly outside of his comfort zone.

Jonathan feels a strange tenderness that he doesn’t quite understand. It has nothing to do with attraction, or at least, it doesn’t feel like it does. It’s more like pity.

Pity that Harry’s the object of his desire? Pity that Harry is as prone to the wiles of lust as he is?

No. It’s more like the way Jonathan imagines God feels when he looks down at the earth and watches the humans—small, ignorant, and flailing.

Harry’s big inside the fishpond of Rosedale Mennonite Secondary School. People listen to him, for whatever reason. And he knows what he’s doing: how to make teachers like him, how to get other students to follow him, how to mold things into going his way. The girls swoon over him. Jonathan swoons over him, even though he should know better—because men aren’t mysterious to Jonathan, and so he knows that Harry isn’t hiding unfathomable layers of emotional depth under his stolid exterior.

But out here, Harry isn’t magical. He’s not the hottest guy or the one who people follow without giving it any thought. He’s just an ignorant, awkward Plain kid like Jonathan.
Chapter 5

Saturday finally dawns. Jonathan has traded a few more messages with Jake, and a couple with Marley, too; they’ll be hanging out at her house today, and sure he can stop by if he likes, maybe they can teach each other some new songs.

Sarah’s the first one to come by in the morning. She brings chocolate-chip cookies, a loaf of whole-wheat bread, a jar of cherry jam, a roll of apple leather, and some deer jerky. “What’s she going to do with all this food?” Jonathan says as Sarah sets her box of provisions on the kitchen table next to the two pies that Jonathan’s sisters already baked for Marley this morning—one apple and one pumpkin, because Jonathan couldn’t tell them if Marley had a preference. “You’re the first person who’s come over today and we already have enough to feed her entire glee club.”

Sarah rolls her eyes at him as she sits down without being invited. She doesn’t need to be invited; she’s been over at this house so much since they were toddlers that she’s as much a part of it as the furniture. “It was your idea to do the care package. And if she wants to share it with her show choir, it’s none of my business.” She looks down at her hands sheepishly. “Besides, Edna was right. That girl is pretty skinny.”

“Well, Miss ‘Don’t judge someone on their appearances’ has certainly had a change of heart,” Jonathan teases as she settles into the chair next to her. He has an urge to reach across the corner of the table and pinch Sarah the way he did when they were younger, but they’re too old for that now. She might misinterpret it.

“Well, I still think Edna should keep her mouth shut about the way that other girls look. Not everyone is as naturally … ample as she is.” The smallest bit of color fills Sarah’s cheeks.

“Do you need to confess the sin of vanity, Miss Yoder?”

Sarah kicks him under the table.

“And violence, too! Why Sarah Jane, I never realized what a worldly girl you are. A lot of things you’re going to need to renounce before your baptism.”

Sarah’s chair screeches against the floor as she scoots back from the table. “Where are your sisters, anyway?”

“They went to the neighbors to drop off a pie. They should be back in a few minutes if you want to hang around.”

Sarah shakes her head. “No, I’ll go find them.” At the back door, she turns to give him a warning look. “Don’t let Mark eat any of that food. And don’t you eat it, either.”

Jonathan looks down at his gangly frame, pats his concave stomach. As soon as puberty hit, all his baby fat turned into sinew; adolescence has been a constant battle to keep on weight. His mother says he’ll eventually grow into his frame, but since his father’s like a pencil and so was Alvin when he left, Jonathan’s not convinced. “You don’t think I could afford to fatten up like Marley Rose?”

Sarah rolls her eyes again. “You’re not fainting on stage. You’re fine.”

Jonathan watches her go. When she reaches the far end of the driveway and turns onto the road, he lifts the lid off the cookie container. It’s one of those disposable Zip-Loc things that his mother
says are wasteful, but come in awfully handy when you’re giving food to strangers.

The cookies are arranged in a staggered ring. There’s no way Sarah will notice if he eats one.

He bites into it. It’s perfectly soft, with extra brown sugar and a bit of oatmeal thrown in to give it a satisfyingly chewy texture.

If food could make a person fall in love, Jonathan would fall for Sarah Yoder.

He regrets that it can’t.

He washes his face to get rid of the chocolatey evidence on his lips, but doesn’t brush his teeth. He knows you should always brush your teeth right after eating, but he doesn’t want to erase the memory of the cookie just yet. He wants it to linger a little longer, the taste of vanilla and butter clinging to his tongue and as-yet-undissolved granules of chocolate occasionally melting out from where they’re stuck in the gaps between his teeth. He misses the way that kissing results in the same sort of enduring pleasure, the way the taste of them hangs around even after they’re gone.

He shoves the thought aside. It’s hard to imagine he’ll ever know that feeling again—not the way it was with Seth.

He’s not sure he deserves to.

That thought makes him almost hopeless.

He reminds himself that he’s going to Scandals, and that’s a first step toward some kind of future that’s not so lonely, isn’t it? He won’t know what it’s like to kiss again tonight—he wants to save himself for someone who makes his insides feel the way Seth did—but still, someday.

Maybe. Possibly. If an outsider could fall in love with someone as peculiar and plain and country-bumpkin-backward as he is.

“Oh, stuff it,” Jonathan mutters to his one-note brain as he dries off his face, then tosses the towel aggressively into the hamper. He wants to go punch something, but since punching even inanimate objects is frowned upon in Mennonite society, he goes out to chop wood instead.
The wood pile is over near the barn, about thirty yards from the driveway. Jonathan barely registers when Sarah and his sisters come back to help his mother with the rest of the week’s baking. Soon, the house is a whirlwind, with visitor upon visitor coming by with food for Marley. Jonathan keeps his distance from the chaos as much as possible, annoyed every time someone interrupts his chopping with “Morning, Jonathan!” Thankfully, most are too focused on their own to-do lists to walk over and visit with him.

He’s carrying an armful of chopped wood over to the woodpile when he notices the older of the Groenings’ two minivans in the driveway—the gray one that he and Seth used to take when they wanted to be alone and far away from everybody else. Jonathan’s palms start to sweat in his work gloves and his heart jumps into his throat. The memory of him and Seth necking in the back comes to him so vividly he feels the blood rise to that one sensitive spot on his collarbone.

Edna from glee club steps out of the driver’s side.

Of course you dolt, Edna’s his sister. You’ve only known that for the past sixteen years.

Jonathan shakes his head at himself and the foolishness of his body.

The Pfeiffer sisters get out of the van too, and one of them points in his direction and then the other two girls turn and wave. He calls out a hello and wishes the pile of logs in his arms were high enough to cover his red face. Edna hollers something else, but just then his brother Mark starts up the tractor and her words get caught in its chokehold.

Fifteen minutes later Mark’s driven off far enough that Jonathan can hear his own thoughts again, along with a pair of footsteps through the grass and a skirt swoosh-swooshing against stockinged calves. He assumes it’s Sara or one of his sisters bringing him a snack, but when he looks up he’s
surprised to see Edna, sans Pfeiffer sisters, looking at Jonathan sheepishly.

Usually when a girl looks at Jonathan that way, he gets a knot in his stomach and guilt over not being able to give her what she wants. But he knows why Edna’s here, and it’s not to flirt.

“You heard from Seth lately?” she says. Her voice is tight; he can see the tension in her neck as she speaks.

“Sorry,” he says. “You know I would have told you if I had.”

“I know. It’s just … we’ve been so busy lately with all the rehearsals and everything. It would be easy to overlook a piece of mail in all that.”

She’s wrong, of course. Jonathan scours the mail every afternoon for a letter with a return address in Wisconsin. The last one he got was six weeks ago. He’s sent two businesslike and innocent letters to Seth in that time with no response, just to let Seth know he’s still here in case he ever needs to escape. Not that Jonathan would say it in those words. He’s trying to respect Seth’s decision, even if it was the wrong one. Besides, Jesus said to forgive. If the Anabaptist martyr Dirk Willems could forgive his jailer, certainly Jonathan could forgive Seth. And if the Dordrecht Confession said, “We must pray for our enemies, feed and refresh them whenever they are hungry or thirsty, and thus convince them by well-doing, and overcome all ignorance,” then surely Jonathan’s steadfastness will eventually convince Seth that Jonathan is in the right.

Edna’s family has undoubtedly been just as steadfast.

“You’re his family,” Jonathan says. “I’m sure he’ll write you soon.”

“I’m not. The conference up there probably has some rule against writing letters because the postal service is too worldly. The Mennonites up there are so conservative. They even paint their bumpers black.” Back before Jonathan was born, the Mennonites around Rosedale had to paint their cars black too—color was seen as “putting on airs”—but the demand for black cars drove prices up at the local dealers, and the Mennonite love of practicality and thrift eventually won over the love of ostentatious plainness. The bishop lifted the ban on non-black cars, but cars with flashy detailing were still out of the question.

Jonathan sets the axe down next to the chopping block; it doesn’t look like Edna plans to go away anytime soon, and the axe suddenly feels too heavy to hold onto any longer. “He’s probably just busy.” The words fall easily from his mouth because he’s been using them as a silent mantra over the past few weeks to reassure himself. “You know they have more restrictions on electricity than we do, and that makes everything take twice as long. I bet he’s so tired at the end of each day that he falls asleep halfway through his prayers.”

Edna’s lip flares like she’s about to laugh, but she stifles it. “Seth would never do that. He’s too devout.”

“Devotion doesn’t keep a person’s body from needing what it needs.” Jonathan remembers the feel of Seth’s erection hard against his hip; he blinks the memory away.

“I suppose not.” Edna looks down as she drags the toe of her black sneakers through the dirt. The neon-green laces stand out like bright flowers against the grass. “Do you think he’s shunning us?”

The thought has occurred to Jonathan more than once in this interminable month of waiting. His mom has told him stories about shunnings when she was a little girl, particularly her Uncle Darryl, who left the community a year after his baptism, unable to resist the pull of the larger world. The
family didn’t cut him off completely, but when he came to visit none of the baptized adults would eat at the same table with him or even shake his hand. He took his meals at the picnic table outside with the kids, who weren’t required to shun him since none of them had been baptized yet. In that way, at least, the shunning backfired. He became her favorite uncle.

But the Rosedale Mennonites haven’t shunned anyone in years. It seemed too cruel and Amish. Being kind to someone isn’t condoning them. Welcoming someone into your home isn’t the same as sharing communion with them.

“Shunning’s only for people who’ve been baptized and then go against the church. You and I haven’t been baptized, and your parents haven’t gone against any of the community’s rules. If anyone has, it’s—” Jonathan cuts himself off. His gut twists uncomfortably. It’s not right to speak ill of Seth, no matter how wrong it was of him to leave. Besides, Jonathan’s no saint either.

“I wouldn’t put it past the Mennonites up there to shun somebody just because they wanted to. They’re so full of themselves. Think they’re more righteous than everybody. Almost as bad as the Amish.”

Jonathan finds himself nodding and immediately feels ashamed. “We shouldn’t be talking like this. They aren’t so different from us.”

She looked up, crooked her eyebrow. “The Wisconsin Mennonites or the Amish?”

“Both.”

“Different enough that our brothers felt compelled to leave us for them, though.”

“Land is cheaper in Wisconsin. You know that.” Jonathan’s stomach twists again. It’s not technically a lie. But land isn’t the primary reason Seth left.

Edna knows this too, even if she doesn’t understand its depths. “The fact that they’re more stringent up there didn’t hurt.”

“Look. Just because our brothers made decisions to live a different way doesn’t mean they don’t love us. Sometimes a person just has to do what they have to do. God calls everyone to a different mission. It’s not for us to understand.”

“Do you really think it’s God that called our brothers away?”

Jonathan doesn’t know how to answer that. “I should get back to work, Edna.” He picks up his axe to signal the conversation’s over.

“I know him leaving hurt you as much as it hurt me, especially after what happened with your brother. Why won’t you talk about it?”

Jonathan recites a Bible verse he’s had memorized since he was six years old: “He that speaketh evil of his brother, and judgeth his brother, speaketh evil of the law, and judgeth the law.”

“It’s not speaking evil to talk about your feelings.”

“But that’s what talking about feelings leads to, isn’t it? Someone always ends up getting badmouthed. Nothing good can come of it.”

“When’s the last time your brother wrote home?”
Jonathan sucks in an angry breath. “I said I don’t want to talk about it.”

Edna crosses her arms across her chest. “You’re such a Mennonite, Jonathan.” She clearly means it as an insult.

He lets out a huff of frustrated laughter. “So are you, Edna.”

“Fine, whatever. You’re incorrigible. Have a good drive into Lima, anyway, and don’t get into any trouble, alright?”

She gives him a meaningful look, and for a moment Jonathan can’t help but think she knows the truth about him. She knows he’s in love with Seth, and she knows exactly where he’s planning to go after he drops off Marley’s care package.

It’s impossible, though. No one in Rosedale knows about Jonathan.

Edna probably thinks he’s going to make a move on Marley.

Jonathan sneers. “That Marley girl has a boyfriend, and besides she’s too skinny for me.”

Edna eyes him up and down. “You’re one to talk about skinny.”

He feels his face turning red.

“Sorry,” she says. “That wasn’t nice of me. I’m sure you’ll fill your frame out fine once you stop growing so fast.”

He tries to shrug it off. “Actually, I’m skinny on purpose. The fastest way to get a Mennonite girl to fall in love with you is to convince her you need her cooking.”

“You’re such a dork.” A smile spreads across Edna’s face. For a moment, she looks like the spitting image of Seth, right down to the dimple in her left cheek and the way she blushes like a ripe peach.

Jonathan doesn’t realize he’s staring at her until she looks away, her eyes to the ground. She clears her throat. “I’d better get going and let you work. See you Monday?”


Edna spins on the heels of her neon-laced Skechers and starts marching back toward the drive. Jonathan sets a log on the chopping block and doesn’t wait for her to get a good distance away before he brings the axe down on it. She startles at the sound—a tiny, mid-step jump into the air. Her skirt billows like a bell. She snaps around. “Jonathan, you could have warned me!”

“I’m standing with an axe by a chopping block. What do you expect?”

The light that filled her face a few moments earlier is gone. She’s glowering. “You’re such a boy!” She imbues the word boy with as much venom as she imbued Mennonite a few minutes earlier.

Jonathan snickers to himself as he brings the axe down for another crack! that likely annoys her just as much as the first. Well, good. It’s better she think he’s annoying than think he’s in love with her. That path can only lead to misery.

He’ll never learn how to love anyone the way he loves Seth.

Don’t be stupid, he tells himself, picking up another log to split. If it’s adultery to lust after another
man’s wife, it must be adultery to lust after a woman’s husband, too. He needs to forget Seth, forget the way his hair would fall across his forehead when it had been too long between cuttings, forget the smell of him, forget that danged dimple and twitch in his left cheek.

Jonathan brings down the axe even more swiftly this time. With a loud thwack, the log splits cleanly in two.

Jonathan wishes his memories could break apart so easily.

* 

Jonathan’s arms and shoulder feel like vats of inflamed Jell-O by the time noon rolls around and he walks back up to the house. Everyone has dropped off their contributions to Marley’s care package, the gifts neatly spread out on the table. Upon seeing Jonathan, the twins—Hope and Joy—set aside their dough and start repacking the gifts into paper grocery bags while Marilou sweeps flour dust into a neat pile in the corner of the kitchen floor. It comes to five bags worth, which strikes Jonathan as awfully excessive for a people who pride themselves on moderation.

“Could you clear this stuff out of here, Jonathan?” his mother says as the twins finish up their work. “We hardly have anywhere to cool the baking.”

“Where’s Sarah?” Jonathan says. He’s surprised she would have left without saying goodbye to him, but maybe Edna told her he was in a bad mood.

Joy looks up. “Why do you want to know? Do you have a crush on her?”

Hope titters.

“Don’t tease your brother,” Mother scolds, then turns to him. “She went back home to do her chores. She’s an industrious girl, that Sarah.” It might not sound like much to the untrained ear, but in Mennonite speak, that’s gushing. There’s a glimmer in Mother’s eye, too, and Jonathan knows exactly what it means. She also thinks he’s fond of Sarah, and she approves.

“I suppose,” Jonathan says, because it would be rude to disagree. Besides, it’s true. There’s a reason she’s his closest friend next to Seth. It’s just not the reason his family seems to think.

He hauls the bags and basket of food out to the truck. It’s fifteen years old, with a beat-up shell and an interior with nicks and scratches galore, but the engine runs smooth as silk. Seth made sure of it.

“I’m not letting you hit the road in a ride that’ll leave you stranded, or worse,” Seth said when Jonathan won the pickup at auction shortly after his sixteenth birthday. Seth came over the next day with two mechanic’s toolkits, a jack, and a plastic tub full of sundries like jumper cables and chargers. If Jonathan hadn’t already been head-over-heels for Seth, he would surely have fallen then. Their afternoons of working side by side on the engine were the sweetest sort of agony.

Jonathan loads everything into the cab. There’s fresh pretzels from his cousins the Wiebes, a peck of black twig and russet apples from the Stoltzfus orchard, cranberry cake, macaroni and cheese, turnip casserole, jello salad, roll kuchen, whoopie pies, the Pfeiffers’ famous sauerkraut, more kinds of bread than Jonathan wants to count, and jars and jars of homemade jam. Kevin Phelps was an idiot and brought a jar of his mom’s pickled eggs and beets—which is one of Jonathan’s favorite snacks, to be sure, but even Vernon must know that normal people don’t eat like that. And Laura Dyck—poor Laura Dyck.

The basket of food she brought is fine: sugar cookies and gingersnaps. It’s the non-food item that makes Jonathan shake his head: A CD of recordings from their glee club’s dress rehearsals, most of
which she solos on. Jonathan protested when she brought the microphone and computer into their rehearsals, but Laura insisted: “It’s not vain. Christ said not to hide our light under a bushel.”

“He was talking about the gospel, Laura. *We’re* not the light,” Jonathan shot back. Laura was so frustrating sometimes. Her dad’s family was Mennonite back to the seventh generation, and her mom was a convert with good intentions, but the kids clearly weren’t being raised as they should; the whole family stood out like odd ducks half the time.

“Our songs preach the gospel,” was Laura’s answer, and none of the other members of the group wanted to get into a fight. So the argument ended and Laura got her way.

Jonathan’s always found it easy to bicker ad nauseum over things he doesn’t really care about. Having lots of brothers and sisters has given him plenty of practice at that. But the things closer to his heart—he has no idea how to fight for them once he meets resistance.
Chapter 6

Jonathan drives over to his uncle’s to pick up the dining room chairs destined for Lima. Uncle Abraham works in an old barn that looks simple from the outside but is outfitted with enough voltage and power tools to give the producers of *This Old House* countless wet dreams. His furniture-making business is pretty successful. It not only keeps his sons busy, but he has two assistants who aren’t related to him (well, no more than every ethnic Mennonite is related to each other) and has hired several other of the community’s men to help out here and there. Most of his customers look at his hat and ugly clothes and think that he’s Amish, despite his clean-shaven chin, and everybody loves buying furniture from the Amish. Uncle Abraham doesn’t lie about his background, and if anyone actually calls him Amish to his face, he will correct them, but even then they don’t really listen. People think what they want to think, and that’s good business for Uncle Abraham. He can make a chair five times faster than an Amish guy working with hand tools, and the quality’s better, too.

People can romanticize handiwork as much as they want, but when it comes down to it, they always prefer the smooth finish of power-sanded wood.

“You’re here early,” says Uncle Abraham. The customers in Lima aren’t expecting the delivery until 5 o’clock; it’s 1 o’clock now and it only takes an hour and a half to get to Lima.

“I’ve got other errands to run in Lima, too,” says Jonathan.

“Oh?” Uncle Abraham raises an eyebrow. “When is your age, I had ‘other errands’ to a lot. Especially at the video arcade.”

Jonathan rolls his eyes. “I’m not going to a video arcade.” He’s not sure people even have those anymore. He’s seen them in old movies from the 1980s, usually ensconced somewhere inside a huge shopping mall. Jonathan avoids shopping malls. It creeps him out to be surrounded by so many things. “A girl from one of the schools our choir competed against on Thanksgiving got sick. I’m delivering the care package.”

“Oh?” Uncle Abraham says again. It’s his go-to response to everything. “Hannah and the girls have been baking all morning. You should go up to the house and ask them if they could spare anything for her.”

“The truck’s already kind of full as it is.” Jonathan taps on the side window toward the food inside.

Uncle Abraham looks in and is apparently unimpressed. “There’s definitely room for more.”

“This is enough food to last her for two weeks.”

“But there’s her family to think of, as well.”

Jonathan doesn’t answer. The conversation is veering too close to an argument for his comfort. He changes the subject to the delivery. They go into the workshop to wrap the chairs in blankets, then load them into the back of the pickup. One is an old Shaker-inspired Arts and Crafts piece from the 1920s, provided by the customer for Uncle Abraham to reproduce; the other two are the ones Uncle Abraham made. He’s done a good job copying the original, down to the tone of the wood. If it weren’t for the scratches in the antique chair’s seat and the slightly smoother finish on the new pieces, Jonathan isn’t sure he’d be able to tell the difference.

“Here are the directions,” says Uncle Abraham, handing Jonathan a piece of paper.
“I can use my phone to find my way.”

“It’s a bad habit to get too dependent on those things. You won’t be able to use it after you’re baptized, you know.”

“Then I’ll live it up now. You know, the same way you used to go to video arcades when you are my age.”

Uncle Abraham smirks. “I knew I shouldn’t have mentioned that.”

*

The drive into Lima is uneventful, unless you count pulling over at a gas station outside the city limits to change into blue jeans and a red Ohio Buckeyes t-shirt that Alvin bought during his short-lived worldly period. It’s a little tight on Jonathan, but it doesn’t look bad. It makes him look … gay, actually. Like one of those fashionable young guys on the gay sites he tries not to spend too much time looking at because they’re mostly about sex. What do they call them again? Twinks? Yeah, twinks. Rhymes with winks.

Jonathan smiles at the thought and winks at himself in the mirror. Then blushes, even though no one else is around. It’s just him, two urinals, two toilets, and the mirror in here.

Is he cute when he blushes? He’s not sure. He’s not terrible-looking, though. The pink spreads evenly across his face, not in splotchy patches the way it does on Sarah Yoder’s, like she’s got some sort of rash. And he doesn’t look too much like a perpetually inbred Swiss-German. He might even pass as someone with English heritage, or French, or Polish.

Jonathan folds his home-sewn black trousers, suspenders, and collarless blue shirt neatly into a plastic shopping bag and pulls his wool coat off the hook in the bathroom stall. He wishes he had something more modern—maybe a green parka with puffy sleeves—but the one his mom sewed for him looks enough like a regular black pea coat that most people wouldn’t notice that it’s plain dress. Besides, it’s sunny enough right now that he can probably go without it.

Back out in the parking lot, Jonathan tucks his bag of plain clothes under the passenger seat with his black felt hat. He feels a compulsion to hide them, as if someone might peek in through the truck windows and learn his shameful secret. He’ll have to put them back on for the delivery—he wouldn’t want word of his wearing blue jeans to get back to his uncle, even though all the kids do it when they get the chance—but for now he can just blend in.

Funny how the point of plain dress is not to stand out, but it’s effect is just the opposite. Frankly, Jonathan thinks it would be more modest and less showy if all Mennonites were nothing but jeans and T-shirts all the time. Every few years at one of the conference meetings, members of Rosedale and the neighboring Mennonite congregations will discuss changing the Conference Rules & Discipline to allow boys and men to wear blue jeans for work like in some of the other communities, but nothing’s ever come of it.

Jonathan pulls out his phone and texts Jake that he’s on his way. It’s probably Marley he should be sending the message to, and he knows it, but he tells himself it’s unseemly to text another guy’s girlfriend. Besides, she fainted less than two days ago. Maybe she’s asleep right now.

*

When Jonathan knocks on the door of the little bungalow, the person who answers the door is neither Marley nor Jake. It’s a girl who’s curvaceous and astonishingly black.
It’s not like Jonathan has never seen a black person before. In fact, he saw this exact girl at the competition on Thanksgiving, bumped into her backstage. But he doesn’t see black people often, unless you count photos of the president and his family, or movies Jonathan wasn’t supposed to go to, or music videos he’s watched on his phone. Occasionally, he’ll spot one in the grocery store or gas station. He’s talked to a few of them—small pieces of conversation while ringing them up like he would with any customer—though he can’t remember a particular instance.

And there’s Jake. Is Jake black? Jonathan wouldn’t have thought so—his skin isn’t any darker than Laura Dyck’s—but Jake said that thing on Facebook about being called Barack Obama a lot, so maybe he is.

But this girl—she’s a whole different level of black. Her skin’s dark, the tone of it smoother than that of any white person he’s ever seen. Jonathan literally thinks about how it’s almost as uniform as chocolate, and his mouth starts to water, and he feels a little weird about that but can’t put his finger on why, except that it’s weird to look at people and think about food and tasting things, unless it’s in a sexual way.

And this isn’t sexual. She’s a girl.

The girl looks at him quizzically. “Where are the suspenders?”

Jonathan looks down at himself. He’s left his coat in the truck. It’s just the Buckeyes shirt and his skinny arms on show, the left one propping up a bag stuffed with food. “I don’t dress like that all the time.”

“I thought it was your religion.”

“My parents’ religion.” He feels a little guilty saying that, but it’s technically true.

The girl shrugs and waves him in. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to be rude. Unique just likes a guy in suspenders.” Before Jonathan can attempt to make heads or tails out of that last sentence, she closes the door behind him and holds out her hand. “That’s my name. Unique. Unique Adams. Jake and Marley are upstairs trying to figure out the remote control for the new DVR. They’ll be down in the second. You must be Jonathan. Enchantée.”

He takes her hand. Shakes it. Notices that her palms are pink, almost as pale as his. Isn’t sure what to do with that piece of information. Wonders if he’s staring. Looks up and notices her lips aren’t pink, but rather a shade of brown not very different from the rest of her face—unless you count her eyes, obviously, which are white and a darker shade of brown mixed with … is he staring? He looks at the wall behind her. It’s painted light green and covered in pictures with mismatched frames: a black-and-white photo of a farmhouse, a poster of someone sitting at the base of an oil rig with the words “I know it’s still a mess … I’ll clean it when I get home” painted in white cursive letters beneath, a water-color painting of pink and orange poppies against a backdrop of blurry blue flowers, and an embroidered portrait of Eeyore from the Winnie-the-Pooh books. Smack in the middle of everything is a large mirror with a brass-colored frame—about the same size as the gas station bathroom mirror he was looking in earlier, but bigger than any of the mirrors in his own home. He catches his face. He looks stunned, out of his element.

That won’t do. It will make the girl—Unique—uncomfortable. He needs to step outside of his head. God’s universe is a whole lot bigger than Rosedale.

“Jonathan,” he says. “Jonathan Unruh. Pleased to meet you too.” He makes himself smile. It feels forced, like all the muscles in his face are being pushed in the wrong direction. They ache. Think about something that makes you really smile. He remembers Seth’s stupid brown eyes, clear like
maple syrup. The muscles in his face relax, but his mouth is still upturned. Good.

The girl’s smile seems to relax, too. It was genuine before, but now it seems less guarded. Funny, he didn’t even notice it had been guarded until now. Her teeth are very white. Or maybe that’s just the contrast with her skin. He doesn’t know. But they look nice. She should be in a toothpaste commercial.

She releases his hand and reaches for the bag. “Let me get this. You’ve been standing with it long enough.”

“That’s okay.” He clings to the bag. He’s a man. It’s his job to carry things. “Just show me where to put it.”

They walk back to a small kitchen. Its walls are also covered with pictures—so many that he’s not sure whether to stare or look away. It’s a cacophony of images and slightly overwhelming. Framed family photographs interspersed with landscapes, taped-up finger paintings, boldly colored posters. The fridge is covered too: magnets and menus, calendars and announcements of upcoming events. There’s even one for the Sectionals competition that happened on Thanksgiving: “Cheer on McKinley’s New Directions! Thanksgiving 2013, April Rhodes Auditorium.” The time of the performance is written in small print at the bottom.

Footsteps come thundering down the stairs as Jonathan sets the bag on the kitchen counter. “Is it Jonathan? Don’t keep our new buddy all to yourself, Unique!” It’s a smooth, masculine voice, and Jonathan can see the face even before it appears in the kitchen door—or rather, a dozen different versions of it flashing through his mind, freeze-framed moments from the New Directions’ performance on Thanksgiving and the shuffle backstage; warm, backlit snapshots from Facebook with eyes as sweetly brown as Seth’s, though more molasses than maple. Heat unfurls low in Jonathan’s belly.

Jake bounds into the kitchen. Marley is right behind him, though not bounding. Still, she looks less frail than she did backstage on Thursday. Her skin is firmer; it doesn’t sag and cling to her skeleton. Jonathan suddenly realizes he should have known what was wrong with her on Thursday night. He has seen dehydration before, had to drag his brother Mark back from the strawberry patch a few summers ago after finding him collapsed there, refusing water because he said it made him feel like puking. Mark’s skin felt hot and paper-thin, and didn’t bounce back when Jonathan touched it. Up at the house, their mother had plopped Mark down onto the couch—he was too weak to sit up in a chair—and forced dropperfuls of watered-down Gatorade into his mouth once a minute until he complained that he needed to pee.

Marley smiles. She’s still too skinny, but it’s a pretty-ish smile. It makes her eyes light up. They’re greenish-blue, like Marilou’s. That’s nice, too.

He still doesn’t see why Jake would want to date her, though.

“You a Buckeyes fan? Awesome!” Jake points at Jonathan’s shirt, then holds his hand out too high for shaking and too low for a high-five. Jonathan stares at it. He’s not sure what he’s supposed to do, but he figures it must involve hand contact, so he presses his open palm to Jake’s and clasps his fingers around the back of Jake’s hand—soft, just like Jonathan expected. But not like touching a girl.

Apparently it’s the right thing to do. Jake squeezes back and gives both their hands a little jerk before letting go. “Football or basketball?”

Jonathan wishes suddenly he had not chosen this shirt to wear. “Um. Basketball?” He’s actually
never watched a game on TV, but he’s played it often enough. It’s not dishonest to say he likes it.

“Cool,” Jake says. “We have the Buckeyes’ Thanksgiving game on Marley’s DVR if you want to
stay and watch it.”

“Oh no you don’t!” Unique interrupts. Her voice is loud and melodious. It almost sounds like she’s
singing. “Marley and I already decided on Moulin Rouge before you got here.”

Jake looks at Marley, his eyebrows all squinched up in an adorable questioning expression. “Is that
true?”

Marley purses her lips and nods in exaggerated seriousness. “I’m afraid it is. Though since we have
a guest, we’ll need to take into consideration what he’d like to watch.” She turns to face Jonathan.

“Um, whatever the hostess wants.”

Marley beams and squeezes Jake’s upper arm. “Oooh, I like this guy! You could learn some
manners from him, Jake.”

Jonathan’s face goes as hot as a firebrand. He darts for the door so none of them will see it.

“There’s more food in the truck. I’ll bring it in.”

But Jake is right behind him, stepping out into the sunny fall afternoon. “She meant that as a
compliment.”

“I know.” Jonathan doesn’t look up. Jake’s right next to him now, footsteps in stride with his own,
so close that their hands are almost brushing. He smells like soap—something with undertones of
eucalyptus and spice—and indescribable manliness. Jonathan shoves his hands into his jean
pockets. “I guess I’m just … awkward. People don’t really compliment each other where I’m
from.”

“In Rosedale, you mean?”

Yeah. Mennonites don’t like anyone getting too big of a head, you know? That’s one of the
biggest sins you can do—pride, I mean.” They’re at the truck. Jonathan swings the door open and
pushes up the seat to get access to the back bench. He pulls out a bag and hands it off to Jake, still
managing to avoid looking into his face. He feels like if he does, Jake will see right into him and
know how much time Jonathan spent gazing at his Facebook photos Thursday night. Is lust a
bigger sin than pride? Sometimes it feels like it might be.

“Huh, that’s interesting,” Jake says. He shifts the bag to his left arm and Jonathan hands him the
basket from the passenger seat. “Mr. Schuester—our choir director—he seems to think I don’t have
enough pride.”

“What’s he mean by that?”

“He says if I thought more highly of myself, I’d get better grades and maybe wouldn’t fool around
with so many girls. He can’t accept that maybe school is just boring, and sex is awesome.”

The image that pops into Jonathan’s mind makes him almost choke on his own spittle. It’s both hot
and repulsive. Hot because Jake is naked in it, and repulsive because so are the bodies of dozens of
faceless women, all colors and shapes and sizes, their breasts rubbing against him, their wide hips
swaying with each of Jake’s thrusts. Jonathan takes a deep breath as he hauls the last two bags out
of the truck. “I thought Marley was your girlfriend.”
“Yeah, she is. I haven’t been fooling around lately. But I used to, and maybe I would again if Marley broke up with me. I like sex, and most girls like having sex with me.”

Jonathan’s face must go redder than Mrs. Phelps’s pickled eggs and beets. He wishes he had skin like Unique’s to hide behind. “I wouldn’t know much about that,” Jonathan says, because he doesn’t know what else to say.

“You wouldn’t know much about sex, or wouldn’t know much about liking it?” Jake laughs and nudges Jonathan’s elbow with his own. The bags jiggle in Jonathan’s arms, but he’s at no risk of dropping them.

“Both, I guess.” The things that Jonathan did with Seth never felt like sex. They felt too sacred and intimate to be a sin. Besides, their clothes never came all the way off.

“Ah, well. You’ll find out eventually. You guys are probably pretty strict about that kind of stuff, huh?”

Jonathan shrugs. “I don’t know if I would call it strict. We’re just supposed to save it for between a man and his wife.”

“I guess that’s not strict if that’s what you’re into. Don’t think I could live like that, though. Different strokes for different folks. … Oh, man. Strokes. I swear I didn’t mean it that way.” Jake laughs again. It’s like music, as melodious as the way Unique talks, water over a cobbled creekbed. Jonathan can’t help but finally look at his face. Regrets it immediately. Jake is looking right at him, his syrup-sweet eyes taking in all the stray bits of sunlight filtering through the poplar branches that overhang Marley’s entryway. Still, Jonathan can’t look away.

Jake knocks by tapping the door with the toe of one sneaker since his hands are full. Marley opens it. She’s smiling again. Her teeth look almost as white as Unique’s. There must be something in the water here in Lima. Her smile turns into a gaping jaw drop when she realizes what’s in the bags. “Oh my God, that’s a lot of food.”

Jake frowns. “It’s okay, Marley. You don’t have to eat it all at once.” Jake lowers his voice and leans into her, his lips barely an inch from her forehead. “You don’t have to do anything you’re not ready to do.” His tone is serious, carries the weight of some deeper meaning that Jonathan can’t grasp. There’s a subtext here, something between the lines. Jake kisses Marley’s forehead.

She smiles again, but its edges seem touched by sadness. She looks at Jonathan. “Thank you so much. Your choir has really gone above and beyond.” She turns to Jake again. “I think I’m going to need to sit in the living room for a minute while you guys deal with that in the kitchen. You two will be okay?”


She peels off to the couch. A somber weight hangs around Jake as they make their way back to the kitchen. Jonathan feels like he’s done something wrong, but can’t for the life of him figure out what it was. Maybe she’s too tired for visitors. Maybe he shouldn’t be here at all.

But as soon as they’re back in the kitchen, the spirit lifts. Unique has been unloading the food from that first grocery bag onto the kitchen table, and she’s singing some song he’s never heard before as she does it,

*He’s a pinball wizard*

There has to be a twist
A pinball wizard's
Got such a supple wrist

Her voice is shockingly rich. The notes resonate in his bones.

No one in Rosedale ever sings like that. The only voices that come close are ones that Jonathan has heard in the soul music that sometimes comes on the gas station’s satellite radio. But an actual, flesh-and-blood human being? It’s revelatory.

She interrupts herself as Jake loads his bag and basket onto the counter next to her. “More? Good Lord, these Mennonites sure know their food.” She spins around and makes eye contact with Jonathan as she points to a blueberry pie. “Is that shoofly pie? I’ve always wanted to try one.”

Jonathan shakes his head. “No. But there’s a shoofly pie somewhere here. I think Naomi Pfeiffer made it.”

Unique gives him a blank stare.

“Um, she’s in the choir. Brown hair and …”

Unique shakes her head. “I’m sorry. With those white bonnets on, all the girls looked the same to me.”

Jonathan can’t wrap his head around that. But then, most of the girls in New Directions would probably have looked the same to him in their skimpy black dresses if they hadn’t been different races. “She’s the one who played the autoharp.”

“Well, I look forward to trying it.” Unique turns back to the food. “Anything that needs to go inside the refrigerator?”

Jonathan sets his bags down and shows Unique what everything is and where it needs to go: jams and jerky in the cupboards, apples on the counter, macaroni in the fridge. Jonathan’s surprised when Jake reaches into the bottom of one of the bags and pulls out two packs of Rook cards. He holds one of them up so Jonathan can see the big black crow printed on the front. “What’re these?”

“Rook? It’s a card game based on fifty-seven cards, four colors of one through fourteen and a wild card with a crow on it called the Rook. Mennonites are crazy about it for some reason. I guess someone thought they’d be fun for Marley to play with while she got better?”

“Is it fun?”

“Depends how good everyone playing is. There are different games for it, though. I can teach you guys a couple to start out if you want.”

Jake smiles. Jonathan’s knees go wobbly. “Sure.”

Jake helps for a while more before drifting off to check on Marley. It’s actually a relief. It’s hard being so close to someone who’s so attractive when you don’t know them very well and can’t fill the air with harmless small talk because they’re basically from another planet and you’re worried that every word that comes out of your mouth will sound stupid and backwoods.

Unique starts to sing again after Jake leaves the room, probably because Jonathan’s so awful at making conversation. Jonathan’s not sure if it’s the same song as before or something else. He still doesn’t recognize it in any case.
“You should have soloed on Thursday,” Jonathan says without thinking. He wonders if it sounds bossy, or maybe disrespectful to the Asian girl. “Not that your soloist wasn’t good. But you’re voice is … different. It would have stood out.”

Unique stops what she’s doing and looks at him. Her eyes are wide: a deer caught in the headlights. Only Jonathan can’t do what he’d do out on an unlit country road by hitting the brakes and flicking off the highbeams. She’s stuck.

Maybe if he swerves. “I meant that in a good way. You’re voice is … nice.”

Her face relaxes. Her brown cheeks take on a deeper color, like the pink-purple juice of black raspberries. Two things occur to Jonathan at once: that he was wrong earlier in thinking her skin could hide her feelings; also, that he just caused her to have feelings. Feelings that would make her blush. Which means … does she think he’s flirting with her?

Crud.

She looks down at the counter and takes the lid off the container of Sarah Yoder’s chocolate-chip cookies. “My parents don’t like me to stand out.”

“Oh.” Jonathan thought every parent outside his little Anabaptist bubble wanted that for their kids. That’s what he’s always been warned the biggest difference is between Mennonites and the rest of the world. People who don’t understand the Gospel want to “make something” of themselves and of their children. It doesn’t matter what they make, so long as they get noticed for it, ending up in newspapers and on Twitter, getting talked about by everyone from factory workers and presidents. Whether it’s by flashing skin on national television or massacring a movie theater full of strangers, their highest value is to leave a mark on the world.

Jonathan can think of only one reason Unique’s parents might be an exception to the rule. “Are they religious?”

Unique shakes her head. “Not particularly. They just worry about me getting the wrong kind of attention, is all.” Her smile is as sad as Marley’s was a few minutes ago.

Jonathan wants to ask Unique what about that makes her sad. But he doesn’t need to. It’s hard enough living so differently from the rest of the world, and he has a whole community of likeminded people to buffer him from the contrast. Unique doesn’t. Her parents want her to be unremarkable, when everyone else tells her every minute of every day that that’s all she should be. Living in the bigger world must be confusing when you’re trying to live a moral life.

Maybe Seth was right. Maybe a life outside the community is inevitably filled with sorrow.

“Well,” he says, “Mennonites don’t believe in trying to get people’s attention, either. It’s hard sometimes, because if you do a good job on something, no one hardly ever praises you for it. But Jesus said we should be humble—the salt of the earth, you know? So I guess it’s the best thing in the long run.”

Unique pulls a plate from a cupboard and starts setting cookies out on it. She handles each one delicately, as if it is glass and might break. For the first time, Jonathan notices that her nails, though short, are polished with black lacquer. They are as shiny as the paint job on a new car. “Being the salt of the earth is one thing. Hiding who you are is another. You know the parable of the talents, don’t you?”

Jonathan nods. “A man gave three servants money to invest. He gave five talents to the first, two
talents to the next one, and one talent to the third. The first two servant invested their talents and
doubled what they had. The third servant hid his talent in a hole in the ground. The man was
pleased with the first two servants, but punished the other one for his laziness by sending him
away.”

“God has given each of us gifts. We should use them.” Unique opens the box of whoopie pies from
the Pfeiffers and lays one next to the pile of cookies on the plate. “Like your friends. You all can
clearly bake, and you’re not letting that talent go to waste.”

“That’s not what the parable of the talents means, though. It’s about raising your children to follow
the church.”

Unique set eyebrows shoot up as if they’ve got a mind all their own. “Never heard that
interpretation.”

Interpretation. The word scalds like soup that’s slurped up when it hasn’t yet cooled down from
boiling. It implies it’s not what the text literally means. Still, Jonathan doesn’t get defensive. Listen
before you speak, his mother always says. Maybe Unique is right. Maybe the parable is about more
than just one thing. “I guess it could be about missionary work, too.”

Unique smiles. “Is this missionary work? Bringing food to the poor in health?”

“Um,” Jonathan says. It is and it isn’t. He has no expectations of McKinley’s glee club members
becoming plain-dressing Mennonites—he wouldn’t know how to react if they wanted to. It’s not a
life he would recommend to anybody, even if it’s the only way he knows how to live.

But following Jesus is a way of testifying of him, and testifying is a form of evangelism. Jesus said
to love your neighbor. So that’s what Mennonites do. That’s how they spread Christ’s gospel. By
living it.

Unique jostles him playfully with her elbow. “I’m just teasing. I don’t suppose there’s anything
wrong with missionary work anyway, as long as it’s about Jesus’s real message.”

“And what do you think Jesus’s real message is?” Jonathan’s almost afraid of what she might
answer. He’s seen the way Jesus gets distorted on the internet. People think they can serve in the
military and follow Jesus at the same time. They think that God rewards the righteous with
worldly riches. They use prayer as magic spells, think all they have to do is ask and Jesus will do
some hocus pocus to give them any silly thing they want. There’s no discipline in it. No humility.
It’s not a Christianity he recognizes.

Unique hums as she considers his question. Not a tune exactly. More of a “hmm” sort of sound, put
with a pitch that swoops down like a bird. When she hits the bottom note, she opens her mouth.
“Loving people, of course.”

Jonathan breathes a sigh of relief. It’s a right enough answer that Jonathan doesn’t split hairs over
it. Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul,
and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it,
Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.

Loving people is the second commandment. Loving God is the first. But by loving our neighbor,
by turning the other cheek, we learn to love and obey God. That’s what Jonathan’s understood as
the truth as long as he can remember.

Though he wonders sometimes: When does loving your neighbor conflict with loving God? They
can’t agree all the time, or Jesus wouldn’t have had to command both things.

Seth had an answer for that. “I love you, Jonathan. I do. But I need to love God more,” he’d said after Jonathan confronted him about Martha Ens.

“The two things aren’t mutually exclusive, you know.”

Though they were sitting in a different spot than their usual by the creek, a red-winged blackbird was nonetheless furious at them for being there, screaming its loud check-check again and again from its perch on a nearby reed. Jonathan wished he had his BB gun with him so he could shoot the damned thing. But he was also glad he didn’t, because that would only make him feel worse.

Seth’s cheek twitched. He tugged at a loose straw from the hat he held in his lap. “Yes, they are. We can’t keep going on this way.”

“Why not? You just said you loved me.”

“Because I can’t be with you after I’m baptized.”

“Then don’t get baptized. Mennonites don’t have a monopoly on God.”

“Are you sure about that? Every time I look at the news, it’s war and murder.”

“Then don’t look at the news. Look at me.”

Seth did, finally. That twitch pulsed through his cheek fast as the trills in the blackbird’s threatening call. “It’s wrong to let anything stand in the way of following the path that God has set out for me.” He bent the brim of his hat so hard that Jonathan could hear the straws start to crack. Jonathan put his hand on the back of Seth’s to stop him from destroying it altogether.

“No, Seth. Just because it doesn’t fit with the Rules & Discipline doesn’t make it wrong.”

“But that’s what we’re supposed to do. Fit ourselves to the Rules & Discipline. Humble ourselves. Become the camel who can fit through the eye of a needle. We can’t live for ourselves. We have to live for God.”

“Then why is the only time I ever feel like God’s around is when I’m with you?”

“I don’t know.”

“But you feel it too, don’t you?”

Seth looked back down at his hat. “You know I do.”

Seth thought the only way to love God was to erase himself. But if Unique’s right, the way to glorify God is to magnify our gifts. Could it be true that God wants more than obedience from each of us? That what he wants most is for us to be ourselves, to not squander our individuality?

If it is, then hiding who we are is a sin.

It would be a sin for Laura Dyck not to sing her solos, for Sarah Yoder to shy away from making the world’s best chocolate-chip cookies, for Edna Groening not wearing her stupid fluorescent shoelaces.

It would be a sin to marry a woman you don’t even desire.
It would be a sin to wear only plain dress, to always blend in with the crowd.

Maybe the Rules & Discipline aren’t about glorifying God at all. Maybe it’s about pleasing one’s neighbors—not making them uncomfortable, not rocking the boat.

Maybe this is one instance where you can’t love your neighbors and the Lord both.

Jonathan shakes his head. He’s thinking too much.

“Do you ever think loving people is dangerous?” Crud. Was that him just talking?

Unique stops what she’s doing. Jonathan avoids looking at her, but he feels her eyes on him, the whites like beacons in the night. “Still waters run deep, don’t they?”

“Sorry, I don’t know where that came from.”

Unique puts one hand on the counter. Her eyes go from Jonathan to the window over the kitchen sink. Beyond it is a small backyard strewn with brown leaves. Someone should rake them. Maybe Jonathan will offer to do that before he goes.

“Scary, yes. Dangerous? Not in itself. But I suppose it could get dangerous if you forget who you are in the process. If you try so hard to please them that you end up hurting yourself.”

“Huh.”

She turns to him. “‘Huh’? Is that not the answer you expected?”

Jonathan shrugs. “I don’t know. It’s just … Jesus said that if someone strikes your cheek, you should let them strike your other cheek too. We shouldn’t worry about getting hurt.”

“Honestly, that never made sense to me. I can understand not punching them back, but how about walking away? There’s no moral high ground in letting someone beat the crap out of you. I mean, Jesus also said to love your neighbor as yourself, and if you’re willing to let people mistreat you, then wouldn’t that mean you should let people mistreat your neighbors, too? Makes no sense.”

Unique steps over to one of the lower cupboards and pulls out a tray. She puts it on the counter and stacks the plate on top of it, along with four glasses. “Would you do me a favor and get the milk out of the fridge, cutie pie?”

Jonathan blushes all the way to his hairline.

“Oh, honey, that’s adorable. Does no one ever flirt with you?”

“I, um—no. Not really.”

“That’s a shame. But I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable. I just like to flirt, and gay guys and straight girls are the easiest to do it with because no one ends up with a broken heart.”

“I, um … Do you think I’m …?”

“I saw the way you were looking at Jake when you thought no one was watching. I mean, I guess you could be bi, too, but since every guy who’s interested in girls seems to be in love with Marley and you didn’t even give her half a glance, I figured…” Unique waves her hand in the air, as if that explains everything.

Jonathan is horrified. And also strangely relieved.
Unique knows him, and better than any of the people he’s lived with his whole life. She knows who he is, and she doesn’t seem fazed by it at all.

“Is Jake …?” Jonathan bites his tongue. He can’t believe he’s asking something so rude.

But Unique answers as nonchalantly as if they’re discussing the weather. “I’d say he’s probably a zero or one on the Kinsey scale.”

“The what?”

“The Kinsey scale. Zero is totally straight, and six is totally gay. Jake likes the ladies.”

Jonathan clears his throat. “Yeah. He mentioned that earlier.”

“Don’t worry about it though. He’s cool with everybody. He’s not going to be offended if he figures out you think he’s hot. Might even like it. But he won’t make out with you, either. Well, except in a game of spin the bottle. We could arrange that if you like.” Unique winks at him.

“No. That’s okay.” Jonathan suddenly remembers that Unique asked him to get the milk a couple minutes ago now, and he still hasn’t made a move toward the fridge. He does that now, and they stride into the living room together, Jonathan with the milk and Unique with the tray of goodies.

“How you doing, sweetheart?” Unique says to Marley as she sets the tray down on the coffee table. “For today’s repast, we have chocolate cookies, whoopie pies, deer jerky, and a sampling of the world’s most amazing apples. I wasn’t sure what your stomach would be in the mood for, so I brought a little of everything.”

Marley smiles. She is sitting next to Jake on the couch, and they’re holding hands. “Thanks.
Honestly, I’m so out of touch with my stomach that I don’t even know. I’d love to try one of those whoopie pies, though.” A whoopie pie is sort of like a giant Oreo cookie: two circles of chocolate cake with cream filling. She takes one and sets it on her plate with a couple apple slices. “Dude, why’s everyone looking at me? You’re supposed to be eating, too.” She scoots the tray toward Jonathan. “Don’t be shy. You brought all this stuff. You should really be the one getting first dibs.”

“That’s exactly why I wouldn’t expect first dibs.” Jonathan leans forward and grabs two of Sara Yoder’s cookies. He’s hungry as one of his dad’s cows and could easily eat more, but he wants to be polite. “But thank you. That’s very kind of you.”

“Oh my God, you are such a peach!” Marley declares.

Unique, who has set herself down in a stuffed ottoman next to Jonathan’s, leans over and squeezes his arm. “Isn’t he, though?”

“Stop it, girls. I’m gonna get jealous,” Jake says with a winning smile as he grabs a whoopie pie and some deer jerky.

“Can’t stand anyone being more charming than you?” Unique teases.

“Ha! No one’s ever accused me of being charming.”

Marley snuggles into Jake’s side. “Oh, I think I have once or twice.” They give each other a syrupy sweet look and a quick peck on the lips. Jonathan looks away. He’s not used to that kind of openness—not around family or friends. Occasionally a couple will walk into a gas station and make out up and down the aisles as they grab their snacks, but since they’re strangers it doesn’t really make him all that uncomfortable. It’s like sitting out by the pond and watching dragonflies mate. This feels different, more intimate, like he’s being invited to be somehow a part of it, like a witness at a wedding.

They talk about easy things, first about the food and then about music. Jonathan tries to explain to them about Mennonite hymn singing, and how the voices of a congregation coming together in four-part harmony, unaided by instruments, is one of the best sounds on earth there is.

“That sounds cool,” Jake says, leaning back into the couch with his arm around Marley’s shoulder. Jonathan ignores the pang in his heart. It’s not about Jake, anyway. Not really. Jonathan’s just lonely. Jake, Harry—they’re just distractions, really. Something to make the void that Seth left in him feel less like a gaping wound. “Why didn’t you guys sing any of those songs at Sectionals?”

Jonathan sucks in his bottom lip. It’s not right to bring contention and discord into the open. “We talked about it. But we thought we should do something that would appeal to a bigger audience.”

“That makes sense.” Jake bites into his whoopie pie with a pleased moan, but he clamps down on it too hard and the cream filling spurts out of the side and onto his jeans. “Oh my God!” he laughs at himself. “I didn’t mean to shoot my load right away.”

Marley gets this look on her face that’s half-amused, half-scandalized. She slaps Jake’s clean leg. “There are ladies present, Mr. Puckerman!” But she laughs. So does Unique, though she hands him a napkin to clean up.

Jake ignores the napkin and uses his fingers to wipe the cream from his denim and licks it into his mouth. It’s decidedly sinful. Jonathan’s neck goes hot.

This turns into a whoopie pie eating contest, in which Marley and Unique try to prove that it can be done without making a mess. They fail almost as badly as Jake did, and then through giggles and
barks of laughter, beg Jonathan to eat one so they can see how it is really done. Jonathan doesn’t protest. He still starving, even after eating two of Sarah Yoder’s cookies. He takes a pie and eats it one delicate bite at a time, occasionally interspersed with a sip of milk, the other three staring at him breathlessly, waiting for a cream-filled disaster to occur at any moment.

But it doesn’t. Jonathan perfected the art of whoopie pie eating early in life. The last time he made a mess of one was on purpose, in his and Seth’s little refuge by the creek, letting the cream filling smear on his lips and fingers so that Seth would “have” to kiss it off.

There’s no reason to make that kind of mess now.

And there’s every reason not to. The three students from McKinley are staring at him like he’s some kind of rockstar. It’s exhilarating.

When he swallows the last bite, they break out into applause. Jonathan laughs—a full-hearted belly laugh that makes his sides ache. He can’t remember having this much fun in ages.

*

Jonathan teaches them how to play Dutch Blitz with the Rook cards and watches a bit of *Moulin Rouge* on Marley’s gigantic television, though he has to keep his eyes half-closed through much of it to keep the color and movement from making him dizzy. Marley and Unique stand at the front of the room, singing and dancing along, but it’s not a performance. They seem almost unaware of the two guys in the room—or they just don’t care. They’re lost in the music and the story.

It strikes Jonathan that this is a kind of humility. Marley and Unique have, at least for now, abandoned their egos for something greater than them. It’s never occurred to him before that someone could be both humble and brash. Back home, the only kind of humility allowed is the quiet, self-deprecating kind.

His phone alarm goes off at 4:15 to remind him to deliver the furniture. He tells him that he has to go.

“Aw, you have to go already?” Marley says when Jonathan gets up to leave. “But what if I forget the rules to Dutch Blitz?”

Unique hooks a hand around Jonathan’s elbow. “Guess he’ll have to visit again.”

“What time is it?” Jake says.

Jonathan tells him.

Jake looks at Marley. “I’m gonna have to go soon, too. Noah’s family is coming over to light the candles with us.”

Jonathan tries to figure out why anyone would need help lighting candles. Apparently his state of perplexity is written on his face.

“Jake’s Jewish,” says Marley.

“Hanukkah,” says Jake.

The word sounds vaguely familiar, but Jonathan’s still not sure what they’re talking about.

“It’s a minor religious holiday,” Unique says.
Now Jonathan feels supremely stupid. “Okay.”

“It’s not a big deal if you don’t know about it,” Jake says. “I probably know less about Mennonite traditions than you do about Jewish ones.”

Jonathan feels slightly better. He supposes he knows a little from reading the Bible. But as far as he can remember, this is the first time he’s met an actual Jew.

Unique keeps her arm around Jonathan’s elbow the whole way to the door, and even though Jonathan’s not into girls, it feels nice. His skin has been hungry for touch, but in his mind he wrapped it together with his longing for Seth. Unique’s hand feels perfect, like just the thing he needs. Maybe if Mennonites didn’t keep their hands to themselves all the time, he wouldn’t miss Seth so much.

At the door, all three of them give him hugs. Jake’s is the most surprising, not because he does it, that because Jonathan doesn’t feel that rush of arousal being near him that he did earlier in the afternoon. Maybe spending time around him is rubbed away some of the mystique, or maybe it’s the way to Jake kept looking at Marley while they were watching Moulin Rouge. The guy is in love, unobtainable. And Jonathan is tired of wanting things he can’t have.

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The delivery is easy, though Jonathan feels like he’s coming down from a caffeine rush the whole time. Spending time with strangers sometimes does that to him. Even if he has a nice time, it takes a lot of energy and focus. Plus, the blaring lights of Moulin Rouge were a little overwhelming. He stops at a McDonald’s on the way to change back into his plain clothes and dons his hat when he gets out of the truck at his final destination. The house is huge, easily big enough for two large families. White Grecian columns like those at the Ohio state house buttress the front door. A smiling lady in a skirt suit and string of pearls answers the door and shows Jonathan where to set the chairs. He walks down a hallway lined with geometric quilts in Amish and Mennonite patterns. “I so admire your people,” the lady says when he’s done bringing the chairs in. “Truly resourceful, and such a simple life. I envy it.” She gives him a twenty dollar tip.

He nods and thanks her, wishes her a good evening before walking back to the truck in the dark. The words make his stomach turn. If he had a dollar for every time he’s heard one of his uncle’s customers say something to that effect, he wouldn’t have to work at the gas station. But no one ever means it. If they did, they’d convert. But that would take the fun out of it. It’s easier to fill your house with Mennonite crap than actually be one. Simplicity by remote.

And it makes him feel a little dirty, like he imagines a girl must if a guy stares at her boobs too long. He itches to get out of his plain dress. He takes off his hat and suspenders as soon as he’s halfway around the block. Starts unbuttoning his shirt, too. It’s never felt so confining. He whips it off for his T-shirt at the next traffic light, not caring if any of the other drivers can see him changing.

He picks up dinner at Sonic, but he can’t get the interaction with his uncle’s customer out of his head. Looking around at the other cars at their intercoms, he wonders about the people inside them. There’s lots of kids his age, in groups of two to five, shoving food into their mouths and laughing. If he were still wearing his plain dress, would they look at him the way that woman did?

His mind flips back to Thursday night, and he suddenly realizes how not conscious of his outfit he was during Sectionals. Yes, he would have rather been wearing a Dalton blazer, but no one gave his group weird looks or asked embarrassing questions. Maybe it’s because all the groups wore matching outfits; the Rosedale Mennonites were no longer different in that way.
Jonathan shoves his fries back into the take-out bag and backs out. He’s thinking too much, and thinking is never good when he’s trying to work himself up to something new. With his luck, he’ll spend his whole time at Scandals ruminating on people who treat him like a sore thumb, and the whole trip will be a waste. He needs to go somewhere he can be alone for a few minutes, let the day clear out of his head and gain the courage to face the night.

He feels a little like the first time he snuck out of the house after bed to be with Seth, all nerves and self-doubt and anticipation, his mind racing in too many directions. But as soon as he opened the door of that gray minivan and met Seth’s eyes, all watery gray in the moonlight, he knew without a doubt that he was exactly where he needed to be.

He hopes it will be like that tonight—not with a specific person (Jonathan can’t imagine falling for a stranger so quickly), but with the place itself. That he’ll feel that same assurance that he’s doing the right thing, the way he almost always did with Seth.

He spots the Auglaize River on one side of the road and pulls up on its banks. He gets out of the car and sits on the hood to eat the rest of his fries. It’s cold outside, but he likes the chill. It makes him feel awake and alive. Besides, the heat from the engine keeps his butt warm, and that’s the most important thing.

That first night he snuck out with Seth, they ended up out by their creek without planning to. Making out in the van felt too penned up; gearshifts and armrests and the low roof got in the way. The trappings of modernity interfered with what was right and natural. Besides, someone might see them from the road.

But the creek was theirs. They tumbled to the ground, kissing to the sounds of horny frogs and crickets singing their courtship songs, of barred owls hooting out their mating calls. They were just one more pair of creatures in the night, made by God to need connection with their own kind. *It is not good for man to be alone; I will make a help meet for him*, God said after he created Adam, and Jonathan understood without a doubt that those words applied to the bond between him and Seth as much as they did to the bond between Adam and his wife.

“I don’t want this to ever end,” Jonathan said later, catching his breath after they’d worn each other out. Seth’s arms were around him, and both their flanks were damp with fresh sweat. The scent of what they’d done hung heavy in the air, rich and fecund.

“Me neither,” Seth whispered against his scalp.

“Maybe it doesn’t have to.”

Seth said nothing to that, just as Jonathan expected. But he still felt warm and right. Seth wanted what he wanted, even if it might never work out in the end. That was enough for the moment.
Chapter 7

The bouncer is big, tall, hairy—long beard and handlebar mustache, a ponytail that goes halfway
down his back—and covered in rainbow tattoos that wrap from shoulders of his muscle shirt to his
wrists, winding around his arms like ribbons. They’re interrupted only by a pink triangle on the
guy’s upper left arm and, on his right, two linked circles with up-pointed arrows.

Jonathan can’t help but stare at them. Instead of the usual thoughts that race through his head when
he sees tattoos—Why would someone do that to the skin that God gave them? And why are people
willing to endure such pain to appease their vanity?—he thinks, Everyone knows. Everywhere this
guy goes, all they have to do is look at his arms, and they know.

If Jonathan wasn’t freaked out already at the prospect of walking into a gay bar, that idea freaks
him out even more. His fingers shake. He drops his wallet as he pulls Alvin’s ID from it.

“Sorry. Butterfingers,” Jonathan mumbles as he hands over the ID and bends down to pick up his
wallet. What he wants to say is, How do you do it? Or maybe Teach me to be like you. Except
without all the hair and tattoos and the scary, half-feral eye-look the bouncer is fixing on him.

The bouncer looks at Alvin’s ID, looks at Jonathan, looks at Alvin’s ID again. “I hate to say it, but
that’s definitely you.” Jonathan’s not sure what that means, but he counts himself lucky. He takes
back the license and he slides it into his wallet, and his wallet into his back pocket. Steps forward
through the narrow entryway into the building.

Almost collapses at what he sees:

People, everywhere. On the dance floor, clustered around tables, leaning over games of pool. Men
in flannel, men in sequins, men laughing and smiling and taking long, studied sips from their
bottles. Women, too, though fewer of them—tall and caked with makeup; short and scrappy and
dressed in boys’ clothes.

A few people who might be men or might be women. Jonathan doesn’t look at them long. It makes
him dizzy.

There’s so many of them, and they’re here and they’re happy and they’re not afraid to be seen.
They sparkle under the reflected light of the mirrored disco balls that spin from the ceiling.
Everyone looks like they belong here—to each other, with each other. They are in little groups at
tables and pool tables, couples dancing, hips and thighs pasted together. A familiarity he can’t tap
into. Like they’re all part of the same community, the same people. Like they know each other,
understand each other, better than a group of Mennonites would.

Jonathan’s never seen this kind of oneness outside of Rosedale.

But he’s not a part of it. He’s a sore thumb. A broken straw.

His heart is pounding, like someone might look up at any moment and shout, “Jonathan
Zimmerman Unruh!” loud enough to be heard back in Rosedale.

He walks past sweat and bodies, a bright neon sign that says B-O-Y in bright neon letters, a
rainbow flag painted on one wall. So many bodies. He keeps bumping into them as he walks.
Should he worry about pick-pocketers here? No, of course not. He shouldn’t worry about them
anywhere. His wallet is just an earthly possession; if someone tries to take it, it wasn’t his in the
first place. That doesn’t mean the thief deserves it more than Jonathan; it just means that Jonathan
should never have relied on it in the first place.

He’s not sure where he’s going, but there’s got to be a bar in here somewhere, a place where he can face the wall, sip a drink, and regain his bearings.

The music is thrumming. Is that a word, thrumming? But that’s what it sounds like, a high steady thrum and a lower thump-thump beat. One is the blood flowing through his veins. The other is the heart that pumps it.

On the dance floor, men and women dance in groups and pairs, arms draped intimately around each other, foreheads leaning together the way he and Seth used to do sometimes when they were just about to kiss. No one bats an eye but Jonathan. He looks away, embarrassed at his own voyeurism.

Jonathan chooses a seat at the bar. A basketball game plays on the TV; Jonathan can’t help but stare at it. The light and movement are magnets to his eyes. The court floor bright with dark figures darting across it—blackbirds on dried reeds, grackles on a wheatfield. Even though he should have gotten his fill watching TV after that crazy Moulin Rouge this afternoon, he doesn’t want to look away. It’s addictive.

Which is probably why they’re not allowed to have them at home.

“What would you like?” the bartender says. It’s quieter over here than in the the rest of the bar, and it only takes Jonathan a half-second to make out the his words over the music.

“A Sprite, please.” Jonathan has no intention of breaking the Rules & Discipline’s prohibition against alcohol. At least not tonight.

“7-Up?”

“Sure.”

Jonathan sips his drink and keeps on watching the basketball game. He tells himself he ought to go out on the dance floor and meet people, or maybe the pool tables, but he doesn’t know much about either. Making the effort to talk to a stranger seems impossibly difficult right now. He must have expended more energy than he realized at Marley’s this afternoon. Oh, well. It’s about time he watched an entire basketball game on TV, anyway.

Of course, if that’s all he wanted to do, he could have gone to Target. It would be a lot less loud and a lot less terrifying.

This was a stupid idea. He shouldn’t have come here.

But leaving would require getting up and walking past all those strangers again. So he stays.

He tightens his grip around his glass of soda. It’s something secure to hold onto, even as its surface becomes slippery with condensation. A player on the blue team makes a slam dunk. Someone at the other end of the bar lets out a whoop.

“I haven’t seen you around here before.”

Jonathan turns, finds himself staring straight at the words LOOKING FOR MR. RIGHT NOW emblazoned in rainbow letters on a young man’s chest. Jonathan doesn’t stop to think how he knows it’s a young man without even looking at the face, but it’s probably the way that the chest is narrow and the stomach so flat it’s almost concave. There’s the timbre of the voice too, deep but
also somehow light even above the blasting music, sonorous and textured without being scratchy. It could easily belong to a tenor.

“No. You haven’t.” Jonathan’s eyes flick up to take in the stranger’s face. He almost startles. The guy is even younger than Jonathan expected. Can’t be more than eighteen. He’s smiling wide, his teeth shining blue from the dance floor lights.

Is that a dimple in his right cheek?

“What’s your story, then? And your name?” The boy slips onto the stool next to Jonathan’s. The way he moves, long and lean, graceful and confident, makes Jonathan think of a heron knee-deep in the water, stalking its prey.

“Jonathan.”

“Nice to meet you, Jonathan. I’m Sebastian Smythe.” The boy—Sebastian—holds out his right hand.

Jonathan wipes his damp palm on his jeans (it’s wet and cold from his soda glass) before accepting the handshake. He feels relief that Sebastian’s palm is damp, too, and warm from the heat of the club. Jonathan suddenly notices other signs of sweat: below shine over the stubble of the boys upper lip, darker circles in the fabric under his arms.

“You been dancing?” Jonathan says.

“Yep. You should join me back on the floor after I have this drink.” Sebastian’s eyes flicker down to Jonathan’s chest and his bare arms. Sebastian squeezes Jonathan’s upper arm. “You look like you have the stamina to keep up with me.” The way he says it sounds dirty, suggestive, and Jonathan is sure it has something to do with sex though he can’t quite figure out how. His tongue catches in his throat.

Fortunately, Sebastian doesn’t wait for an answer, instead turning to signal the bartender and ordering a rum and coke. Jonathan can’t decide if that’s confidence (Sebastian is sure that Jonathan will say yes, so he doesn’t need an answer) or shyness (he’s unsure, and doesn’t want to hear no). Jonathan is glad not to have to answer right now in either case. He’s not sure he could dance with another guy, stand close and look into his eyes, hands on hips and shoulders, smelling each other’s breath and sweat—the kind of space-sharing that he hungers for but can’t imagine with anyone but Seth. Heck, he’s not even sure he can do anything more coordinated than swaying to this kind of music. He’s only ever done square dancing, the kind that involves minimal touching and frequent switching of partners so no one becomes too physically intimate.

“You look familiar. You from Lima?” Sebastian pulls out his wallet and lays a ten-dollar bill on the counter as the bartender begins mixing his drink.

Jonathan shakes his head. “No. Outside of Columbus.”

Sebastian’s eyebrows shoot up. “You live near Columbus? Then what are you doing in this hellhole?”

“Work.” Jonathan leaves it at that. If he said Delivering made-to-order custom furniture from Rosedale, he’d be outed as a plain person in no time.

“You don’t talk much, do you?”

“Not really.”
Sebastian laughs. “Is that a hint?”

“Um, depends what you mean by a hint.”

“A hint that you want me to leave you alone, Jonathan.” Sebastian lingers on the last three syllables. They’re musical and sweet, like Sebastian’s got honey dripping from his tongue. It makes something spark down Jonathan’s spine and his thighs go warm.

Jonathan feels the muscles in his face pull into a smile. “No. It’s not a hint. You can stay.”

“Good. I was hoping you’d say that. I like a man who’s a bit of a challenge. Tonight’s challenge will be to see if I can get you to string two sentences together. After that—” Sebastian slides his hand over Jonathan’s knee, his palm moves in a light circle like he’s polishing it “—we’ll move on to another challenge.”

Jonathan thinks he might melt. He grabs his 7-Up and takes a gulp, sucking an ice cube into his mouth so he can chew on it. It’s a way to use some of the giddy tension building up in his body, though it doesn’t use it up. Jonathan can’t imagine what would.

Or—Oh. He can imagine what would. Quite explicitly in fact. The image hits him like an icicle falling from the eaves: Sebastian’s hand moving higher than where it is right now, his mouth closer. They’re somewhere dark where Jonathan can only half-see his face, but can feel everything—bones and muscle and skin, tight fingers and aching breaths.

Heat steams Jonathan’s face.

The bartender delivers Sebastian’s drink. He sips it slowly, as if he has all the time in the world. “Since you’re new here, I’ll give you the orientation.” Sebastian swivels in his seat to face the dance floor, starts pointing out regulars one by one. It’s like he’s going through a roster of softball players. He gives their names and their stats: how old they are, whether they’re in a relationship, what they do for a living, how good they are at dancing and kissing, how amenable they are to more.

Jonathan glances at Sebastian’s shirt again. LOOKING FOR MR. RIGHT NOW. Sebastian didn’t start looking for Mr. Right just now; he’s apparently been looking for a very long time. Funny, the way he talks about it, it doesn’t sound like he’s actually that set on finding true love.

“What?” Sebastian says. “You’re giving me a look.”

“I am?”

“Yeah. Haven’t known you long enough to say what kind. Confused, maybe, or frustrated? Like there’s an itch between your shoulderblades, right in the spot where you can’t reach.”

The description makes that very spot tingle. Jonathan rubs it against the edge of the counter. “Um … Confused, I guess.”

“About what?”

Normally, Jonathan would evade the question. His opinion doesn’t matter. Also, it borders on rude. But Sebastian’s looking right at him like he’s the most fascinating creature that ever lived. It would be equally as rude not to answer. “Your shirt.”

Sebastian looks down at his own chest, breaks into a smile. “Nice, huh? What’s there to be confused about?”
“Well,” Jonathan chews on his lower lip, wishes he’d left a piece of ice in his mouth to suck on. “If you’re looking for Mr. Right, why would you throw yourself around like that?”

Now it’s Sebastian’s turn to look confused. “Do you speak English as your first language?”

“Um. Yes?”

“You don’t sound too sure about that.”

“Yes.”

“What do you think my shirt means?”

“What it says. You’re looking for Mr. Right now.”

“As in, ‘Now I’m looking for Mr. Right’?”

“That’s what I said.”

Sebastian’s face breaks into the biggest smile of the night. “Oh my God, you are precious.” He swings around so that he’s no longer facing away from the bar, but is knee-to-knee with Jonathan. The fabric of Sebastian’s jeans rustles against the fabric of Jonathan’s, which in turn rustles against Jonathan’s leg hairs. Prickles of desire skitter over Jonathan’s skin.

“I am?”

“The shirt means I’m looking for looking for Mr. Right-Now. You know. Put a hyphen between the right and the now, pretend they’re one word.”

“Oh.” Jonathan still doesn’t get it.

“You know, like a one-night stand. Or hell, just to make out with for a while. None of this boyfriend bullshit, though. I’m too young for commitments.”

“Oh.” Jonathan’s not sure what to make of that. He didn’t know it was possible to be both turned on and horrified at the same time.

“God, you really are adorable.” Sebastian reaches out with the hand that’s not wrapped around his drink. He catches a strand of Jonathan’s hair as if it were going astray, brushes it back over his ear.

“You’re a virgin, aren’t you?”

For some reason, Jonathan doesn’t look away. He doesn’t feel like he can, not with the way Sebastian’s gaze is so fixed upon him. And the touch. It feels so intimate, closing out the world around them. Jonathan has nowhere to hide, and he doesn’t even want to. So he keeps looking at Sebastian, though he has no answer for him.

The lights in the bar shift from one bright color to another, each reflected in Sebastian’s irises. Jonathan wonders what color they actually are. Brown, like Seth’s?

“Don’t worry, sweetheart. I won’t make you answer that.” Sebastian lowers his hand to the counter. Jonathan wishes he wouldn’t.

“It’s complicated.” Jonathan honestly doesn’t know if he’s a virgin or not. When do the things that two guys can do together cross that line? All Jonathan knows is what feels too sacred to share with just anyone. But if that were the definition of sex, French kissing would be fornication.
“It’s always that, isn’t it?” Sebastian’s drink is half gone now. Jonathan’s is mostly water from the melted ice. He calls the bartender over and asks for a refill on his 7-Up. When the bartender walks away, Sebastian asks, “You’re not drinking?”

Jonathan takes a sip of his refresh 7-Up. “Clearly I’m drinking.”

“Ooh, sarcasm. I didn’t know you had it in you.”

Jonathan blushes. “I didn’t mean—”

“It’s a compliment, sweetheart.”

“Oh.”

“So are you not drinking alcohol because you’ve had enough, you don’t like it, you’re underage and have already broken enough rules for the night by sneaking into this bar, or it’s against your religion? And since you are a man of few words, I’ll make it easy for you. My guess is the last one.”

Jonathan’s overwhelmed that Sebastian has given it this much thought, and also flattered. It’s nice to be the center of someone’s attention. He realizes he’s a little hard. “Why do you say that?”

“Because you seem very sheltered. Like you’ve spent your life living in a bunker somewhere. Or maybe a New Agey hippie commune. But I don’t think I have those in Ohio. So my guess would be homeschooled fundamentalist.”

“I’m not homeschooled.”

“But you’re fundamentalist? Or your parents are?”

“We’re just Christians.”

“Interesting. I don’t suppose you’ll tell me what kind.”

Jonathan shakes his head.

“Well, I’ll let you hold onto that little secret. When you’re at Scandals, you get to be whoever you want to be.”

They talk about other things, like the fact that Sebastian is also under age but definitely not fundamentalist, how he goes to a private prep school but is aiming for Ivy League next year.

Jonathan can almost picture Sebastian in one of those navy blue Dalton blazers. He’s about to ask Which prep school? when their conversation is interrupted by a large hand on Sebastian’s shoulder and a cheery voice shouting, “Hey, asshole!” over the music.

Sebastian spins in his seat. The guy who called him an asshole as if it were a compliment is tall and stocky, built as solidly as the furniture in Uncle Abraham’s workshop. His shoulders are almost as wide as a doorframe.

Jonathan likes that.

Sebastian’s eyes light up from more than dance floor lights. “Hello you big lunk! Thought you weren’t coming tonight!”

“Got done with my paper early. Thought I’d celebrate.” The guy leans in toward Sebastian in a half
hug and presses a kiss to his cheek. Sebastian kisses him back. They are brief kisses, no longer than
the Holy Kisses that baptized church members exchange before services each week in recognition
of the Apostle Paul’s admonition to *Greet one another with an holy kiss*—but this isn’t church.

“Dave,” Sebastian says, rubbing the guy’s upper arm like it’s some sort of good luck charm, “this
is Jonathan. He’s new here. Jonathan, this is Dave.”

“Nice to meet you,” Dave says, and Jonathan starts to give him a little wave, but Dave shakes his
hand instead. Unlike Jake’s or Sebastian’s palms, Dave’s is rough and callused like the hands he’s
used to. It makes Jonathan feel almost at ease.

“So you’re Sebastian’s …” Jonathan’s not sure how to finish the sentence. *Friend* seems too
casual, but Sebastian said he doesn’t do boyfriends. So why were they kissing? It’s not like they’re
brothers. Or are they? They sure don’t *look* like brothers. Are they a recurring one-night stand?

“Friend,” Dave says. “We’re just friends.”

Sebastian smirks and nudges Dave’s calf with the toe of his sneaker. “You’re forgetting that one
time…”

Dave rolls his eyes, but he’s still smiling. “I don’t think your new friend Jonathan wants to hear
about that.”

“You don’t know that until you ask.” Sebastian turns to Jonathan. “Do you want to hear about the
one time Dave and I hooked up? It was pretty hot. He’s a good kisser. And other things. You
wouldn’t think so with that tiny mouth of his, but there’s a lot more room in there than it appears at
first. Not too much, not too little. Just right.”

Jonathan may be sheltered, but he knows exactly what Sebastian’s implying with that. Kissing Seth
was addictive, and their mouths wandered a lot lower than their necks. The memory of Seth’s
mouth on him is visceral. His heart clenches, and his fists clench too, the way they would in Seth’s
hair when Jonathan got overwhelmed by the sensations.

Dave looks sterner now. “Christ, Sebastian.” Jonathan flinches at the vulgarity. “And you wonder
why I still greet you with ‘asshole.’”

“No I don’t. I always figured it was because you wanted to tap mine.”

David ignores the comment and turns to Jonathan. Despite his light tone, there’s something fierce
in his eyes. Protective. “Is he making you uncomfortable? Because I can totally make him shut up.”

Jonathan swallows. Funny how dry his throat feels even with all the soda he’s been drinking. “It’s
okay.” Because maybe the innuendos make him slightly uncomfortable, but they’re also kind of
hot. Besides, the Mennonites have this thing called nonresistance. When someone does something
that makes you uncomfortable, you just put up with it. It’s your cross to bear.

“You sure?” Dave says.

“Yeah. It’s fine.”

“See, Dave?” Sebastian chimes in. “No need to be bashful about the fact that your blowjobs come
highly recommended.” He turns to Jonathan, leaning in conspiratorially. “And mine aren’t bad,
either. I’d be happy to give a demonstration later. Only when you’re ready for it, of course.”

Mercury inches up Jonathan’s spine. His skin goes as hot as the fiery depths of Hell. “That’s okay.”
Dave slides in on the other side of Sebastian to order his drink. “Ignore this douchebag,” he says to Jonathan, tipping his head toward Sebastian. “He’s more bark than bite.”

“But you’re … friends?” Jonathan says. He’s still try to practice his head around how to people who fling so many insults at each other could actually like each other.

“Yeah, we’re friends. It’s not Sebastian’s fault that he was raised to be a self-centered prick.”

Sebastian feigns embarrassment, batting his eyelashes and. “Aww, Dave, that’s the sweetest thing anybody’s ever said about me.”

Dave wraps an arm around Sebastian’s chest and kisses the top of his head. It’s so confusing. Their gestures don’t match the words that come out of their mouths. This is clearly a complicated friendship.

“Can I ask something personal?” Jonathan says.

Sebastian lights up. “Honey, I’ve been waiting for you to ask me something personal all night.”

“Are you two ex-boyfriends?”

Dave’s beer has arrived and he just took a swig. He almost spits it out. Instead, he shakes his head vigorously as he swallows. “No. Definitely not. Sebastian’s not dating material.”

“But he’s … friendship material?” Jonathan’s parents have always told him that friendship is the most important aspect of a good marriage. If they’re friends and they’ve … done stuff, why aren’t they together?

Sebastian raises his hand. “Hello, people. I’m in the room.”

Dave ignores him. “He hasn’t always been friendship material. But he stood by me in some tough times. So yeah, he’s friendship material.”

Sebastian leans against the bar and covers his face as if he’s ashamed. “Could you stop with the compliments already? Next thing I know you’ll want to hold hands with me and sing ‘Kumbayah’ and every other give-peace-a-chance folksong—” Sebastian looks up suddenly, his body jerking like he just sat on a tack. “Oh my God! I know where I recognize you from! You’re from …” Sebastian hesitates, as if he knows that he should’t speak the word, that he should at least keep that part of the revelation to himself. “I’m in …

Please don’t say Mennonites. Please don’t say Mennonites.

“—instruments and stuff. Except you didn’t have an instrument. You’re the cutie from the back row!”

Cutie? At least that’s flattering, even if the rest of the revelation is completely mortifying. When did the world become so small? Aren’t these different realms supposed to be discrete?: Rosedale, Sectionals, Scandals. It never cross Jonathan’s mind that a person from one might cross over into another. It’s more than clear now what prep school Sebastian goes to. But why didn’t Jonathan recognize him? Maybe he was too distracted by the bodies to look at the faces ...

“What are you talking about?” Dave says.

“Sectionals. I thought when I introduced myself to Jonathan that he looked familiar, but I didn’t put two and two together until just now. You’re from …” Sebastian hesitates, as if he knows that he shouldn’t speak the word, that he should at least keep that part of the revelation to himself. “I’m in
the Dalton Warblers. You’re from that new choir, aren’t you?”

Nonresistance. There’s no point in denying it. “Yes. I’m sorry I didn’t recognize you.”

Sebastian arches a brow. “I sang lead on one of our songs.”

Oh, this is embarrassing. But fully explainable. “I didn’t see your whole set. Had to help out one of my friends.”

“Don’t worry about it. We all look the same in our matching blazers, anyway.” Sebastian slaps Jonathan’s knee, clearly too excited to contain himself. “You guys were great. I usually can’t stand folk songs, but I don’t know, you had good energy—”

“I hated our set.” The words shock Jonathan. Did he actually just say that? Did the bartender put vodka in his drink?

“Oh? Why’s that?” Sebastian says.

Jonathan shifts in his seat uncomfortably—not from Sebastian’s question, but from the shock of having said something so brazen. “Maybe not ‘hate’—that’s a strong word.”

“OK. So you loathed it. Why?”

Jonathan looks at Sebastian, then up at Dave, who’s still standing. Jonathan’s already said too much, been disrespectful by expressing his disagreement with the songlist publicly. But they’re both looking at him like they’re hanging on his every word. It makes him feel like he’s the most fascinating person in the world, which is weird because he’s not, and he shouldn’t want to be, either. Doubly weird because Dave wasn’t even at Sectionals.

Still, it feels nice.

And he feels grateful to Sebastian for keeping his Mennonite secret. So grateful that he suddenly feels safe saying it out loud.

“It wasn’t us,” Jonathan says. “Mennonites usually sing a cappella in four-part harmony. It felt like we were trying too hard to fit in.”

“That’s weird. Why wouldn’t you sing a cappella for Sectionals? We always do. Judges eat that shit up.”

“It was our first time. We didn’t know. Anyway, they’re all old hymns. It wouldn’t have been right to redo the lyrics just so they would fit with the show choir competition rules.”

Sebastian laughs, but not cruelly. “You mean the ‘no Jesus songs’ rule? No one’s going to hold you to that. This is Ohio.”

Dave’s been standing there with his eyebrows growing progressively closer together. “Dude, did you say you’re Mennonite?”

Maybe Jonathan shouldn’t have said anything. He hides behind his glass of 7-Up. “Yeah.”

“Oh, cool. One of my cousins goes to Bluffton,” Dave says. The university, seventeen miles northeast of Lima, is affiliated with the modern wing of the U.S. Mennonite church.

“Different kind of Mennonites.”
“Oh? How? I admit I don’t know much about the whole thing.”

Jonathan’s face heats up from embarrassment even before he speaks. “I’m the suspender-wearing kind.”

Dave looks at him quizzically. “I’m not sure what that means.”

“You know, like the Amish. Except we drive cars and have electricity.”

Dave looks even more confused. “Wait. How can you be like the Amish if you drive cars and have electricity?”

Sebastian nudges Dave’s shin with his toe. “Seriously, Dave. How long have you lived in Ohio?”

Dave looks down at the watch on his wrist, as if that will tell him. “Nine years.”

“Then you have to know what he’s talking about.”

“Nope.”

Sebastian turns to Jonathan. “Should I break it to him, kid?”

Jonathan laughs. “Sure. That’s what I’ve been trying to do.” Besides, he kind of wants to hear Sebastian’s explanation. It’s always amusing (okay, well, sometimes infuriating) to hear outsiders explain the difference between the two groups.

Sebastian puts a hand on Jonathan’s shoulder. “Jonathan here is an Anabaptist. The Anabaptists trace their roots back to the Reformation in sixteenth century Switzerland. You know what the Reformation is, right?”

“Yes. I took world history in high school. It’s when the Protestants split off from the Catholics. Martin Luther and all that stuff,” Dave huffs, his chest going big like a preening bird’s before it deflates. It’s kind of cute.

“Okay, but the Anabaptists thought the Protestants weren’t radical enough. They thought it was wrong to baptize infants, that people should only get baptized when they are adults and can commit to living by the rules of the church. And they thought the church should be less hierarchical, that reliance on priests and other full-time clergy got in the way of the Holy Spirit. They also didn’t believe in using violence for any reason, including war and self-defense.”

Sebastian turns to Jonathan and winks. “How am I doing?”

Jonathan is impressed. “All right so far.”

“So they got called Anabaptists by the Lutherans, because Anabaptist means ‘rebaptizer,’ and the earliest Anabaptists had been baptized by a Catholic or Protestant priest as babies, and now they were getting baptized again as adults. Eventually the Anabaptists broke off into different branches, like the Mennonites and the Amish. But they’re all related. And a lot of them, including our Jonathan here, wear suspenders and funny hats.”

“Hey!” Jonathan squeals. Sebastian was making a very good impression on him until that last sentence. He gives Sebastian a soft poke in the ribs with his index finger, though he isn’t really offended. It’s more an excuse to touch Sebastian than anything.

“I take it you don’t subscribe to the nonviolence part,” Sebastian quips.
“I do most of the time,” Jonathan says. “How do you know all that stuff, anyway?”

“Yeah,” says Dave. “I don’t remember learning any of that in high school.”

“That’s because Dalton Academy provides a much better education than your lowly public school.”

“Douche,” Dave says, but he’s smiling. He turns to Jonathan. “So what you’re trying to say is that you’re usually dressed like an Amish guy in suspenders and one of those hats, and not a tight T-shirt that shows off your smokin’ hot bod?”

Jonathan lowers his eyes bashfully. “I’m not sure about the ‘smoking hot bod’ part, but otherwise, yes.”

“Cool. You’d probably look good in that, too, but I can’t say I mind the T-shirt. Good choice for a night out.”

Jonathan’s at a loss how to respond. It seems rude to contradict Dave twice in a row.

Sebastian apparently reads the conflict on Jonathan’s face, because he leans in and whispers, “This is where you either say ‘thank you’ because you’re flattered, or you kick the guy in the balls because you think they’re trying to get into your pants and you don’t want them to.”

Jonathan definitely doesn’t want to kick Dave in the balls; he wouldn’t want to even if he weren’t a Mennonite. Instead he looks up into Dave’s eyes. “Thank you.”

Sebastian leads and again. “You can also compliment him back, but I wouldn’t recommend it with Dave. It might get to his head. Besides, some guys like it when other guys play hard to get.”

Jonathan’s heard the phrase “playing hard to get” before, but he’s never understood what it entails. Why would pretending not to like someone make them want you even more? If Seth had been cruel to him back before they got together, Jonathan never would have fallen in love. Oh well. No point in trying to figure it out now; Jonathan’s relieved to have an excuse not to answer. Dave is handsome, but Jonathan’s not sure he would know how to compliment someone on their appearance if his life depended on it. Did he ever even tell Seth how nice he was to look at? He doesn’t remember doing so. It was easier to show him.

Sebastian drains the last of his rum and Coke. “C’mon. Let’s dance.”

Before Jonathan can answer, Sebastian has his hand and is pulling him off his stool. Jonathan doesn’t mind though. Sebastian’s assertiveness makes him giddy. Jonathan hardly knows what he wants half the time, while Sebastian just goes out and takes it.

“I don’t really know how to dance,” Jonathan shouts as they move toward the center of the floor. It’s the same kind of voice he uses in the barn with his father and brothers when they need to be heard over the milking machinery. The music is louder here, thumps right through the soles of Jonathan’s shoes. Dave is right with them, hooked on Sebastian’s other hand.

“You don’t have to know how,” Sebastian shouts back. “All you have to do is listen to your body. And if that fails, listen to mine.”

Dave leans in. For the first time, Jonathan notices they’re all three around the same height. It makes it impossible to avoid either of their faces. “Sebastian, that’s the worst pickup line I’ve ever heard come out of your mouth.”
“It wasn’t a pickup line!” Sebastian protests, turning to Jonathan. “Unless you want it to be?”

Jonathan shakes his head, feels himself smile. “Nope. Still waiting for Mr. Right.”

Freeform dancing isn’t as difficult as Jonathan expected. It mostly involves bouncing around on your toes and moving your arms in ridiculous ways. He just copies whatever other people do. It’s a method that suits him. It’s how he learned square dancing, singing, milking cows, and navigating his smart phone. At first it’s the three of them in a circle, but then Dave wanders off to dance with a redheaded guy with a mustache and thick beard. Jonathan wonders what it would be like to kiss a guy with a beard. Would it prickle? Would long makeout sessions leave a rash? Sometimes when Seth hadn’t shaved in a couple days, nestling against his jaw the wrong way would leave Jonathan’s face feeling like he’d made out with sandpaper. It was worth it, though.

But the hair of beards is longer and more forgiving, and the tips must be blunted from exposure. Maybe it would be more like rubbing your cheek against the the belly of an outstretched barn cat, all warm from the sun.

“Jealous?”

“Of what?” Jonathan turns away from watching Dave and Redbeard to focus on Sebastian’s face. He still can’t tell what color Sebastian’s eyes are.

“Of them.” Sebastian indicates the other couple by tilting his head. “I’m sure Dave would dance one-on-one with you if you asked nicely. He doesn’t only like bears.”

It must be even louder in here than Jonathan thought. “Did you say ‘bears’?”
Sebastian smiles. “Oh, I guess you don’t know that one. It means a big or hairy gay guy. You know, the alpha male type.”

That’s another phrase that doesn’t exist in Jonathan’s vocabulary, but he doesn’t ask for clarification. “No. I’m not jealous.” He can’t be. Jealousy is a sin.

Sebastian puts a hand on Jonathan’s hip, checking his face for a reaction. Jonathan nods. He likes being touched there, can already feel the warmth radiating from Sebastian’s skin to his own through the fabric of his jeans. It might be too hot on this dance floor, but Jonathan doesn’t mind it getting hotter. He drapes his forearms over Sebastian’s shoulders, letting his hands hang down behind Sebastian’s neck without really touching it.

Sebastian arches a brow. “So is that the way it’s going to be?”

“What do you mean?”

“You’re not as shy as I expected.”

“It always takes a while for me to warm up.”

“And have you?”

“What do you think?”

Sebastian smiles. “I think you’re flirting with me.”

Jonathan’s too warm to blush. Anyway, he’s pretty sure Sebastian’s right. It doesn’t mean he wants to do anything more with Sebastian. It feels good in itself. “Maybe I am.”

“Here. I want to try something.” Sebastian slides his hands up Jonathan’s bare forearms, each hair he brushes sparking like a live wire against Jonathan’s skin. He loops his hands around Jonathan’s wrists and brings them forward over his shoulders.

Jonathan lets his hands relax as Sebastian leads them downward, letting his palms meld to the shape of Sebastian’s chest, his ribcage, his hips. God, it’s been so long since he’s touched someone this way, and even if it isn’t the same thing, it fills the same need in Jonathan, makes the hole in his heart feel less wide open and aching.

“Now turn.” Sebastian spins Jonathan around a half step so Jonathan’s facing out toward the other dancers. He plants his hands on Jonathan’s hips. Jonathan isn’t sure where to put his own, so he puts them over the back of Sebastian’s.

“Good.” Sebastian closes the gap between their bodies, his torso flat with Jonathan’s back, his chin resting on Jonathan’s shoulder. His hips sway against Jonathan’s ass. Jonathan can’t tell if the hardness he feels there is Sebastian’s hard-on or his zipper, but maybe it doesn’t matter. Jonathan’s body reacts in either case, his dick going half-hard in his jeans. He should be embarrassed by that—he’s in public, surrounded by people who might see—but he’s not. He feels strangely empowered.

Sebastian traces his hands down and up Jonathan’s thighs as they dance, getting just close enough but never gets too close to where he doesn’t belong. Jonathan lets the back of his head relax against Sebastian’s shoulder, swinging with the movements of Sebastian’s body. “You good?” Sebastian says.

“Very,” answers Jonathan. It’s funny how in sync they can be without even looking at each other.
The other dancers on the floor come into sharper focus. Jonathan’s been too overwhelmed by new sensations up to this point to really pay attention. He zeroes in on Dave and Redbeard, who’ve drifted from the center towards the edges. They’re barely even dancing now, just moving their weight slowly from one leg to another, their hands on each other’s waists. Dave says something and Redbeard laughs. When Dave’s mouth opens with his own laughter, Redbeard seizes the opportunity by leaning in to kiss him. Dave looks surprised, but not displeased. His jaw relaxes, and he raises one hand to curl around Redbeard’s ear as he deepens the kiss.

Jonathan grows harder. He knows he should stop looking, should give them their privacy, but he can’t bring himself to.

“Have you ever seen two guys kiss before?” Sebastian whisper-shouts into Jonathan’s ear.

“Not in real life.”

“It’s hot, isn’t it?”

Desire thrums through Jonathan’s body. He doesn’t try to tamp it down. But he doesn’t act on it, either, except for swaying a little more solidly against Sebastian. He feels ecstatic in this limbo of wanting and not-quite-having, but knowing he could if he made the next move.

He remembers those weeks before Seth first kissed him, the desire so strong it made his veins ache, every movement or look from Seth either a clue or a sign of rejection. Jonathan’s desire made him feel weak then, and hopeless. Now it makes him feel invincible.

Seth used to make helpless little noises when Jonathan would kiss him. Sometimes, if the kisses weren’t on Seth’s lips, but instead involved Jonathan’s mouth on Seth’s ear or his collarbone or, later, that wonderfully private hardness down below, the noises weren’t so little. They were as deep as the sound of ice sheets breaking on the lake’s surface during the spring thaw. “Jonathan,” Seth would whisper, and then bite his own hand to keep from shouting.

Those were some of the few moments in Jonathan’s life he can ever remember feeling powerful.

But now he does again, here among this heaving mass of bodies in a tiny little gay bar in Lima, Ohio.

He might have found his home.

*

Jonathan’s parents are usually in bed by eight or nine o’clock in winter, so whether Jonathan gets home at ten at night or three in the morning doesn’t really make a difference as far as getting into trouble goes. But he has to get up to help milk the cows in the morning, and then sit through two hours of church and Sunday dinner without falling asleep. Besides, he’s been up since five this morning. The fact that he feels like liquid putty in Sebastian’s arms isn’t due to lust alone.

“I should go soon,” Jonathan says after they go to the bar to replenish what they’ve lost in sweat while dancing. Jonathan order a cola for this round; he’s not fond of the taste, but he needs the caffeine for the drive home.

Sebastian pulls a phone out of his back pocket. “It’s barely ten. The night is still young. Things don’t really pick up here for another hour.”

“I have to get up to milk the cows.”
Sebastian’s eyes go wide. “Wow. Your life totally sucks, doesn’t it?”

Jonathan chuckles. “It’s not that bad.” At least, it doesn’t feel bad right now. It feels like something special, like it’s got all the promise of the sun when it first starts to peek over the horizon.

Sebastian grabs Jonathan’s phone and adds himself to the contacts. “I usually enter my name as The Hottest Guy You’ve Ever Met, because even if a guy forgets my name, he remembers that much about me. But I figure that wouldn’t go down too well if someone in your family found it.” He hands the phone back to Jonathan, and Jonathan’s relieved to see it simply says “Sebastian.”

“Yeah, well that’s why I keep my phone locked most of the time. But honestly, I don’t think my parents would know how to find anything on it, anyway.”

Sebastian raises an eyebrow. “Mennonite parents aren’t the only ones like that. It took me three days to teach my dad how to send a freaking text message. Here, ring me so I have your number.”

Jonathan does, and when Sebastian is done adding the number to his own contacts, he flashes the screen to Jonathan. The listing says That Cute Mennonite Boy. Jonathan flushes. “Maybe you should change it to That Cute Apostate.”

“Nah,” Sebastian says. “You’re too wholesome to be an apostate.”

Dave and Redbeard come by for beers. Redbeard’s name turns out to be Dan, which Jonathan finds hilarious, although he doesn’t say anything. Dan and Dave. They sound like twin sons of unimaginative parents. Whatever’s going on between them can’t possibly last. Dan is super handsy, though, kissing the back of Dave’s neck and rubbing his hip while he talks. Jonathan finds this behavior both hot and irritating. Dave acts like it’s the most normal thing in the world. Maybe it is.

“Jonathan’s abandoning us,” Sebastian announces to Dave with a frown.

“That’s too bad,” Dave says. “I hardly got to talk to you. Or dance. Though it looks like you had a good teacher.”

“Next time,” Jonathan says. It’s probably a bold thing to say to a guy who’s being made out with, but that is fine with the Jonathan. He should try being bold more often. It feels good.

Maybe if he’d been bolder with Seth, he never would’ve left.

When Sebastian reaches out to shake Jonathan’s hand goodbye, Jonathan doesn’t take it. Instead, he puts a hand on Sebastian’s arm and presses a kiss to his cheek. “Whoa,” says Sebastian. “I didn’t know you had it in you.”

“I definitely do.” Jonathan turns to Dave for the next kiss. His face is saltier than Sebastian’s, and sweet.

Then, for good measure and just to show that none of it means anything, Jonathan plants a last one on Redbeard’s cheek. The beard is definitely rougher than cat hair. It’s more the texture of a fallen robin’s nest or a pile of half-dried hay.

Only when Jonathan pulls away does he remember the texture of Seth’s pubic hair against his lips and nose, wiry and fine. But that was sparser than this beard, less profligate and more restrained. Though shorter, this beard seems somehow immoderate. Jonathan doesn’t think he likes it, but it could just be Redbeard that he doesn’t like. Which doesn’t really make sense, since he’s known
Redbeard for all of… well, two minutes if you only count the time they actually conversed adjacent to each other.

He really needs to work on liking people more.

Jonathan thinks about that a little on the drive back, but mostly he thinks about how it felt to finally be in another guy’s arms after all this time. His dick goes from wobbly little Vienna sausage to half-length bratwurst. It’s not a roaring hard-on, just this pleasant sort of reminder that he has a body and it has its wants, just the way the cattle and the blackbirds and the barn cats do. That’s not supposed to be a comforting thing, to think of oneself as an animal; but even if he takes the story in Genesis literally, God made humans just the same way he made the rest of creatures, by taking dirt and shaping it according to his will. They’re related, even if they’re not the same.

Jonathan flips through radio stations trying to find music that’s like the stuff they played at Scandals. They’re not supposed to have a radio in the truck, but it’s not like anyone comes around checking, and Jonathan is usually pretty good about not listening to it anyway. But he wants to now. Being on the dance floor felt right, just like kissing Seth felt right. He doesn’t even know if he liked the music, but he knows it wasn’t sinful. And he wants to carry that feeling he had when he was dancing as long as he can.

He laughs, remembering all the bickering in the choir room back when they were discussing whether or not it was okay to play musical instruments at Sectionals. Why was Jonathan convinced it was so wrong? He can hardly remember, and the arguments he does remember no longer make any sense. His mother finds joy in Mozart. He finds joy in four-part Mennonite hymn singing and the sexy thumping beat of drum machines and synthesizers.

What he does remember is being thirteen and helping out at the Friesens’ on sheep-shearing day for the first time. It was hard work, herding and holding the sheep in place while the shearers shaved off their wool. But it was fulfilling work, too, filled with laughter and camaraderie. Jonathan had spent most of his life in the mixed-gender world of children, only separating out with men at church services and hunting. But now he was growing up, and he loved this work. With youth and men everywhere he looked, everyone laughing around picnic tables at dinnertime while the women faded into the background.

The men who’d been doing this a while made a few jokes about the rams that only wanted to rut against each other during mating season, but no one condemned it. They were merely animals, and therefore incapable of sin. They didn’t have to marry, either, or go to church each Sunday, or wear hats regardless of the weather.

Thirteen-year-old Jonathan wished he could be a sheep.

*The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.* The words sound in Jonathan’s head as clearly as the song on the radio. He loved that Psalm when he was younger. He pictured Jesus leading him through green fields, protecting him from the evils of the world the way a sheep farmer watches for coyotes. And if a sheep farmer could care for his strange, queer rams as much as the rest of them, maybe Jesus could care for Jonathan, too.

Unfortunately, the comfort in that analogy dissipated when he thought about how the Friesens eventually slaughter most of their sheep.

Still, a death by a knife to the throat is faster and kinder than death at the claws of a wolf or coyote. Jonathan’s seen those kinds of kills on deer, and he never wants to see one again. It doesn’t seem fair that the last moments of a creature’s life should be so drawn out and painful. And if that’s what nature necessitates—the nature God designed—then at least that there ought to be some kind of
heaven waiting for them on the other side. Maybe not the human heaven, if our souls are supposed
to be so much different than the lives God breathed into the creatures. But still something beautiful
and comforting, even if it only lasts for a moment—just to give them one last glimpse of joy before
everything ends.

So yes, a shepherd eventually kills his sheep. But it’s better for the sheep than living without one.
They don’t need to wander in search of food and water, or worry about predators moving in. No,
they don’t have freedom, but they have freedom from want. It’s a good life. And that should be
enough.

Jonathan pulls over at a truck stop to change back into his normal clothing. He doesn’t want an
interrogation if his brother is awake when he gets in. He’s on his way back out to the truck when a
chirp from his phone gets his attention. He pulls it out of his pocket as he gets into the cabin. It’s a
message from Sebastian.

Jonathan opens it up, expecting something flirtatious or slightly raunchy.

    Sebastian: Nice meeting you tonight. Text me if things get too heavy at home, okay?

A lump forms in Jonathan’s throat. His eyes go watery. He blinks so he can see clearly again.

    Jonathan: Thanks.

    Sebastian: Dave wants your number. Can I give it to him?

    Jonathan: Sure.

    Sebastian: He might have ulterior motives.

    Jonathan: ?

    Sebastian: He thinks you’re cute, dummy.

Jonathan has to read the sentence three times before he starts to get it. It doesn’t make sense to
him. Dave was making out with that Redbeard loser all night. On the other hand, he did
compliment Jonathan on his shirt.

Maybe Dave’s like Sebastian, looking for Mr. Right Now, too. Jonathan’s about to ask when he
thinks better of it. Instead, he keeps the focus on Sebastian.

    So do you. It makes Jonathan blush to type the words, and it makes him blush harder to press Send.
He forces himself to do it because it’s true, and he needs to remember this, now and always:
Someone besides Seth thinks Jonathan’s worth looking at. Even if it’s not true love, it’s a
beginning.

*  

In church the next morning, Jonathan sits in the middle of the wooden pew, his father and brothers
on one side. At the door, men kiss each other on the cheeks or lips before finding a place to sit on
the left side of church with their sons, while the women and girls file off to the right.

Jonathan remembers kissing Sebastian and Dave and Redbeard last night—the innocence of it, and
the comfort. At Scandals, that feeling of belonging was for everyone. But here, only baptized
members are allowed kiss each other. It’s a reminder that he doesn’t belong; that the community
found in the church is only for those who give up everything for it.
After Seth was baptized, Jonathan would be hit by pangs of jealousy whenever Seth shared the Holy Kiss with the other adult men, lips against lips. It made Jonathan burn—not sexually, but over the unfairness of it, that this public intimacy among casual friends was sanctified by the church, but the deeper intimacy that he and Seth had shared wasn’t.

Harry Thiessen slides into the pew next to Jonathan, the males from his family on the other side. He smells like Irish Spring and the slightest amount of sweat—not quite as strong as the throng of men pulsing together on the dance floor last night, but still enough to be slightly arousing. Maybe it’s good that Jonathan’s not allowed to do the Holy Kiss. He’d probably be tempted to slip Harry a little tongue.

Jonathan stifles a laugh at the image. The service hasn’t started yet, and the room is quiet except for the shuffling of footsteps and fabric. Harry nudges his elbow and gives him a questioning look. Jonathan shakes his head. *It’s nothing*, he tries to say with his eyebrows. Harry shrugs and looks away.

The talks are miserable as usual. Old man Albrecht preaches about the dangers of higher education, looking over at Sarah and her mother every thirty seconds just to make sure they know his words are directed at them. Rumors fly fast in this community. That’s for sure. Jonathan wishes he could sit over there and block them from the worst of Myron Albrecht’s glares, but he’ll have to make do with texting Sarah later.

The songs are good, though. They almost always are—the only way they can get messed up is if the song leader sets the beat too slow, and then the hymns of praise sound like funeral dirges. But Jacob Brubacher is leading this week, and he’s got a peppy little wave that never lets the music drag.

*Great is Thy faithfulness! Great is Thy faithfulness!*
*Morning by morning new mercies I see.*
*All I have needed, Thy hand hath provided.*
*Great is thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me!*

The words feel true this morning, as does the joyous swell of the music. As insufferable as Harry can be at times, his voice is beautiful: a deep, resonant bass that carries Jonathan’s tenor the way Sebastian’s arms guided Jonathan last night. Jonathan feels God’s love inside himself and outside. He has a sudden torrent of memories from the night before, all jumbled together at once: the texture of Dave’s skin against his lips; the weight of Sebastian’s hands on his hips; the ridiculously kind text. Now that he’s in God’s sanctuary, it’s clear to him in a way it wasn’t before: God brought him to Scandals last night.

*All I have needed, Thy hand hath provided.*
*Great is thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me!*
It’s a good week. Mr. Shenk is back despite his broken ankle. He’s impressive with the way he gets around on crutches, but Jonathan shouldn’t be surprised. Farm work makes for strong arms.

Marley sends a thank you card for the care package, and it’s signed by the entire McKinley glee club. Mr. Shenk puts that in a place of honor, right next to the blackboard where everyone can see it. The second-place trophy goes in the back corner of the music room with the broom and dustpan.

They go back to singing their four-part harmonies, and Sarah starts smiling more often when she’s singing—the real smile, not the one she puts on when she thinks someone might be looking. Mr. Shenk doesn’t banish the instruments, though. They’re learning a new hymn in Zulu, and since Kevin Phelps is out with a cold but is a third of the bass section, Mr. Shenk asks Edna to play along with the bass line of a new song they’re learning so Harry and Vernon Wiebe can get their bearings in it before they have to carry it all by themselves. Neither of them are very good at sight reading.

It’s nice, Jonathan thinks, how the instrument melds with the voices. Its wood body has a resonance that’s almost lifelike. It feels like a natural part of the landscape, the way his and Seth’s voices were among the blackbirds and frogs and flowing water of the creek.

“We should have thought of singing in Zulu before Sectionals,” Sarah says when she climbs into the truck on Wednesday. “No one would have known we were singing about God. And we would have done a lot better.”

“But then we might have won. And you wouldn’t have been happy with that, either.”

Sarah smiles. “I suppose you’re right. That second-place trophy is gaudy enough as it is. I have a mind to throw it in the dumpster.”

“That would be wasteful, though. At least put it to good use. It’s heavy enough to make a handy doorstop. And tall enough to make a substitute table leg.”

Sarah laughs. “Who’d let that thing in their house for use as a table leg? It’s so … shiny.”

So were the disco balls that hung from the ceiling at Scandals, and they were perfectly beautiful. But Jonathan doesn’t mention that. “We could spray paint it black first.”

She really loses it then. “We could be black-bumper Mennonites, like …” She covers her mouth and straightens in her seat, suddenly serious. “I’m sorry. That wasn’t funny.”

Jonathan feels like a marble is lodged in his throat, but he swallows around it. “Do you think Seth was wrong to leave? And the Ens?”

She looks down at her lap. “It’s not my place to judge.”

“Please, Sarah. I want to know.”

“I don’t know. We need the community and the boundaries it gives us to grow as Christians. They help us not to stray from God. But I don’t know that black bumpers keep people from straying any more than regular bumpers do.”

“It’s not just the bumpers, though.”
“No. I’m sure participating in Sectionals would never have flown in their community. But—” She pauses, chewing on her lower lip. “I don’t know that participating in Sectionals was all that bad, actually.”

Jonathan turns to gawk at Sarah. He has to remind himself to keep his eyes on the road. “That’s not what you seemed to think on Thursday.”

She shrugs. “I was being prideful. I wanted things my way. Sectionals was a lesson in humility for me.”

The answer makes Jonathan unexpectedly sad. He likes Sarah’s stubbornness. He doesn’t want her to be humble—not when it comes to the things close to her heart. “It’s important to stand up for what you believe in, though.”

“Not at the expense of the community.” She looks out the window. “They hurt people when they left, the Ens did. People move all the time, and for different reasons. It’s not a sin to move from Ohio to Wisconsin. Land is cheaper there. But they said a lot of things about our way of life that they should have kept to themselves. Frankly, I was surprised they kept in touch with the Groenings. I remember, before they moved, Mrs. Ens scolding Mrs. Groening over Edna’s colored shoelaces. And she would not shut up about calico fabrics being vanity. She wouldn’t wear the maternity dress my mother loaned her because it had flowers on it. We’ve always worn calico here.”

“I didn’t know about that.”

Sarah sighs. “I suppose I shouldn’t have said it, then. I don’t want you to think badly of them. I’m sure they were trying to do what they thought was right. But they hurt people. And Seth hurt people too, didn’t he?”

Jonathan can feel Sarah’s eyes on him. He doesn’t look over at her. Up ahead on the road, it’s just a ribbon of road over rolling hills, and up above that a sky that’s growing grayer by the second. Night falls earlier each day this time of year. Jonathan flicks the headlights on. “Seth fell in love. He wanted to get married.” Both those things are true, if not causally related.

“It must have been hard for your best friend to leave six months after your brother did.”

The marble in Jonathan’s throat grows into an egg. “We’re not supposed to have favorites among our brothers in Christ.”

“Pffft. In the abstract, yes. But if you take that literally, no one would ever be able to choose a husband or a wife.” She’s still looking at him. Since he refuses to look in her direction, Jonathan can’t tell what kind of look, but he’s pretty sure it’s not one he’d like. This is one of those moments when it feels like she knows him completely. “Spouses are different from friends.” He manages not to choke on the words.

“If you say so. It’s funny, though.”

Jonathan keeps waiting for the next sentence, but it doesn’t come. Odd. It’s not like Sarah to keep him hanging. “What’s funny?”

“It seems to me they should be the same thing. That your best friend should be the person you marry. Or the person you marry should be your best friend. I think people are happiest that way.”

The egg in Jonathan’s throat? It turns into a pipe wrench, twisting him up from the inside. He feels about ready to puke. He can barely see the road in front of him.
“Watch it!” Sarah startles as a deer leaps across the road. Jonathan swerves just in time to miss it.

It’s nothing, the kind of near-accident that happens all the time out in the country. Usually, he’d roll right on. But not today. He brings the car to a stop in the ditch. He can barely breathe.

Sarah puts a hand on his shoulder. “You okay, Jonathan?”

“I didn’t even see it.” He’s so short of air that it comes out like a sob.

“The sun’s getting low. All the browns look the same.” She gives him a squeeze before letting go. “Take a deep breath.”

He complies. “I could have killed us both.”

“Nah,” she says. “The deer would have gotten the worst of it. We’d have a free dinner.”

He laughs. “You would have helped me load it into the truck bed?”

“I’ve handled worse.”

“Practice for midwifery, huh?”

She snorted. “You’re disgusting.”

More air enters Jonathan’s lungs as he continues to laugh, and he forgets what caused the near-miss in the first place. He feels loose-limbed and young. Life is good again. He pulls back onto the road.

“You know what’s weird?” Sarah says after a couple of minutes.

“You?”

“Ha ha. No.” She fiddles with her cap strings. “For some reason, it felt more personal when the Ens left than when your brother did.”

“Why? Were you friends with Martha?”

Sarah shakes her head. “Not really. But it feels like more of a judgment on us. They’re leaving over petty things, like the color of our shoelaces and our dresses and our cars. Splitting straws, you know? I doubt anyone’s salvation depends on the length of their cap strings. But being Amish is a whole different ballgame. No electricity, no telephone, no cars … If that’s the life you’re called to, you really do have to leave.”

“You were never subjected to one of Alvin’s lectures. He could be judgmental, too.”

“I suppose not.” Jonathan feels her eyes on him again. “Was it hard on you when he left?”

_Not as bad with Seth around, _Jonathan thinks, but doesn’t say. _What do you think? _is his next thought, but that would be mean. She couldn’t have done anything to make it easier. “Sort of.”

“I’m sorry. I should have been a better support.”

“There’s not much you could have done.”

“Maybe not. But friendship is important. It makes lots of things easier.” She pauses. “How are things going with Alvin now?”
“Better, I think. It could just be because you can’t argue in letters, but ... maybe it’s good for him? He seems less contentious.”

“Maybe he misses you.”

“Maybe.”

“And maybe you’re right. Maybe the Amish are a good influence on him. Perhaps that’s where God wants him to be.”

“If God wants Alvin to be Amish, wouldn’t that mean God wants all of us to be Amish?”

“I don’t think so. The Rules & Discipline are there to help us stay close to Christ. But they aren’t Christ himself. Our Rules & Discipline help me keep my priorities straight. The Amish Rules & Discipline helps the Amish.”

“But what about the people who have no Rules & Discipline at all?” He thinks of Unique, who seemed to have some sort of faith in Christ, but who goes around with her hair uncovered and in dresses that are too figure-hugging to fall into the “plain” category, even if they do hide her shoulders.

“No one can be assured of their salvation, not even when we’re baptized. So I don’t think we can say that some people aren’t saved, either. Maybe they’re called to a different path.”

“Do you really think God would call people in that direction, though? Not away from worldliness, but toward it?” He wants to know. He’s rarely felt so at peace as he did on Saturday night. It’s hard to believe that could be a trick of the devil. And with the things she seemed to be hinting at earlier ...

“I don’t know.” She looks at her lap. “Is this about me wanting to go to school?”

Jonathan had forgotten all about that. Huh. Maybe she hadn’t been hinting about him and Seth at all. Maybe she was talking about something different, though what it would be he doesn’t know. Sarah’s so strange. Sometimes he thinks she knows everything about him, and other times it’s like she knows nothing at all. Like they’re speaking two different languages that sound the same, but all the words have different meanings. “No, Sarah. It’s not about you wanting to go to school.”

“You don’t think I’m being sinful?”

“To want to help people? No.”

“You didn’t seem so open to it when we talked before.”

“I was surprised. That’s all. I’d never really thought about it.” Jonathan suddenly remembers Myron Albrecht’s talk from Sunday and his note to himself to say something about it to Sarah. He immediately feels like a terrible friend for forgetting all about it. “Higher education probably is a danger for most people. But nursing is a humble profession, and you’re a good girl. It isn’t going to pull you into a world of sin.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence.” Her tone is sarcastic, but out of the corner of his eye, he sees a sincere smile form on her lips.

It’s twilight by the time they reach the Yoders, the sky deep, dark purple instead of gray. Jonathan drives Sarah to the front door. Through the window, he can see her mother and younger sisters working in the kitchen.
“Thanks for the ride,” Sarah says as she slides out of the passenger seat to the ground. She grabs her pink backpack from the footboard. “You’re a good friend, Jonathan. Thanks.”

She shuts the door behind her and he watches as she lets herself into the house. He realized to his own chagrin that he feels more relaxed with her gone. Trying to figure out what she really meant earlier when she was talking about friendship and marriage is like having an itch that he can’t scratch. Now he can pretend she never said it in the first place.
By the time the following Saturday rolls around, Jonathan’s itching to peel off his plain dress again and replace it with soft stretch denim and knit fabrics that cling to his body like a second skin. Sebastian’s texted him a few times, and so has David, and he’s chatted with Unique on Facebook. She wants to introduce Jonathan to a gay kid from New Directions who’s newly single and really needs to get over his ex, and who wears suspenders even when he’s not on stage.

The description makes Jonathan laugh. He wants a boyfriend, not a twin.

He checks out the kid’s profile, anyway. Blaine Anderson. Relationship status: It’s complicated. He has a ton of photos from parties and performances, several of him wearing a Dalton blazer with the Warblers. Huh. Why would a gay kid leave that testosterone-fueled paradise?

Jonathan shrugs. Maybe Blaine’s parents couldn’t afford the tuition anymore.

All the pictures make it clear that Blaine is totally not Jonathan’s type. Not that Jonathan was conscious of having a type, but… This Blaine. He’s short and compact, and it’s sort of cute how someone so little can have the chest muscles filling out his cotton-knit polo shirts. But it’s cute the way a calf is cute, or a litter of kittens. If Jonathan wanted to touch the guy, it would be to scratch his belly, not to kiss him.

Not that Jonathan should judge someone on looks alone. He didn’t always want Seth the way he does now. But even when they were younger, and Jonathan’s only inkling of sex was what he’d seen in the barnyard, Seth put stars in his eyes. He couldn’t get enough of Seth’s smile or his laugh or of watching Seth walk along the side of the road, his bare feet flashing golden-pink against the asphalt with each step, his strong, square hands gripping a fishing rod or a basket or a wagon handle, his hair hanging out from beneath the brim of his straw hat, glistening like water in the late afternoon sun.

Jonathan would follow him and Alvin around like some kind of lost puppy, much more eager for Seth’s attention and approval than his own brother’s. When it was time to bait the fish hooks, Jonathan wanted Seth to show him how to do it. When he reeled in a big one, he looked to Seth for the thumbs up before he turned to his own brother. Nothing made Jonathan’s day like Seth smiling at him, that tiny dimple forming a crease in his left cheek and his brown eyes lighting up like the sky on Easter morning.

Of course, looking at a picture isn’t the same as looking at a real person. Maybe up close, this Blaine guy would be more than kittens and baby bovines. This ex-boyfriend of Blaine’s certainly seemed to think so. Jonathan spots the guy just by the look in his eyes when he’s near Blaine, then confirms him as the ex by flipping through more photos and finding frame after frame of the two boys standing side by side, arms around each other’s waists. Kurt Hummel, the photo tag tells Jonathan when he presses his finger to the image.

Jonathan skims through more photos. As much as Blaine isn’t Jonathan’s type, Jonathan might very well be his. Kurt is tall and skinny like Jonathan, underfed and bird-boned. But it looks better on this Kurt, more refined. Like a fully grown peacock, where Jonathan’s more like an awkward adolescent goose.

Maybe it’s the clothes. They fit amazingly well: vests that make his chest look like God sculpted Kurt out of marble instead of the dirt he used for the rest of the human race, stretch jeans that streamline his legs but not his package—and it’s quite an intriguing package. It makes Jonathan
think of the way Seth used to fill out the front of his trousers when he got aroused. Seth’s mother never left much leeway in the inseam for accommodating such things, and the resulting tightness just made it look bigger. “You’d better let that thing out before you rip a seam,” Jonathan would tease into Seth’s ear, undoing the buttons along Seth’s waist until the front flap fell open.

Jonathan flips to another photo. It’s not right to be staring at the crotch of another guy’s boyfriend. Or ex-boyfriend. Or anyone’s crotch but his own, really, and even that’s questionable. Desire without connection is merely lust.

Maybe Jonathan would be as refined as this Kurt boy if he dressed differently, too. Maybe he could also be porcelain instead of plain old earthenware.

But even if he could, would he want his arm wrapped around the hip of Blaine Anderson? Jonathan tries to picture himself in Kurt’s place. He can’t.

Jonathan sends a friend request to Blaine anyway. It’ll make Unique happy.

He won’t be seeing Unique today, though. It’s almost Christmas, and his uncle’s got more deliveries to make. That gives him an excuse to go to Lima, but not to hang out as long as he did last week. He’s got three deliveries to make, and with the small talk and requisite Mennonification from his uncle’s customers, it won’t leave him with more than a couple of hours to hang out. And if he only has a couple hours, it’s Scandals he’s going to. It’s not even a question.

He shoots a quick text to Sebastian and Dave. Still planning to be there at six?

Sebastian’s the first one to answer. Depends what you’re wearing.

Jonathan’s not sure if that’s a come-on or a jab. He answers it straight. Same thing as last week. I don’t own that many T-shirts. Also, Dave said he looked hot in it. So there’s that.

You could show up shirtless.

Am I going to have to delete all your messages from my phone?

Probably.

Fine. What are you wearing?

Something to make mouths water and grown men cry.

Jonathan sucks in his bottom lip. Sebastian has a decent body—more than decent when it’s pressed up against Jonathan’s. He imagines Sebastian primped up like Kurt, in a fitted vest and shirtsleeves that he’s rolled up to bare his forearms, dancing around in pants that don’t leave what’s beneath up to the imagination.

Now that would make grown men cry.

Jonathan pushes the image out of his head. This is no time to get a boner. He needs to get to Uncle Abraham’s if he wants to get to Scandals by seven, and besides, the house and barn are crawling with people. If the situation gets dire, he can get some privacy at the gas station.

*

Sebastian’s already sitting at the bar when Jonathan arrives at Scandals. It’s earlier than when he
got here last week, and far less crowded. On the dance floor, someone in a brown leather cowboy hat is teaching a line of four men the steps to some kind of dance. Otherwise, the dance floor is empty. Jonathan can see Sebastian clear across the room, in not-tight jeans that are slightly frayed at the cuffs and a slate-gray T-shirt. It’s not as hot an assemblage as Jonathan dreamed up in his head earlier while texting Sebastian and later in the gas station halfway to Lima, but his forearms are showing, so that’s nice.

There’s an empty stool on one side of Sebastian, and a patron he’s talking to on the other. It’s not Dave, who said he wouldn’t be able to make it until later because of another paper he wanted to finish (and that excuse made Jonathan wonder if he could trust Sebastian’s He thinks you’re cute, dummy, because if Dave thought he was cute, wouldn’t he show up to Scandals on time?). In fact, it’s a far cry from Dave. Jonathan can tell even with the guy’s back to him. He’s short, for one thing, the top of his head coming up only to the level of Sebastian’s eyes, his toes barely reaching the lower rung on the bar stool. And though he’s got a nice set of biceps sticking out from the arms of his polo shirt, he’s not built.

The guy turns to say something to Sebastian, and it’s the profile of his hair and his thick, caterpillar-like eyebrow that make Jonathan realize: It’s Blaine Anderson, the guy Unique is trying to set Jonathan up with.

Small freaking world. Though maybe that shouldn’t surprise Jonathan. Blaine did used to wear a Dalton blazer, after all.

For a split second, Jonathan thinks about turning around and leaving. But that would be stupid. He’s been looking forward to being here all week. And Blaine being here can’t be a set up. Unique didn’t know that Jonathan would be here tonight. Besides, just because they’re both gay and heartbroken doesn’t mean that Jonathan has to date the guy if he doesn’t want to. He can simply make another new friend, the way he did last week with Sebastian and Dave.

Jonathan takes a deep breath and heads across the room. He slides into the empty stool next to Sebastian without saying a word and purposely doesn’t look over at the other two. He hates interrupting people. He’ll wait for a pause in the conversation to say hello.

“You guys wouldn’t have won if there was always an emergency supply of juice boxes backstage like I’ve been saying there should be for—”

“Years, apparently.” Sebastian interrupts Blaine. Jonathan can’t see Sebastian’s face, but it sounds like he’s smirking. “Trent picked up the juice box torch after you left the Warblers. Acts like it’s a cardinal sin to perform without a few in the wings.”

“Where was Trent at Sectionals, anyway?” Blaine holds a white ceramic mug in one hand. He takes a sip of whatever’s in it.

Sebastian shrugs. “He and Hunter had a disagreement.”

“And you went and performed without Trent? He’s the sunshine of the Warblers. If Hunter’s annoyed Trent so much that he won’t perform, it’s Hunter you should be getting rid of.”

“Yeah, I’ve probably already said too much. No more show choir talk.” He stirs his swizzle stick through a glass of what looks to be mostly ice. “Tell me about something else. How’s gayface?”

“Kurt? Why would you ask me about Kurt? I’m not going to sleep with you, if that’s what you ...”

Whatever else Blaine says gets lost under the voice of the bartender, who leans across the counter
and says, “What can I get you to drink?” It sounds like a proposition in his quiet, soothing bass. Jonathan’s skin tingles. If the bartender didn’t have a ring through his eyebrow and look like he was pushing forty—a sexy forty, but still forty—Jonathan might want to pursue the source of that tingle.

“7-Up, please.”

Sebastian spins around in his chair as soon as Jonathan speaks. He pats Jonathan’s shoulder. “Hey, Mr. Sneaky! How long have you been sitting there?”

“Not long.”

“Well, no more being a wallflower now.” Sebastian slides off his stool so Jonathan has a clear sightline on Blaine.

Blaine’s eyes go from Jonathan to Sebastian and back again. “You know each other? I’m so sorry. You should have said something earlier. You’ve been sitting here for three minutes while I just yack my mouth off.”

“It’s okay,” Jonathan says. “I don’t talk much, anyway.”

“We’ll change that eventually,” says Sebastian. “But first, introductions. Jonathan, this is Blaine. He’s sex on a stick, but will only put out for his ex-boyfriend and random guys from Facebook he’s never actually met before. Since you’ve now seen him in person, you have zero chance of sleeping with him. Join the club.”

Blaine rolls his eyes. “One random guy. I hooked up with one random guy.”

“And Blaine, this is Jonathan.” Sebastian squeezes Jonathan’s shoulder, and Jonathan goes taut like fishing line. After that introduction, he can’t imagine what Sebastian’s going to say about him. “He’s sweet, innocent, a fledgling twink, and loves to sing. If you weren’t so hung up on gayface, he’d be right up your alley.”

Huh. Slightly horrifying, but not as bad as Jonathan had feared.

Blaine is the first to recover. He must be used to these sorts of introductions. “Nice to meet you, Jonathan.” He leans across Sebastian’s empty stool and offers his hand.

“Nice to meet you, too.” Jonathan shakes it. He’s surprised at the firmness of the grip. He didn’t expect that kind of strength to be bound up in such a small body. But then again, those polo shirt sleeves really are snug around the biceps.

“You’re a singer? What kind of music?” Blaine says.

“Um, actually … My choir competed against you at Sectionals. I actually sent you a friend request on Facebook this afternoon.”

A light flicks on in Blaine’s eyes. Or maybe the disco ball just made a half-turn. “Oh! You’re that Jonathan! From the Rosedale Mennonites! That was so nice of you, bringing that care package to Marley. She and Unique have been talking about you all week.”

Jonathan feels his face warm. Apparently Unique’s been trying to work the match from both ends. “It was nothing. I didn’t make any of it.”

“Well, whoever baked those chocolate chip cookies is a culinary genius. They’re amazing.” The
face Blaine makes is ecstatic and slightly sexual.

Jonathan has to look away. “Sarah Yoder. She’s the girl who made them. They’re my favorite, too.”

“Tell her I want the recipe. I need to make more.”

“You bake?”

“Of course. Doesn’t everyone?”

“I … no. I don’t know the first thing about it, actually.”

Blaine frowns. “I’ll have to teach you, then. It’s one of the great joys in life, making food. I’m community outreach coordinator for the McKinley High School Future Homemakers of America, and I ran on a platform of a cookbook on every teen’s iPhone. I’m hosting a holiday cookie bake-in for the club at my house this month. You can come if you want.”

“A bake-in?”

“Yeah. Like a bake-off, but noncompetitive.”

Huh. The noncompetitive part sounds nice, but the cooking part sounds out of Jonathan’s wheelhouse. He already feels out of his wheelhouse enough as it is among non-Mennonites.

“Thank you.” Jonathan figures that’s polite but noncommittal.

“Wow,” Sebastian says, patting both of them on the shoulders. “You two are just wholesome peas in a pod, aren’t you?”

Blaine looks down at his watch. “Speaking of wholesome, I should probably get going. Homework to finish.” He hops down from his stool and picks a messenger bag up from the floor, sliding it crosswise over his shoulder.

“Blaine, the night is young. Technically, it hasn’t even started yet.”

Blaine scrunches his nose. “I know, but I didn’t come here for the night scene. I came here for Scandals Stitch ‘n’ Bitch, and it ended half an hour ago.”

“What the hell is Stitch ’n’ Bitch?” Sebastian says. Jonathan’s glad of it, because he was wondering too.

“You don’t know about Stitch ’n’ Bitch? It’s the best. All ages afternoon knitting circle.” Blaine reaches into his bag, and for the first time Jonathan notices a big red X on the back of his hand. He pulls out a pair of knitting needles and a half finished scarf of red, black, and white stripes. The stitches are neat and even. “I thought it was time I had one in McKinley colors,” Blaine says, giving Sebastian a meaningful look.

“Blaine, there’s still time to come back to the dark side.”

Blaine must notice the confused look on Jonathan’s face, because he meets his eyes and explains. “I used to go to Dalton. The Warblers tried to get me back before Sectionals this year. I told them no.” Blaine turns back to Sebastian on the ‘no,’ his eyebrows furrowing together like he’s scolding a misbehaving dog.

“And Dalton is the dark side?” Jonathan asks. If it is, he should reconsider his fascination with it.
“Not Dalton,” Blaine says, folding his scarf back up and sliding it back in his bag. “The Warblers. I don’t think it’s a permanent situation, but ever since I left Dalton they’ve had problems with leadership.”

“Hey, I heard that,” Sebastian says, but he doesn’t seem too offended.

“It’s not like you can argue that I’m wrong,” says Blaine. He adjusts his back strap so it’s sitting more snugly on his shoulder.

“Yeah, you’re right. I was a pretty terrible leader. But I am trying to be a better person now. Don’t I get any points for that?” Sebastian scratches his chin. “And by ‘points’ I mean ‘blow jobs.’ Because being good is really boring.”

Jonathan’s not sure if Sebastian means it for real or as a joke. He hopes it’s a joke, even though it’s not funny to make jokes about being a good person. He files the comment away to think more about later.

“Do a better job of reining in Hunter, and I’ll buy you a coffee with Courvoisier at the next Stitch ‘n’ Bitch.” Blaine pats Sebastian on the shoulder.

“Yeah, I don’t think so. Remember what I just said about boring?”

“Hook-ups happen at the Stitch ‘n’ Bitch, too,” Blaine says in a sing-song voice. He pulls his coat off the back of his stool and drapes it over his shoulders and bag strap like a cloak.

“I bet engagements happen at the Stitch ‘n’ Bitch,” Sebastian says caustically.

Blaine ignores the comment and turns to Jonathan. “Jonathan, it was delightful meeting you. Sorry I couldn’t hang out longer, but I really do need to get my school work done. I fell behind earlier this semester and … well, you don’t need to hear that whole story right now. I’ll look for you on Facebook and send you the deets on that bake-in, okay?” Blaine maintains eye contact through the whole mini-speech, his face making this wild array of cutely earnest expressions as he talks. Jonathan has the urge to scratch him behind the ears like he’s an attention-hungry calf.

Instead, he shakes Blaine’s hand. “Thanks. Good work on the scarf, by the way.”

Blaine’s eyes go wide. For a moment, Jonathan gets the impression that rainbows are shooting out of them, but then he realizes that the dance floor lights have been turned on. “Do you knit?” Blaine says it with the enthusiasm of someone who’s seen a chrysalis turn into a butterfly for the first time.

Which makes Jonathan feel a little bad for having to answer, “No. My mom and sisters do.”

“Well, cool. If you ever decide to take it up, the Stitch ‘n’ Bitch is a great place to practice. But people bring all kinds of crafts—embroidery, crochet, sewing, thread-knotting. It’s a really welcoming group. Next meeting’s in two weeks.”

“Thanks.”

“All right. See you around.” Blaine pats Jonathan on the elbow and nods to Sebastian before whipping around toward the exit, the empty arms of his coat swinging with each step. He manages to look regal somehow.

“That man is a force of nature,” Sebastian says as they watch him go. He slides back onto his barstool.
Sebastian’s use of the word “man” jars Jonathan. Blaine’s seems mostly boy to Jonathan. He’s too enthusiastic and open to be an adult. “He seems nice,” Jonathan says.

“Too nice for his own good, if you ask me. Which means you two probably would get along swimmingly.” Sebastian makes it sound almost like an insult. “But really, if you guys start hanging out, don’t set your hopes on him. He’s a mess over his ex. I don’t understand the pull that queen has over him.”

“Wasn’t planning to.” Jonathan feels out of his depth. Queen can’t possibly be a compliment—it’s never flattering for a guy to be called by a woman’s title—but Sebastian doesn’t sound hostile. If anything, there’s a slight whiff of admiration under the bewilderment.

“Good. That man is a heartbreaker.”

Jonathan has a hard time imagining how that could be. “No, really. He’s not my type.”

That gets Sebastian’s interest. He turns to Jonathan with a smile as big as a salamander’s. “Oh? And what is your type?”

Jonathan regrets saying anything. When he stopped at the gas station men’s room on his way into Lima to change his clothes and relieve his aching hard-on, Sebastian in a brocade vest was his type. Jonathan’s definitely not going to mention that. It was a fantasy. He knows a guy like Sebastian would be trouble for a guy like him.

At the same time, Jonathan also wants to say more. No one has ever asked him what kind of person he’s attracted to. No one’s ever wanted to know. Beyond the fact that Mennonites aren’t supposed to be gay, they’re not supposed to have types, either. They’re supposed to see people for who they are on the inside. And what’s on the inside is definitely part of it. But it’s not all of it. If it was, Jonathan wouldn’t be attracted to Harry Thiesen. “Tall,” Jonathan says.

Sebastian snorts. “Seriously? Is that the only requirement? I mean, it definitely rules out Blaine, but that can’t be the only thing you like in a guy.” He nods to the bartender to refill his drink—turns out it’s just seltzer water—before turning back to Jonathan. “How tall is tall, anyway? Like, basketball player, or …?”

Jonathan shakes his head. “At least as tall as me.”

“Okay. What else?”

Jonathan pictures Seth. Even after these three months, it’s not difficult. “Broad shoulders. Muscles. Not scrawny like me.”

“A guy with meat on his bones?”

Jonathan nods.

“Like Dave?”

Jonathan shrugs.

“Be that way. Hairy or not hairy?”

“Depends where you mean.”

Sebastian lets out a hoot. “Wow. I did not expect that from you.”
Oh crap. Sebastian’s thoughts must have somehow involved genitals. “That’s not what I— I meant, I like a guy who shaves.”

Sebastian waggles his eyebrows. “Yes, but where?”

“His face. Where else?”

“Oh, poor kitten. You have so much to learn.”

Jonathan doesn’t like this conversation. It makes him feel stupid. He didn’t feel stupid last week when he was talking with Sebastian, and definitely not when they were dancing. He changes the subject. “Who’s Hunter?”

Sebastian’s not laughing anymore. He looks grim. “You heard more of my conversation with Blaine than I thought, huh?”

“I guess so.”

“Captain of the Warblers. But I don’t like talking about him.”

Jonathan thinks of Blaine’s aversion to talking about Kurt earlier. His own aversion to talking about Seth. “Why? Did you date him?”

Sebastian’s chuckle is bleak. “No.” He doesn’t elaborate, just calls the bartender over and orders a whiskey sour even though he’s barely touched his seltzer refill. They sit in silence while the bartender mixes the drink and sets it on the counter in front of Sebastian. When Sebastian starts talking again, he’s looking at the mirror on the back wall of the bar, not at Jonathan. “I’m really not a nice person. It’s important that you know that about me.”

Jonathan’s not sure how to answer. No one’s ever said something like that to him before. It seems like one of those things that, just by speaking it, it becomes untrue, like, I’m not talking or I have no voice. A bad person wouldn’t just come out and admit it. They would obfuscate and come up with excuses. If Sebastian genuinely thinks he’s not nice, there must be some good inside him.

Sebastian takes a sip of his drink, puckering his face as it hits his tongue. He sets the glass down. “Last year I was captain of the Warblers. And I did some pretty awful things. I wanted to win at any cost—Sectionals, Regionals, Blaine. I harassed the captain of New Directions online. I was going to humiliate Blaine’s boyfriend by throwing a slushie in his face, and instead ended up giving Blaine an eye injury with the ice. It’s a wonder he even talks to me. And Dave— That didn’t have anything to do with winning. It just had to do with being a narcissist. I was a jerk to Dave at a time in his life when all he needed was one person who wasn’t a jerk to him. So, I had a wake-up call of sorts.” Sebastian still doesn’t look at Jonathan. He settles his eyes on Jonathan’s drink instead.

And Jonathan’s glad. He’s not sure he can deal with looking at Sebastian straight-on right now. Online harassment, throwing a slushie in someone’s face—they’re not the worst evils Jonathan can imagine, but they’re not innocuous. They’re violent and worldly. They’re the kind of cruelties that make it hard for Jonathan to trust the world outside of Rosedale.

At the same time, Sebastian figured out that they’re wrong without the aid of the Dordrecht Confession: “we must not inflict pain, harm, or sorrow upon anyone, but seek the highest welfare and salvation of all men, and ... we must pray for our enemies, feed and refresh them whenever they are hungry or thirsty, and thus convince them by well-doing, and overcome all ignorance.” That’s admirable.
Jonathan is torn between revulsion and respect. He’s sure the conflict is written all over his face.

“I decided winning wasn’t worth it at all costs. Always coming out on top wasn’t worth it if it meant kicking others to the bottom. I told that to the Warblers. I was going to lead them back into respectability. But they weren’t so hot on the idea. They elected a new captain.”

“That sucks. You were trying to do the right thing.”

Seth takes a hard gulp from his drink. He smacks his lips as it goes down. “Doing the right thing doesn’t always get rewarded. Look what happened to Dirk Willems.”

Jonathan jerks up straight. “You know about Dirk Willems?” Jonathan knew, of course, but his family had a worn copy of *The Martyr’s Mirror* in the living room and a woodcut in the history/English classroom at Rosedale Mennonite Secondary School that told all about the sixteenth-century Anabaptist escaping from a Dutch prison in winter. When the prison guard pursuing him fell through surface of an icy pond, Willems stopped in order to save the man. Willems was returned to prison, where he happily met his own death by fire.

The story sends chills through Jonathan every time.

“I’ve told you, Dalton’s a good school.” Sebastian looks at Jonathan’s eyes for the first time since this strand of the conversation began and leans in conspiratorially. “And when we studied the Reformation last year, my teacher assigned the Anabaptists as my paper topic. I think she was hoping to reform me.”

Jonathan thinks about the Holy Spirit and the mysterious ways in which it works. Maybe there was something working in Sebastian’s teacher’s soul when she assigned the topic. Maybe it’s part of what turned him toward the light. Jonathan feels a sudden tenderness toward him. Living outside of the church must be like being cast out in the middle of Lake Erie during a storm and with no life preserver. Everyone’s flailing, each in their own way. Jonathan’s luckier than Sebastian in that sense.

“Dirk Willems died, but he died doing the right thing,” Jonathan says. “He’ll be rewarded for it eventually.” *The Martyr’s Mirror* says so: “[W]hen the chief Shepherd shall appear in the clouds of heaven and gather together His elect from all the ends of the earth, [Willems] shall also through grace hear the words, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant; thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things; enter thou into the joy of thy Lord.’”

“Do you really believe that? Heaven and the chorus of angels and all that jazz?” Sebastian says. His tone is slightly condescending, but it’s also honest. He wants an answer.

“I don’t spend too much time thinking about heaven. None of us can be sure we’ll end up there, no matter how good a life we lead. But there’s got to be some sort of reward for the suffering, even if it’s only a feeling of comfort before the pain ends.”

Sebastian looks at Jonathan like he’s a puzzle to be solved. “But if you don’t go to heaven, don’t you end up in hell?”

“I suppose.” Jonathan thinks about hell as infrequently as he thinks about heaven, except when hell comes up as a sickening undercurrent in some of the talks people give in church. It’s hard to reconcile the idea of a fiery hell with a God who said to turn the other cheek. Why would he ask of his followers what he wouldn’t be willing to do himself? “But hell could just mean that we disappear when we die.”
“Okay. So what if Dirk Willems didn’t go to heaven. What if he just died? Was saving an ungrateful prison guard worth it?”

“If Dirk Willems hadn’t saved the guard’s life, he would have had the burden of another man’s death on his hands his whole life. That would have been its own kind of hell, don’t you think?”

Sebastian watches his drink as he swirls it around in his glass. “Yeah. I do.”

They’re quiet again. Jonathan sips his 7-Up. Sebastian drains his glass until nothing’s left but a maraschino cherry and three large ice cubes. He orders another one. “You mind if I ask you something else before we drop the religion talk?”

Jonathan didn’t come here to talk about religion, but it permeates everything he does. It’s not like he can avoid it. “Sure.”

“How much of it do you actually believe?”

“What do you mean?”

“What you were raised with. Mennonite-ism. Like, do you believe in God? Are you planning to get baptized? Is coming to Scandals just part of your Rumspringa before you return to the fold?”

“We don’t have Rumspringa.”

“You know what I mean.”

Jonathan takes another sip of his 7-Up to give himself time to think. He’s not used to talking about this kind of stuff. In Rosedale, people just assume that you’re going to conform to the plan. If you
won’t or can’t, you’re not supposed to say so out loud. It causes contention, and contention is sin. That’s half of what made things so difficult with Alvin before he left. He kept opening his mouth.

Even with Seth, when they were doing things they weren’t supposed to be doing and feeling things that were impossible for Mennonites to feel, they rarely talked about what any of it meant for the truth of what they’d been taught. Jonathan let both things dwell in him as separate, contradicting truths: The Dordrecht Confession was true, the gospel was true, the Rules & Discipline were true. And what he felt in his heart for Seth was also true.

He remembers one summer evening lying by the creek with Seth. The sun was setting. One half of the sky was purple with twilight, the first white stars piercing through its fabric. The other half of the sky was painted in streaks of pink and sherbet orange as the sun descended behind silver clouds.

Jonathan thought about God and the foolishness of painters who try to capture his glory. He started to count the colors in the sky.

“Seth, I just realized something,” he said when he ran out of names for the endless shades.

“Yes?” Seth said with a lazy squeeze of Jonathan’s hand.

“The sky isn’t blue.”

Jonathan turned and watched Seth as he scanned the sky, quietly murmuring to himself. The tic spasmed through the left side of his face once or twice. He was beautiful. A minute passed. Seth let out an astounded gasp. “You’re right.” And then he began to giggle.

“What’s so funny?” Jonathan said, though by now he was laughing too. It was impossible not to. Seth’s emotions were contagious.

Seth looked at him. “I love you.”

Jonathan’s laughter caught in his throat. Seth didn’t say the words often. Jonathan wanted to roll on top of him and pin him to the ground. Instead, he said, “And that’s funny?”

Seth brushed Jonathan’s cheek with his thumb. “No, not that. Just, I might have gone my whole life thinking the sky was blue if it wasn’t for you. Because that’s what people told me, and I was too foolish to look for myself.”

“Seth—” But Jonathan couldn’t say anymore, because Seth’s lips were on his, and that was even better than talking.

When Jonathan walked home that night with his empty fishing bucket, Jonathan couldn’t stop smiling. If there was more to the sky than blue, maybe there was more to God than what he’d been told, too. Maybe there was room in God’s kingdom for the love he felt for Seth. After all, there was room in the sky for orange and pink. And God was so much bigger than the sky.

Sebastian’s voice jerks Jonathan back to the present moment. “You still with me?”

Jonathan nods even though the image of that summer sky is clearer to him in this moment than the liquor bottles lined up along the mirrored wall of the bar.

“If it’s too personal to talk about what you believe—”
“No.” Jonathan needs to say it, to try to find words for the things he couldn’t even tell Seth. “Do you believe the sky is blue?”

“‘Believe’? Is this a trick question?”

“No. I don’t think so.”

“Sure. I guess. The sky is blue most of the time, except at sunrise and sunset and before a tornado or during a storm or— Well, you get the idea.”

Jonathan nods. “I’m a Mennonite. I don’t know how to be anything else. I was taught these things like I was taught the sky was blue. And it is, most of the time. But sometimes it’s not. I’m trying to figure out how the ‘not’ fits in.”

Sebastian gives him a long look. It’s half appraising, half respect. It makes Jonathan feel good. He sits up straighter.

“That’s not the answer I expected,” Sebastian says.

“What were you expecting?”

“Something shorter.”

Jonathan snorts. He recalls Dave’s nickname for Sebastian, decides to try it out. “Asshole.” It feels funny on his tongue. His face goes hot.

“Ooh, and swearing, too! First, he enters a gay bar. Next, he says five sentences in a row and swears. Before we know it, he’ll be seducing half the men in Scandals. It’s a slippery slope.”

“Not that slippery.”

“Maybe not. Still, it’s fun for me. Hanging out with you is like watching a piece of space rock transform into a shooting star.”

“Don’t shooting stars disintegrate?”

“Okay, wrong metaphor.” Sebastian sips his drink. “Or maybe not. You know that shooting stars are meteors, right?”

Jonathan bristles at the suggestion that he wouldn’t know. “Yes. They teach science in my high school. I’m not Amish.”

“Sorry. I’m just used to people not knowing things, whether they’re Mennonite or not. Anyway, there’s a hypothesis that meteors brought life to the Earth. Little single celled organisms carried on a rock from another part of the universe, surviving interstellar space travel and fire to reproduce on the surface of our planet. Maybe you’re that kind of shooting star. Right now, you’re burning through the atmosphere. But it doesn’t have to destroy you. It could be the start of an abundant life.”

Jonathan doesn’t know how to respond. Sebastian’s words make him sound beautiful. If he were any good at crying, he might start right now. If he were any good at words, he would say something just as beautiful back. He feels kind of like he did with Seth sometimes, when everything was overwhelming and the only way to express what he felt was through kissing.

Jonathan’s not going to lean over and kiss Sebastian, though, even if he is kind curious what a
whiskey sour tastes like.

Sebastian rescues Jonathan from his wordlessness. He holds up his whiskey sour. “Here. Let’s drink to you. To Jonathan and his journey.”

Jonathan clinks his glass against Sebastian’s. He takes a sip of 7-Up. It’s light and bubbly against his tongue. Jonathan wonders if this is what it felt like when the first thing came alive: effervescent, electric.

“Hey, Sebastian.” A thirty-something man with light blond hair, a mustache, and a white cowboy hat pats Sebastian’s back as he slides onto the stool where Blaine sat earlier. Circles of sweat stain his light blue Western shirt dark beneath the armpits. Another stripe blooms between his groin and chest. “You going to join us out on the dance floor?”

Jonathan looks over. There are three lines of dancers now, six or seven in each row, echoing the steps being demonstrated by the teacher in the leather cowboy hat. He’s tall and brawny in his flannel shirt, but it’s hard to tell if he’s cute from this distance.

“I don’t know,” Sebastian says. “Getting laid and country line dancing are sort of mutually exclusive, aren’t they?”

Jonathan shouldn’t be scandalized by that answer given what he knows of Sebastian, but he is. The stranger chuckles. “Tom and I met through country line dancing lessons, you know.”

“Yeah, and how many lessons before you fucked?”

The stranger counts on his fingers. “Two months before I asked him out, then … That’s none of your business, actually.”


They shake hands across Sebastian’s lap. “Pleased to make your acquaintance, Jonathan,” Alan says before turning to signal the bartender. He orders a watered-down orange juice and a beer, then leans into the bar to talk to Jonathan across Sebastian. “You like dancing, then?”

Jonathan looks out at the floor. It doesn’t look as fun as what he did with Sebastian last week, but it doesn’t look not fun, either. “Sure.”

“Good. You can be our newest recruit.”
Country line dancing isn’t as easy as grinding against Sebastian’s hips. There are too many steps to remember. Which is probably the real reason Sebastian didn’t feel like joining them out here. His Warbler routines are complicated enough, if the bit Jonathan saw at Sectionals was any indication.

Every once in a while, Jonathan looks Sebastian’s way. And even though Sebastian seems to be a magnet for people—guy after guy comes up to sit next to him at the bar—more often than not, Sebastian’s looking in Jonathan’s direction. When they make eye contact, Sebastian smiles and nods, sometimes even winks. It makes Jonathan feel more graceful than he actually is.

It’s probably because he’s focusing so heavily on the bar that Jonathan doesn’t notice a new dancer joining the line behind him until the caller says “Swing, half-turn!” and Jonathan, in his overenthusiasm, collides into a mass of muscle and sends a black cowboy hat flying. Solid hands catch his biceps. The dance floor lights shift from blue to white. The eyes looking into Jonathan’s are the same brown as Seth’s.

But the eyebrows are different. Slender and arching like gulls’ wings. The smile’s different, too. No dimple. No twitch. The jaw is smooth as butter.

White light shifts pink. The lines keep on dancing around them.

“Dave,” Jonathan says.

“Sorry.” Dave squeezes Jonathan’s arms before he lets go. “I didn’t mean to startle you. Just eager to get into the dance now that I’m finally here.” He squats to pick his hat up off the floor, tips it in a salute as he settles it back on his head.
“No, I’m the one who should be sorry. I have no idea what I’m doing,” Jonathan says. The words feel true in more way than one.

“I wouldn’t know it if you hadn’t told me so. You look okay to me.” Dave winks as he swings one foot out and turns around, stepping into the dance. Jonathan supposes he should rejoin it too; everyone’s moving in a square around him. He does a kick and a step, but it takes a few beats before Jonathan can get back into the flow. It helps if he keeps an eye on the caller in front instead of staring at his own feet the way he’s inclined to. But he meets trouble when the square flips and now, instead of being in front of David and behind the caller, Jonathan’s behind David and in front of the caller. So he watches David, even though he’s too close to see all at once. Jonathan can only take in one section of Dave at a time: his feet, clad in pointed-toe cowboy boots; his thighs like Christmas hams, but wrapped in denim; his shoulders draped in a black Western shirt with a yoke of machine-embroidered flowers and vines that are masculine and delicate all at once. Jonathan itches to run his fingers over them. He’s never seen anything like it at Target or Walmart. Granted, he’s never spent much time in the clothing departments, either. Socks, underwear, winter coats, and hunting vests are the only things his mom doesn’t sew for him.

Jonathan loses count of the steps and kicks his own left foot with his right. He picks a spot on the wall past the pool tables to focus on instead.

The dance does send them into a half-turn, and now he and Dave are side by side. “Where’d you get that shirt?” Jonathan asks.

“Online,” says Dave. “Thinking about getting one?”

Would it be weird if Jonathan answered by smoothing his hands across Dave’s shoulders? Probably. “I’ve never owned anything with embroidery.”

“Do you want to?”

“I—” Jonathan’s not supposed to want things. He’s not supposed to want independence and he’s not supposed to want independence and he’s not supposed to want independence and he doesn’t want pretty shirts festooned with more flowers than his mother’s garden beds in June. He imagines wrapping himself up in Dave’s shirt. It would hang like a tent from his bony frame, wrap him like a blanket. He’d trace his fingers over the embroidery the way he used to trace them over the raised scars on Seth’s hip. “Yeah. I do.”

The caller announces another half spin. Dave turns away from him. He catches sight of Sebastian at the bar with a guy who looks close to their ages, thin but more solidly built than Sebastian, with chestnut hair and skin that takes on the color of the dance floor lights. Sebastian smiles at Jonathan, points between himself and the stranger, holds out his two index fingers and rubs them together, then points to the exit. The stranger laughs. So does Dave—a loud bellow that carries over the music.

Jonathan scrunches his eyebrows. Is this some kind of universal sign language he’s supposed to understand?

Sebastian sees Jonathan’s confusion. He pulls out his phone out and thumbs something in. Soon, Jonathan’s phone is vibrating in the back pocket of his jeans. He tries to keep track of his steps as he reads the message. *I found Mr. Right Now. You okay here with Dave for a while?*

The meaning of the rubbing index fingers becomes clear. It’s not unlike what he imagined doing with Sebastian when he jerked off at the gas station on his way into Lima. Jonathan’s ears go red.
I’m good. Jonathan messages back, because giving the OK sign would involve making eye contact with Sebastian, and he’s not sure he can manage that right now.

He turns his focus back on the dance and not on the thoughts rushing through his head. Sebastian. Doing stuff. With another guy. It shouldn’t be so hard to wrap his head around. That’s all Sebastian talks about half the time. That’s what Jonathan pictured in vivid detail in the gas station on the way to Lima.

But none of that was real. It was all talk and fantasy. This is actually happening. Sebastian is going to go somewhere and do things with a stranger that Jonathan’s only ever done with Seth. Maybe he’ll do things Jonathan didn’t do with Seth. Maybe he’ll take all his clothes off. Maybe they’ll use a bed. Maybe they’ll do things that Jonathan wanted but couldn’t bring himself to ask for.

Something bitter wells up inside of Jonathan. He can’t name it. Jealousy, judgment, desire, rage, revulsion—maybe it’s all those things. Sebastian’s getting what he wants without having to work for it. That random guy gets Sebastian. And they’re so blatant about it, none of the hiding and shame that became second-nature to Jonathan last summer. There are people in this world who don’t have to hide. Jonathan and Seth were never among them. Jonathan doesn’t know if either of them will ever be.

His hands are shaking now—such a slight tremor he can barely see it when he looks, but enough to feel off when he’s supposed to clap on the downbeat. Jonathan focuses on the music. By the accent of the singer, it’s clearly supposed to sound like country, but it’s more electric rock with the addition of a fiddle’s twang. The lyrics are all about a lonesome heart and singin’ the blues. They don’t help Jonathan feel any better.

When the song fades out, Jonathan’s ready to fade out too. He nudges Dave on the elbow. “I’m gonna go get another drink.”

Dave nods. His cowboy hat nods with him. “Cool. Mind if I join you?”

Jonathan’s hands stop shaking. “Yeah. Please do.”

*

They head to the bar. It’s gotten more crowded since Jonathan was here talking to Sebastian. Voices ricochet off the counter and back wall, hammering into Jonathan’s skull. It’s a little like being inside Uncle Abraham’s workshop without earplugs. Then, out on the dance floor, the line-dance lessons end and the night really begins. Since the dancers no longer need to hear the caller over the music, the DJ ratchets it up to twice its previous volume. The electric fiddle saws into Jonathan’s eardrums.

They order their drinks and within two seconds, it feels like half the bar is lining up to say hi to Dave. It’s really only five guys, but they all have too much facial hair—which makes them no more good-looking than Redbeard last week, though one of them has nice broad shoulders like Dave’s. Some of them greet Dave with a kiss, others with a slap on the arm. Jonathan greets them with nods and handshakes, but doesn’t bother saying much. He can barely hear his own voice as it is. Dave and the bearded guys shout at each other over the music for a couple minutes, stuff that Jonathan can’t really follow because of the noise and because it’s about football. One of them—a dirty-blond giant with grease under his fingernails and the looks of a Norse Viking—keeps leaning over with an exaggerated smile to say things right into Dave’s ear. Jonathan’s pretty sure the guy is flirting with Dave, but he can’t tell if Dave is flirting back. His cheeks look kind of pink, but Dave was dancing just now, and though Dave smiles whenever Mr. Viking leans in, the smile doesn’t reach the corner of his eyes.
Plus, Dave keeps glancing over at Jonathan like he’s hoping he’ll jump in. It makes Jonathan feel both important and awkward. He literally has nothing to say here, but it’s nice that Dave hasn’t forgotten him.

There doesn’t seem to be any danger that Dave will wander off the way Sebastian did.

“Sorry about that,” Dave says when the crowd of fans trickles to zero. Or at least, that’s what it looks like he’s saying. Jonathan is lip-reading more than listening.

“It’s okay. You have friends. That’s a good thing.” Jonathan says it because that’s how he’s supposed to feel. And he does, sort of. But he can’t deal with so many people all at once just now.

Dave says something else, but Jonathan can’t make the words out. He shakes his head. “It’s loud in here.”

Dave leans in toward Jonathan the way the Viking leaned in toward him earlier. The rim of his hat brushes against Jonathan’s hair. His breath is hot on Jonathan’s ear. Jonathan knows neither of these things is inherently sexual, but his body tells him otherwise. “Let’s find somewhere quieter to talk. I want to get to know you.”

Jonathan’s suffused with a desire to get to know Dave in a way that has nothing to do with talking. He does his best to ignore it. Talking will do for now.

Dave leads him past the pool tables to a corner that Jonathan didn’t even realize was there. It pushes out of the building in a sort of L-shape, obscuring it from the dance floor and bar, but still in view of the pool playing. High tables and a couple low ones fill the room. The music is much quieter in here, though with a large group playing cards at one table, the conversation’s almost as loud. Jonathan tries not to stare at the two men at a high table with their glasses of wine, their hands on each other’s asses, and their tongues down each other’s throats.

Dave leans into his ear. “It’s not as scandalous as it looks. They’re married.”

The word *married* sends twin currents of desire and disbelief through Jonathan. He aches from the dissonance.

When the men unlatch and clink their glasses, Jonathan recognizes one of them as Alan from earlier. He looks different with his hat off. Jonathan could probably stare at him for the rest of the evening and the guy wouldn’t notice. That’s how wrapped up he looks in his … What’s Jonathan supposed to call the other guy? Husband? Partner? Spouse?

But Jonathan doesn’t get the opportunity to stare any longer. Alan and his … husband … drain their wine glasses and head back to the dance floor, nodding at Dave and Jonathan on their way out.

Dave leads Jonathan to a high table in the annex’s farthest corner. “Here we are. The quietest spot in Scandals.”

Jonathan settles into his chair with relief. “I’m not used to being around so much noise.” That’s not exactly true. The milking machine can be crazy loud, as can the cows when they all start lowing at once. But noise made by humans and music is different. Jonathan feels like he should be paying attention to each voice, each note. His brain gets pulled in too many directions. Jonathan sets his drink down on the table. “What were saying over at the bar?”

“Oh, just that if you keep coming to Scandals, you’ll know everyone too. First couple times I showed up here, I didn’t know anyone. Now it feels like I’ve dated half of gay Lima. At least the
bears.” Dave’s face flushes pink, and it’s definitely not related to dancing this time. It’s cute. Jonathan wishes Dave would blush over something that he did. He feels like some kind of lust yo-yo. Sebastian earlier, now Dave. Maybe it’s true what they say about gays being overly sexual. Then again, every time his younger brother Mark borrows his phone, Jonathan has to wipe the browser history to get rid of all those pictures of buxom blonde ladies in bikinis.

And Jonathan never thought about anyone else when he was with Seth.

Jonathan wants to ask about dating—What exactly counts as dating? How do you ask a guy out? Can two guys go on a date anywhere in Lima other than Scandals?—but he’d be too mortified if any of the words came out of his mouth. Instead, he follows up on the safer part of what Dave just said. “When did you start coming here?”

“My senior year of high school, like you. I wasn’t out to anyone yet, and I was in love with this guy who I couldn’t have, and I felt like … well, like I was going to die, frankly. So I stole my cousin’s driver’s license and came here. The first time, I sat over at the bar with my baseball hat on to hide my face and didn’t talk to anybody. But I left feeling better. Because it was what I needed—just to see that there were other people like me in the world, you know?”


Dave slides his hat off and sets it on the empty chair next to him. “So what’s your story?”

Where would Jonathan even start? “Pretty much the same as yours.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. But not really surprised. Is he a Mennonite, too?”

“Who?”

“The guy you’re in love with.” Dave says it as casually as if he’s asking Jonathan how he takes his coffee. Like two Mennonite boys falling in love with each other is perfectly normal and everyday.

Jonathan has to blink back tears. He doesn’t know why. There are so many heartbreaking things he could have cried over in these past few months. Why his body feels the need to give up now over a few innocuous words perplexes him. “Yeah. He is.”

“And your church wouldn’t be okay with that?”

The sympathy in Dave’s expression makes Jonathan’s eyes sting. He takes a sip of his soda to even out his breathing. “Definitely not.”

“My mom’s church is like that, too. I felt the same way for a long time. Where are you on the whole thing?”

“I don’t know. I don’t see how it can be wrong. But …” It’s hard to find the right words for how he feels. It’s also a relief to try. No one’s ever asked Jonathan this question before. “Everyone else thinks it’s wrong.”

“Not everyone.” Dave reaches across the table and squeezes Jonathan’s hand. It’s a brotherly touch, more than anything else. It takes Jonathan by surprise. He stares down at their joined hands.

“I mean, everyone in Rosedale.”

“Then screw Rosedale.”
Screw Rosedale. The words make Jonathan feel vindicated and wrong all at the same time. “It’s not that easy.”

“I’m sure it’s not. And it probably makes me an asshole to compare my life to yours, but if you’ll hear me out for a second?”

Of course it makes Dave an asshole. He has no idea what it’s like, living your whole life doing everything you can to avoid worldliness, only to find that you’re the most worldly of them all. But he’s looking at Jonathan so sincerely, it’s hard to refuse him. “Go ahead.”

“I didn’t grow up in Rosedale. But I spent my life in crowds where being gay was absolutely not okay. I left one high school when rumors started to go around that I was gay. But in the next, it got even worse. I thought my only escape would be to die.” Dave’s eyes fall to their joined hands. “So I tried to kill myself.”

A week or so after Seth left, when early waterfowl-hunting season began, Jonathan had to clean his rifle. He was wiping out the barrel when he felt the impulse to check its length against his arm. He wanted to know if he would be able to pull the trigger with the muzzle against his head.

The sense of reassurance he felt when he found out he could terrified him.

Jonathan instinctively turns his hand in Dave’s so that they’re now palm to palm. His index finger nudges Dave’s wrist. He can feel the pulse there. “I’m sorry,” Jonathan says. It’s not enough.

“Anyway,” says Dave, “I didn’t go back to that school. Part of me thought I should, to brave it out and show those fuckers they couldn’t get to me. But the other part of me knew I needed distance from them to learn how to be okay with who I was. So I left. Finished up school with some tutors and online classes. Started seeing a therapist. Refused to talk to my mom without someone safe around for almost six months. And honestly? Those were the best decisions I ever made. Now, seeing as I just met you and I’m no expert anyway, it would be dumb for me to try to give you advice. I’m not saying that you have to leave Rosedale or your family. I never left Lima, and I still live with my dad. But I left the part of my life that was killing me. And … I hope if it comes to that point for you, you’ll leave. Or at least reach out to me or Sebastian—someone who can tell you from experience that there’s a whole better world waiting for you.”

Jonathan blinks a mile a minute to keep from crying. He squeezes Dave’s hand. “Yeah. Okay.”

Dave looks at the table sheepishly. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to get so heavy.” He draws his hand back and wraps it around his glass. Jonathan has the urge to chase it. He doesn’t.

“It’s okay.” Jonathan’s not sure what else to say, but that feels inadequate. He tries again. “It’s nice to have someone to talk to. I can’t… There’s no one in Rosedale. Just the internet.”

“That’s what it was like for me, too. The internet is good and all, but it’s no replacement for flesh-and-blood friends.”
Chapter 10

The little voice inside Jonathan’s head tells him to avoid Blaine’s holiday cookie bake-in at all costs, but he’s pretty sure that’s his fear talking and not God. When Unique messages him to tell him she’ll be there and the voice disappears, that clinches it. Fear is fickle and fleeting; the Holy Spirit sticks around.

Jonathan’s got a little less than an hour to kill between deliveries, so he texts Unique that he’s on his way and books on over. She greets him at the door with an air kiss. Her hair is totally different today, not straight and silky, but short and cropped close on the sides, with a little length at the top. Can hair grow backwards? Did the weight of it when it was long make it go straight, and now that it’s short again it’s curly? Also, he really needs to learn to not stare. “So glad you’re here,” she says. “You need to rescue Blaine from that recipe your friend Sarah sent him. It makes no sense. I think she wrote it in code.”

“I doubt I can help. I’ve never made them before.”

The house is big. Upbeat Christmas music escapes from the kitchen. The living room has a vaulted ceiling with windows twice as tall as Jonathan that look out on a perfectly manicured lawn out back. On the edge of the property is a strip of woods that’s now naked of leaves; earlier in the season when the colors changed, it probably looked spectacular. Jonathan gapes out as they walk toward the kitchen.

“Our hero has arrived!” Unique shouts triumphantly as they enter. It’s noticeably warmer inside the kitchen. The air is infused with molasses and vanilla and cinnamon. Four pairs of eyes look up to gawk at Jonathan.

Oh, crap. He forgot to change into his street clothes. He tugs self-consciously at his right suspender. Which probably makes him look even more like a hick. He scans the room for somewhere to hide.

“Jonathan!” Blaine pops up from behind a counter and sets an empty mixing bowl on the counter. He’s wearing a turquoise button-down with a tiny plaid pattern and a white chef’s apron. He darts around the counter and swoops in like he’s about to hug Jonathan, but at the last moment something flickers in his eyes and he switches to a handshake. Then he takes Jonathan and introduces him to everyone in the room. There are only four of them, three girls and one boy, not counting Blaine and Unique, but Jonathan immediately forgets all of their names except for the boy, Brett. He’s even shorter than Blaine, with messy red hair and a spaced-out expression. If he’s gay, it’s a very different kind of gay than Blaine.

“Want an apron?” Blaine says, opening a drawer full of linens.

“Yes, please.” Jonathan wasn’t really planning to cook, but he’ll do anything to cover up his clothes.

Blaine turns around to pull one out. Jonathan notes with relief that a pair of black suspenders criss-cross Blaine’s back. Maybe the others weren’t staring at Jonathan’s clothes? Maybe they just stared at him because he was new. Still, it feels good to put that apron on. He matches everyone else now, just like he does in Rosedale.

Unique carries over a laptop and shows the screen to Jonathan. “This is the recipe.” It’s Blaine’s Facebook wall, with a message from Sarah:
Sure you can have the recipe, got it from my grandma but added the cardamom! Here goes: 2 scoops oats, 1 scoop flour, brown sugar, baking soda, large egg, dash of vanilla, pinch cardamom, 2 sticks butter, some salt, handful of walnuts, two handfuls chocolate, a nice amount of cinnamon. Bake at 325.

“What the hell’s a ‘scoop’?” says Unique. “And how much baking soda are we supposed to use? And what do we do with everything before we put it in the oven? Not to mention baking time.”

Jonathan shrugs. “I don’t know. I don’t cook. Did you try messaging her?”

“She’s offline.”

“Maybe she wants to keep it a secret.”

“I’ll say.”

One of the girls whose name Jonathan forgot walks over with a sheet full of unbaked gingerbread men. She’s tinier than Blaine and Brett both, with reddish-brown hair topped by a tiara.

“Chocolate-chip cookies aren’t Christmasy, anyway.”

“Yeah, but you said that about pot brownies, too,” chimes in Brett.

“That’s because they’re not. Pot brownies are for for April 20. For Christmas, it’s gingerbread, warm brandy, and mint martinis!”

“I’m not serving alcohol at this bake-in, Sugar,” Blaine says. “It’s a school-sponsored event.”

“I know. But a girl can dream.”

A timer goes off. Blaine dives toward the oven, two fat red mitts on his hands, and takes out a sheet of molasses crinkle-tops and another of sugar cookies painted in colorful swirls that remind Jonathan of the dance floor lights at Scandals. As he sets them on cooling racks, Sugar slides her gingerbread men in the oven.

“Those molasses cookies are best warm. We should eat them right now,” says a different girl. She’s Asian and as short as Sugar. In fact, Jonathan realizes, everyone in this room is short except for him. She wears large glasses with black frames and a jumper in a red-and-green Christmas plaid.

Soon they’re all sitting at the kitchen table, stuffing molasses cookies in their maws and chatting about their winter break plans. Several of them are heading for college next year and plan to spend most of their vacations on filling out applications. Blaine wants to study performance and has a list of fifteen. Jonathan feels bad that he hasn’t even asked Sarah which one she wants to go to. It didn’t even occur to him. He had this vague idea that people differentiate between schools, but to him, college has always just been college—another amorphous concept that he’s never really bothered to learn about because it’s a thing Mennonites don’t do.

Brett wants to study glass-blowing. The girl in the tiara wants to study fashion design and finance. The Asian girl in the glasses, whose name turns out to be Dottie, isn’t going to college next year, but she’s already narrowed down her schools to a list of twenty and her potential majors to five. The other girl, who’s wearing a neckbrace, got early acceptance to Stanford. The other kids make impressed ooohs and aaahs. Jonathan nods like he knows what they’re all talking about. He wonders
if Sarah has heard of Stanford. Probably. She knows everything.

Unique’s the only one who hasn’t given school much thought yet, but she’s just a sophomore.

“How about you? What do you want to study?” Blaine leans in and looks at Jonathan like the fate of the world hangs on his answer to the question.

“Um … I’m not going to college.”

Half the table turns and looks at Jonathan like they just figured out he’s a three-headed monster, but Blaine—to his credit—responds as if he expected that answer as much as any other. “Cool. What are you planning on after you graduate?”

“I work on my parents’ farm. I’d take up more of the slack there. And I have a job at a gas station, too, just for spending money.”

“Neat. My uncle’s a farmer. It’s a hard living, but a good one,” says Dottie. “What kind of farming?”

“Dairy, mostly.”

“Awesome,” says Brett. “I love cows. Sometimes I pretend I am one. Mooooooo.” Jonathan can’t tell if he’s being made fun of. But then Brett bends forward to eat his cookie crumbs off his plate like he’s grazing on grass, mooing and lowing while Dottie pets his back, and Jonathan decides he’s probably just strange. When the girl in the neck brace gives Brett a funny look, it just confirms it.

She turns to Jonathan. “So is farming something you’ll do for a while to save up money, or is that what you want as your career?”

Career. No one talks about careers in Rosedale. There are just jobs and work and ways of living. Farming’s been Jonathan’s way of living since he’s been a toddler. He’s never pictured himself doing anything else. Even when he tried to convince Seth to run off with him, he pictured them eventually getting their own farm somewhere when they saved up enough money, maybe with goats at first because of the lower upfront cost, and a vegetable garden with fancy varieties they could sell for good money to restaurants instead of raising corn and soybeans that go at commodity prices. Until then, they could rent a small plot while Jonathan kept working at the gas station—or any gas station, anywhere.

“My career, I suppose.”

“And take over the business from your parents?” the girl with the neck brace says.

If he keeps going to Scandals—if he ever finds love again—he can’t get baptized. And if he doesn’t get baptized, it means he’s not a part of the church. And if he’s not part of the church, how can he expect to stay on the farm? His parents love him, but it would be too hard for them to face him every day. It might be hard for him to face them, too. “Probably get my own, eventually,” he says.

He’s known all this in the back of his head, but now it shows up like something with a deadline. He needs a plan to get out.

* * 

It’s a Christmas theme at Scandals tonight. Jonathan doesn’t dress up for it, but he almost looks
holiday-themed in his red shirt—the same Buckeyes one he wears every week. Thought he’s nothing compared to the dozen or more Santas who dot the bar. All of them have red pants and hats trimmed in fake white fur, but they are the similarity ends. There are white Santas and black Santas, old Santas and young ones. Some are shirtless to show off their muscular, hairless chests; others are shirtless to show off the muscular, hairy chests; and yet others have cute round stomachs wrapped in wide black belts and velveteen coats. The real beards, powdered until they’re white, outnumber the fake ones.

Bare-faced men in green shorts and pointy hats skip around the dance floor. Those must be elves. There are people dressed as peppermint sticks and nutcrackers, and one of the bartenders (there are two tonight; the place is packed) is dressed as a sexy reindeer in brown, doe-colored leather chaps, brown tank top, and a white cotton tail that hides the back string of his thong. It’s hard not to stare at the guy’s butt cheeks. They’re round and smooth with a hint of muscle, and Jonathan can almost feel them against the palms of his hands. He hardly ever got to grab Seth’s bare butt, but the few times he snuck his hands back there were paradise. The skin was so soft, the fine downy hairs that covered it made it feel like velvet. Who knows if the bartender’s butt feels like velvet, but his antlers look like they do. They’re the size of a small chandelier and covered in velveteen. But the detail that really gets Jonathan is the bartender’s nose. It’s covered in black make-up, and the guy keeps twitching at at the customers in this flirtatious way that makes Jonathan feel alive down to his toes.

It’s weird, finding someone dressed as a deer sexy. It’s the middle of deer hunting season still.

Sebastian and Dave are not dressed up, though. Sebastian’s in a too big, light blue Oxford, and Dave’s wearing a checkered flannel shirt over a green T-shirt. Thank God. Jonathan couldn’t handle either of them with their shirts off, and is not really used to dealing with people in costumes even with their chests covered. He’s never observed Halloween, and he’s never been in a school play because the Rosedale Mennonites don’t believe in acting. His sisters never had access to a chest full of dress-up clothes, and there’s not much pretend you can play with a pile of Plain dresses and slacks waiting next to the sewing machine to be mended.

Wearing Alvin’s hand-me-down jeans and Buckeyes T-shirt is the closest to playing pretend that Jonathan has ever done. Though the more times he wears them, the more it feels like this might be his real self, and wearing his Plain dress is when he’s pretending.

Sebastian stands up, half tottering, when he sees Jonathan coming toward their table in the annex. “Merry Christmas!” Sebastian’s voice exudes ten times more enthusiasm than Jonathan has ever seen him exhibit. His arms are wide open. There is no way Jonathan could avoid the impending hug if he wanted to. Thankfully, he doesn’t. Touch is one of the things he loves most about coming to Scandals. By Tuesday, he’s already starving for it.

Sebastian squishes the breath right out of Jonathan’s lungs. Before Jonathan knows it, his feet are no longer touching the floor. Sebastian swings him in a back and forth arc. He smells strongly of peppermint and alcohol. “Also, Happy Global Orgasm Day. If you haven’t wanked off yet today, it’s your duty to do so before the end of the night! I can help if you want!”

Dave snickers next to them as Sebastian sets Jonathan back down. He greets Jonathan with a too-quick kiss to the cheek. “Don’t take anything that Sebastian says tonight too seriously. He’s already three sheets to the wind.”

“Three sheets to the …?“ Jonathan says, settling into the empty chair that’s been waiting for him. He keeps his eyes on Dave. He’s little unsure what will happen if he makes eye contact with Sebastian.
“Drunk.” Dave sits down next to him. “Sebastian is very drunk.”

“I am not! This is only my third Fuzzy Santa.” Sebastian sips a layered red and white concoction out of a martini glass through a skinny straw.

“Well, drink it slowly, because it’s also your last.”

Sebastian pouts, but doesn’t argue. “You’re such a mean daddy.”

“Oh my God, do not call me that. It’s creepy.”

“I call all my designated drivers ‘daddy.’ It’s part of the job description.”

“Well, take it out of mine, or you can get a taxi home.”

Sebastian sticks out his tongue. “You’re no fun.”

Dave turns to Jonathan. “I’m going up to the bar to get a refill on my Coke. What can I get you to drink? It’s on me. I’m in a Christmas-y mood.”

Sebastian leans across the table to grope Dave’s stomach. “He’d make the best Santa, wouldn’t he?” he says with a lascivious wink.

Dave rolls his eyes casually, as if he’s dealt with this kind of behavior his whole life. Jonathan sure hasn’t. He’s kind of terrified to stay alone with Sebastian. “I don’t know. Something without alcohol. I’ll go with you.”

The bartender whips up something with chocolate and peppermint syrup, heavy cream, and soda water. It’s not the most attractive drink in the world, but it’s delicious. When they get back to their table, Sebastian’s French kissing a short guy with curly black hair and long sideburns. He is also wearing a pair of tiny, jingle bell-bedecked felt antlers attached via a headband to his hair. The bells make the slightest little tinkling sounds as Sebastian tips his head, presumably to let more tongue into his mouth.

Dave clears his throat with a half coughed, half laugh as he and Jonathan approach the table. Sebastian looks up. “Marcel here gave me the kissing orange! Which one of you is going to be next?”

“The what?” Jonathan says.

“The kissing orange! Whoever has it gets to pick who to kiss. The only rule is that you can’t give it back to the person who gave it to you.” Sebastian turns back to Marcel, who’s scooting back from the table with a cat-that-got-the-cream smile on his face. “Thanks, Marcel. It was an honor.”

“My pleasure,” Marcel says with a wink. For the first time, Jonathan notices the blond guy standing right behind Marcel, a smile on his face and a hard-on evident in his trousers. Marcel turns and takes the guy’s hand. “Come on, honey. I’m horny. Let’s dance.” Marcel stands up and drags the blond out of the annex, calling “Merry Christmas!” over his shoulder.

The web of relationships here at Scandals is complicated.

Sebastian sets an orange—oh, there’s an actual orange—on the table. He rolls it back and forth between curled palms as takes another sip of his drink and eyes both Jonathan and Dave with what is probably supposed to be a look of seduction. “Who should it be?”
“Jonathan, you don’t have to play this, if you don’t want to,” Dave says under his breath.

“I know,” Jonathan says, even though he’s not sure he actually did. Now that he knows it’s a choice, it makes everything a little more confusing. There’s a decision to make. He definitely wouldn’t mind kissing Sebastian. And if Sebastian kissed him, he would have to kiss someone else, and it would have to be Dave, because even though he’s kind of getting to know more people at Scandals, he really doesn’t trust anyone else, which means—Oh. A twofer. Would that make things complicated? Everything at Scandals is so complicated already. But it’s simple, too. Here, you can kiss someone without giving your heart to them. You can touch without anything being taken away. “I’ll play.”

Sebastian grins. If Marcel was the cat that got the cream, Sebastian is the cat who got the whole dairy barn. His smile almost reaches his ears. His eyes hone in on Jonathan. He scoots his chair around the perimeter of the table until his knee grazes Jonathan’s thigh. He holds the piece of fruit out like an offering. “Would you like an orange?” His voice is low and sultry, so deep it could strike oil.

It’s a good thing Jonathan’s already sitting, because his knees are officially jelly. He opens his hand. He’s Adam taking the fruit from Eve. Is this sin? Or is accepting the fruit the only way to become fully human?

The orange has a satisfying weight in his palm. He curls his fingers around it as Sebastian leans in, smelling just as he did before, but this time the scent is alluring. Jonathan tilts forward to taste. There’s salt on Sebastian’s lips in addition to the sweetness of peppermint and alcohol. Jonathan licks them open. Sebastian’s tongue is a little too wet, but it’s delicious. Jonathan feels Sebastian squeeze his knee, and a fine vibration running through his cheeks. Someone is humming or moaning, but the sound is so soft he can tell who it is—himself or Sebastian. Jonathan feels Dave’s presence just outside his peripheral vision, warm and solid as a chair back. Jonathan digs his fingernails into the orange peel. Its scent curls around their kiss.

Every song has a beginning and an ending. When the song leader signals the coda, the congregation stretches out the final notes and sings them with more intention.

Jonathan’s not sure which of them signals the coda, but it happens organically after that, ending on a sweet note.

“Shit,” Sebastian says when he pulled back. His eyes are wide. “This is not your first time kissing.”

“Nope.”

“Okay, I definitely need to hear about that sometime. Mennonites getting it in the barn …”

Jonathan gives Sebastian’s thigh a hard pinch. Sebastian may be hot, but he’s not allowed to denigrate what Jonathan and Seth had.

“Ow. That hurt.”

“It was supposed to.”

“I thought Mennonites were supposed to be nonviolent.”

“Pinching doesn’t count.”

Dave snickers behind Jonathan. Sebastian arches a brow. “Enjoying yourself, Dave?”
“Actually, I am.”

“Hopefully with me, and not at me.”

“Maybe a little of both.”

Sebastian huffs and crosses his arms across his chest. “I give you a great show, and this is the thanks I get. To be mocked.”

“I’m not mocking you. Just experiencing a little schadenfreude.” Dave reaches across Jonathan to squeeze Sebastian’s knee. Jonathan wishes he was wearing a longer, looser T-shirt. His penis is not the Vienna sausage it is in its normal resting state. He crosses his legs and rests the hand holding the orange against his lap to obscure his erection.

Sebastian smirks. “Schadenfreude? Look at you and your big vocabulary, college boy.”

“I knew what that word meant before college. I took German in high school.”

“Me too,” says Jonathan, surprised at his own ability to talk at a time like this.

David turns his head, his mouth quirking into a smile. “Yeah?”

Jonathan nods. “Mostly biblical German, but it’s better than nothing.”

“Fröhliche Weinachten, Jonatan.” Dave’s accent is good. It turns Jonathan’s legs into butter. Jonathan rubs his thumb over the orange peel. Another whiff of citrus rises into the air.

Sebastian rests his chin against Jonathan’s shoulder and pokes him in the biceps. “So, Jonathan, what are you going to do with that orange? Can’t hog it all night. We’ve got to keep the kissing chain going.”

Dave answers before Jonathan can respond. “He doesn’t have to—”

“Let Jonathan decide for himself, daddy.”

Dave’s in the middle of growling “Do you want a ride home tonight or not?” at Sebastian when Jonathan screws up the courage to press the orange into Dave’s hand. Dave startles, his back going straight and his eyes blinking like a fawn’s. It’s adorable. Who else did he think Jonathan would pass the orange to?

“You don’t have to play this, if you don’t want to,” Jonathan manages. He’s just turned the tables. He’s Eve now, and he doesn’t feel the least bit guilty about it. He flushes with pride and nervousness.

“Oh, zing!” squeals Sebastian, but Jonathan can hardly hear him. Dave sucks in his bottom lip. He glances at Jonathan’s.

The light in this corner of the bar is dim, but white. Jonathan can see the brown of Dave’s irises clearly as he moves closer: a sea of gold shot through with fine threads of loam. He smells of the same colors: cola and sunlight, nutmeg and oak. His lips are like soft-cooked bacon.

Jonathan doesn’t close his eyes, but Dave does. He inhales through his nose and his eyelashes flutter. He pulls Jonathan’s lower lip between his own. It feels more intimate somehow than when Jonathan tugged on Sebastian’s tongue earlier. Soft. Subtle. Safe. Jonathan presses an open palm to Dave’s chest, feels the seams and button of Dave’s chest pocket against his skin and, under that,
Dave’s warmth. The orange rolls from Dave’s hand onto Jonathan’s lap. Jonathan ignores it and deepens the kiss.

“Soooo hot!” Sebastian’s groan jolts Jonathan back into the room. There’s no coda to this kiss, just a sudden, disappointing cessation of contact. A fish jumping free of the line.

“Glad we can entertain you,” Dave grumbles. But he’s smiling and his cheeks are pink. Jonathan did that to him.

Jonathan also gave himself a massive boner. He won’t be able to stand up for at least ten minutes.

Jonathan sets the orange on the table. He takes a sip of his neglected chocolate-peppermint concoction. It’s almost as velvety as Dave’s kiss.

“Who’re you gonna pass the orange on to?” Sebastian says to Dave.

Oh, Jonathan forgot about that part. His heart squinches. But he finds himself looking around for a possible target. Someone with a beard. Someone whose face feels different from Jonathan’s so Dave won’t mix up the memories. Jonathan spots Redbeard at one of the pool tables. He hasn’t seen him since his first night at Scandals. His curiosity is piqued. “How about him?”

Dave covers his face and mutters something under his breath.

“Don’t tell me you and Dan had a fallout,” Sebastian says.

“Sort of.”

“Why? Haven’t I always told you to leave guys at least as good as when you found them?”

“Yeah, but … he didn’t want me to leave. He wanted to get more serious.”

“Oh.” Sebastian screws up his face. “That’s gross.”

Dave turns to Jonathan to explain. “I made a pledge to myself not to date anyone seriously my first year or so of being out. And I say that up front. But I guess not everyone listens.”

“Oh? How long have you been out?” Jonathan says.

“Since March. But the first couple months I was just trying to get my head back on straight, so I figure I’ll stay single at least until the end of this academic year,” Dave says. Despite himself, Jonathan starts doing the math in his head. Five months until Dave can date anyone seriously. What does that mean, anyway, if blowjobs are included in the list of things you can do with people you’re not dating seriously? Jonathan’s afraid to ask. But it probably means he won’t be making out with Dave every Saturday night from now on. Which is fine, really. Jonathan’s heart still hasn’t healed from what Seth did to it. “Not that guys are lining up at my door or anything—"

“Dan apparently is,” Sebastian quips.

“Not really. He’s just rebounding. You know how that is.”

“Oh God, do I ever!” Sebastian uses that as a cue to launch into a hilarious and sad story about the first guy he hooked up with when he moved to Ohio. Jonathan laughs through the whole thing, but also has the urge to go find the broken boy and trade stories about heartless exes.

“Oh, don’t look at me that way,” Sebastian says. “He ended up falling in love with a very nice, very stable, very non-assholish and virginal honors student a few months later. Now they’re suing
the government for the right to marry. It’s a fairy tale ending.” He turns to Dave. “Now go find someone whose heart you haven’t broken to pass that orange onto. That orange is the only thing holding Lima’s gay community together. It’s your civil duty.”

“Fine.” Dave scoops the orange off the table and stands up. “I have to go get something from my car, anyway. Don’t try to sneak anything into my drink while I’m gone.”

Sebastian rolled his eyes. “I’ve never been that much of an asshole. Besides, you’re my designated driver.”

Jonathan doesn’t get to see who Dave passes the orange to. He hopes the kiss isn’t long.

*  

Dave comes back with two garishly colored gift bags, one half the size of a grocery bag and the other half the size of the lunch bag, and plucks them in the center of the table. Sebastian’s drained the rest of his Fuzzy Santa and is working on a basket of stale bar popcorn. He drops the handful he’s about to stuff into his mouth, aiming for the basket, but a few kernels skitter down his chest and onto the floor. “Presents?! I love presents! Which one’s for me?”

Dave chuckles. He pushes the smaller bag toward Sebastian. Jonathan wonders if this means that the other bag is for him. His stomach flutters with excitement and trepidation. It didn’t occur to him to bring presents to anyone. He’s never exchanged Christmas presents with anyone outside his immediate family, not even Seth.

“Big things come in small packages,” Sebastian says with wide eyes. He lifts the bag by the beribboned handles and shakes it next to his ear. “Is it condoms or a diamond engagement ring? If
it’s the latter, I must regretfully inform you that I can’t marry you. But I can definitely keep the
diamonds.”

Dave laughs. “It’s not an engagement ring.”

“Oooh, the mystery deepens! Can I open it?”

“That’s what it’s for.”

Sebastian tugs the ribbon so that it unravels. He pulls out a wad of tissue paper and a small blue
paperboard box from the bag. “It is an engagement ring!”

“Now you’re just being a smartass. Keep going.”

Sebastian looks up at Dave as he lifts the lid from the box. “A cockring, then?”

“You wish.”

Sebastian looks down. He squints as if he’s reading, or trying to puzzle out what it is he saying.
“Glitter eyeshadow?” he looks back up at Dave. “Seriously. Is this glitter eye shadow?”

“Read the label on the back.”

Sebastian turns the box upside down so that the contents pop into his hand. It’s around acrylic
container, its contents shimmering gold. “‘Glitter body paint.’ Oh my god. That might be even
worse. How gay do you think I am?”

Jonathan isn’t really clear on what glitter has to do with being gay. He’s also confused about
Sebastian using the word ‘gay’ like it’s an insult. The guy brags about his hookups nonstop. It
doesn’t make sense.

“Incredibly gay. You’re just afraid to show it, Mr. Douchey Frat Boy.”

“I am not afraid. I’ve hooked up with half the men in this bar.”

“Not half. And sex isn’t all there is to being gay.”

“I don’t see you wearing glitter.”

“I wear my glitter on the inside,” Dave says.

Sebastian smirks. He opens up the container and smears some of the gold paste onto his fingertip.
He leans over and dabs it onto the cleft of Dave’s chin. “And now you wear it on the outside.”

“I bet I look hot, too.”

“Maybe a little.” Sebastian looks down at the open container and seems to be considering it. “Oh,
hell.” He dips his finger back in and smears a stripe across his cheekbone. Oh. It’s kind of
stunning. It makes his face look somehow stronger. It highlights the masculine structure of his

“Of course. I’m always happy to play a small part in freeing my friends from their internalized
homophobia.”

Sebastian sticks out his tongue.
Dave loses the teasing tone and lowers his voice. “Especially when they’ve helped free me from mine.”

“Stop, or I’m going to start having emotions, and that would be ugly.” Sebastian primly sets his jar of glitter paint on the table and turns to Jonathan. “Now that I’ve gotten mine, it’s time for you to get yours.” He slides the bigger gift bag Jonathan’s way.

Jonathan looks at Dave for concurrence. It’s still hard for Jonathan to imagine that this present is actually for him. Dave nods, a half-swallowed smile on his face. “Go ahead. I’m not sure you’ll like it, but—”

Sebastian slaps Dave’s arm. “Never downtalk a present you’re about to give. It shows a lack of self-confidence.”

“Well, I’m not always confident,” Dave mutters.

“Other people don’t have to know that.”

They appear to be done bickering, at least for this round. Jonathan takes the bag and undoes the ribbon at the top. When he reaches inside, he feels a rolled up piece of cloth that’s a little like a dish towel, but thicker. As he pulls it out, his fingers nudge against buttons and embroidery. An image of the shirt Dave wore while line dancing pops in Jonathan’s head. His pulse quickens.

The first color he sees when he pulls the gift from the bag is dark blue like a midnight sky. Then, flashes of red in the shapes of trumpet flowers and cosmos. Then, light blue tendrils connecting the blooms.

Jonathan feels his mouth fall open, but no sound comes out. He unfurls the cloth. It is a shirt, with embroidery that drapes over the shoulders and across the front and back yoke. Red piping runs down both sides of the front placket and curves around the collar and cuffs. The buttons have a dark, luminescent mother-of-pearl shine.

It’s extravagant and beautiful. It’s his.

“I remembered you saying how you liked that one Western shirt.” Dave’s looking down at his Coke, not at Jonathan. “So I figured you might like this. But if you don’t, the gift receipt is in the bottom of the bag. It would be easy to return.”

Jonathan shakes his head. His mouth is still agape. He closes it, taps his tongue against the roof of his mouth in the hope of finding words. “I’m not returning it. I love it.”

Dave looks up. His face is pink. “Well, we should at least check that it fits. I guessed the size based on Sebastian’s measurements.”

Sebastian’s slaps the table. “So that’s what those texts were about! And I thought you were just being dirty.” He giggles at his own joke.

Jonathan unsnaps the buttons and pulls the shirt on. He lifts his arms to check the shoulders. He can move easily. It will be nice to dance in. The cuffs come down to his wrists, just as they should. The fabric feels softer against his skin than the shirts his mom makes for him. He wants to bury his nose in it. But obviously, he won’t do that here. “It fits.”

“Do you like the colors? I wasn’t sure which way to go, but you wear red a lot, and I figured the blue would go with your eyes …”
Dave knows the color of Jonathan’s eyes? Jonathan kind of wants to kiss Dave again. “It’s perfect.”

Dave beams. “I’m glad.”

“I’m sorry I don’t have anything for you. I’ve never really done Christmas.”

“Don’t worry. That’s not the point. I just like making people smile.”

Jonathan reaches over and squeezes Dave’s hand.

“This calls for a celebration,” Sebastian proclaims. “We should dance.”

They dance in a cluster of three, others occasionally wandering in and out of their group. The music is mostly pop- and big-band-style Christmas music that doesn’t lend itself to the close-body gyrating of Jonathan’s first time at Scandals, nor to country-western line dancing. Sebastian and Dave trade off teaching Jonathan simple swing steps, holding him by the hand or waist. The weight of the collar feels a little funny against Jonathan’s neck as he moves, but it also feels good. It’s bold and masculine and loud, nothing like the prim collarless necklines of his Plain shirts. Jonathan doesn’t take it off even when he gets hot and sweaty. He feels like a different person when he’s wearing it, someone who he’s always longed to be.

Sebastian, however, does pull off his own shirt to reveal a white undershirt beneath. His nipples are visible through the thin fabric. He doesn’t seem worried that anyone might see, just ties the sleeves of his Oxford around his waist, pulls the jar of glitter out of his pocket, and giggles as he draws squiggly lines of glitter down his forearms. “I’m bedecked like a Christmas tree!” he squeals.

By the end of the night, all three of them are covered in glitter.
Jonathan wakes up the next morning with glitter on his pillowcase. He smiles to see it glinting in the light of his bedside lamp, thinking of the way Sebastian and Dave shimmered on the dance floor. Sebastian painted Dave’s eyebrows with it and mussed it through his hair. And some of it must’ve gotten in Jonathan’s hair, as well, because he scrubbed his face and arms thoroughly with soap and water when he got home from Scandals. He’ll have to take the pillowcase outside and try to shake the glitter off. Otherwise it will get all over the laundry, and Jonathan’s mother will have too many questions he won’t want to answer.

Though it’s the Sunday before Christmas, there’s nothing particularly distinctive about the service aside from the Christmas hymns. No candles to light, no pageants, no special oratory. None of this strikes Jonathan as strange. Anything more elaborate would jar him. Harry Thiesen sits next to him for the second time in a month. The tug of desire Jonathan usually feels around him is weak. After the previous night’s kisses, the only person he wants is Dave.

Okay, and maybe Sebastian too.

School is out for the next couple weeks. Jonathan spends more time working in the barn, doing some deep cleaning and maintenance that his father has put off for this time of year when he has a helper. At the gas station, he picks up a few presents for his family: chocolate for his brothers and the twins, a bag of good coffee for his father. He finishes whittling a family of toy manatees for Marilou—he started out with the aim of making cattle, but he’s not a great whittler and couldn’t get the legs right. She’ll like them anyway, and they’ll open her eyes to the world outside of Rosedale. They’ve never been to Florida, but he can show her photos of manatees on his phone. His parents won’t mind since it’s educational.

For his mother, he frames the orange zinnia he pressed in his dictionary this summer. Thirty pages behind it is a flattened wild geranium that Seth picked and tucked into the ribbon of Jonathan’s hat in June.

He sends a Christmas card to Seth. Well, technically, to Seth and Martha, since it wouldn’t be right to address a card to the husband without also addressing it to the wife. But he picked the message out for Seth:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Faith makes all things possible,} \\
\text{Hope makes all things work,} \\
\text{Love makes all things beautiful.} \\
\text{May these gifts be yours this Christmas.}
\end{align*}
\]

The house smells like spice and syrup every day as Mom and the girls prepare what they can of the Christmas dinner ahead of time and make breads and desserts they’ll bring over to the neighbors on the visiting days following Christmas.

They exchange presents on Christmas morning after singing carols in the living room as a family. Marilou has drawn him a picture of Jesus in the manger. He gives her a big long hug, and she’s thrilled with that almost as much as she is with the manatees. Their mom has knitted each of them a pair of winter slipper-socks made with wool from the Friesen’s sheep. The twins give everybody caramels that they made over at the Yoder’s house so that it would be a surprise. After that, it’s dinner. Jonathan feels stuffed to the gills as he and Marilou cuddle on the couch watching every single video of manatees they can find on YouTube. They’ve been at it for close to an hour when Dad walks into the room with a greeting card-sized envelope in his hand. “This came in the mail earlier this week and I threw it in with the rest of the Christmas cards to open tonight.” It’s the family tradition to open and read all the holiday cards together after Mom and the twins are done.
cleaning up dinner. After that, they’ll go over to the Wiebes for hot cocoa and hymn singing with Grandma Eunice and the rest of the extended family. “Just noticed now it was addressed to you.”

Jonathan takes the envelope from his dad. It’s a good thing Marilou’s the one holding the phone, because his hands start trembling as soon as he sees Seth’s name in the return address. “Thanks,” Jonathan says, setting the card on the pillow next to him and crossing his arms to hide the shaking. If his dad comments on it, he’ll have to blame his post-dinner sugar crash. But Dad says nothing, just goes over to the easy chair on the other side of the room to read the bird book Mom got him for Christmas.

Jonathan doesn’t open the card until he’s in bed and hears Mark snoring in the top bunk. On the front is a photograph of a candle flame and the words:

_The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness cannot overwhelm it._

Inside, beneath the Merry Christmas printed in red, curling script, is Seth’s handwriting:

_Strange how it’s hard to tell sometimes what is dark and what is light. I take hope in the assurance that we are never so deep in the darkness that the light of Christ cannot reach us. I pray your life is full of light._

_Yours in Christ,
Seth_

Jonathan pores over the words, trying to eke meaning from them. What is Seth calling dark? His love for Jonathan, or his marriage to Martha?

Is he still in love with Jonathan? Does he feel Jonathan’s pull like a beacon, but tell himself the pull of love is actually temptation?

Or is he saying his marriage to Martha, which was supposed to save him, is killing his spirit?

Jonathan puts the card in his cash box. He wishes Seth had never sent it. It raises more questions than it answers. But he’s also glad. Seth still thinks of Jonathan. He hasn’t forgotten what they had. What they could have again, if Seth ever gets over being such a stinking idiot.
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The day after Christmas is a slow one at the gas station. Cars come and go at the pumps, but few people come inside. Their stomachs must still be full from the day before. All the Mennonite businesses in Rosedale are closed so that their owners can visit their neighbors and eat even more than they did the day before. The gas station isn’t owned by Mennonites, but it might as well be closed too.

“Carlene,” Jonathan says when he runs out of things to restock, “how long will it take you to get your degree?” He’s leaning on the pushbroom, though he’s already swept the floor twice. There’s not much dirt left.

Carlene comes out from behind the register to help herself to a coffee refill. “Five years if I decide to get a bachelor’s. Maybe six, at the rate I’m going.”

Six years. That’s a third of Jonathan’s lifetime. Six years ago, Jonathan was still a little kid without even a hint of peach fuzz in his armpits. He was singing soprano in church next to Alvin’s tenor and Seth’s baritone. He hadn’t heard of algebra and couldn’t read the Gothic script his great-great-grandparent’s Bible had been printed in. He didn’t know what it meant to be in love—not really. He believed everything his parents taught without question and rarely thought of the future.

Six years before that, he was just learning to read and write. He was too young to handle a rifle, but Alvin and Seth would bring him along fishing, though he didn’t have the strength to reel in anything other than tiny panfish by himself. He dreamed of being a grown-up one day, and played at running the milking machines and baling the hay. His farm would neighbor Seth’s, and they’d eat lunch together every day—sandwiches that their wives would pack for them so they could eat out in the field without having to return home.

Rewind another six years, and Jonathan didn’t even exist.

Where will he be six years from now? Living with his parents and skirting around baptism? Working as a shift manager at the gas station? Studying toward his own degree?

Will Seth still figure in his life at all?

“That’s a long time,” Jonathan says.

“Yeah. I suppose.” Carlene swirls creamer into her coffee before tossing the stirrer in the trash. “But if I wasn’t working on it already, it would take even longer.”

“What are you studying again?”

“Right now I’m working on my associate’s degree in information technology. Software development, mostly. But when I transfer from technical college to four-year, it’ll be computer science. Unless I can find a good-paying job in the field before that.”

Four-year? She just said she had six more years to go. But if he asks, he’ll betray his ignorance. He should be proud of that ignorance. He’s not. “Why’d you pick information technology?”

“Because I’m a single mother and that’s where the money is.”
“It pays better than working here?”

Carlene laughs. “A lot better. And a lot of IT companies pay for your health insurance, too. That’s nothing to sneeze at.”

Jonathan’s never thought about health insurance. No one in Rosedale has it, because it means depending on outsiders for help. Instead, they rely on God and the church when someone gets sick. After Mr. Shenk injured his ankle, the deacon came around collecting money for the part of the bill Mr. Shenk couldn’t pay for. That’s what they do for everything: births, hospitalizations, surgeries. If it’s too much for the congregation to afford, brethren from the regional conference chip in. If that’s still too much, they turn to the multi-conference mutual aid society.

“You can’t get those jobs without a degree?”

Carlene shrugs. “Maybe if I’d been coding since I was twelve, but I haven’t. I have to learn it somewhere.”

“And the extra money you earn will pay for the cost of going to school?” Jonathan can’t imagine it would. He’s heard that some colleges cost tens of thousands of dollars a semester to go to.

“Yeah. Technical school tuition isn’t that expensive if you do a little at a time. Plus, as a single mom with crappy jobs, I qualify for federal grants.”

“Do you like college?”

“It’s pretty cool. This semester I worked on developing a phone app for breastfeeding mothers.”


Apparently his discomfort shows on his face, because Carlene starts chuckling again. “You work on a dairy farm, Jonathan. How can that shock you?”

“Those are animals.”

“You also have four younger siblings.”

Yes, but his mother only nursed them under a cover when he was around. “That’s different.”

Carlene still looks amused. “If the word ‘breastfeeding’ is enough to scandalize you, you’re in for a big shock when you get married. What are all these questions for, anyway?”

Jonathan’s glad for the change of subject. “One of my friends is talking about going to college. I just wondered what she might be in store for.”

“She? Is this one of your Mennonite friends?”

Jonathan nods.

“The future Mrs. Unruh, perhaps?”

“No.”

“Because you have a thing against educated girls?”

“No. Because…” He can’t tell Carlene about his aversion to marriage. She’s going to think he’s weirder than she already does. “I have to save up money before I think about that. And get
baptized.”

“But it’s not normal for Mennonite girls to go to college, is it?”

“It’s not normal for any of us to go to college.”

“So she’s rebelling?”

“Not really. She wants to study nursing. That’s humble.”

“Too bad. I was hoping she was rebelling. Mennonite girls don’t get a lot of freedom.”

If Jonathan were one to argue, he’d ask Carlene how can she talk about freedom when she’s working sixty hours a week. If her grandparents had never left the church, she wouldn’t be a single mom struggling to make ends meet. She’d be married to a hard-working Mennonite man, and he would have to provide for her and Nevaeh. She might still have to work, but it would be in the family business or in the home. She wouldn’t be away from her kid all the time. “It depends how you measure freedom.”

“True. I guess not being allowed to cut their hair frees them from going to the hairdresser, and not being allowed to wear pants frees them from … pants.” Carlene gives him a look. She’s studying him like a textbook. That can’t be good. “How do you measure freedom, Jonathan?”

“What do you mean?”

“I was just thinking, I don’t suppose Mennonite guys get a lot of freedom, either, do they?”

There’s no way he’s going to answer that. “I should probably go scrub down the insides of the coolers since it’s slow right now.”

Carlene sips her coffee without taking her eyes off him. “Yeah, you could do that. Especially if you want to avoid answering my question.”

“I want to work, Carlene.” He straightens up and drags the broom across the floor toward the backroom.

“Because you’re a Mennonite, and working is so much better than thinking?”

“No, because—” Actually, that is why. “What’s up with you today, Carlene? You’re not usually so contentious.”

“I’m not trying to be contentious, Jonathan. Just trying to figure you out. I worry about you sometimes.”

“Worry?”

“Yeah, worry. You haven’t seemed very happy lately.”

Her words hit Jonathan like cold water. His skin tightens. “I really should go clean the cooler.”

Carlene forces her lips into a sad smile. “You do that.”

As Jonathan pushes the door to the back room open, she calls out after him, “I’m here if you need someone to talk to, Jonathan. I promise not to be an asshole. You remind me of my little brother, and I stopped being an asshole to him years ago.”
Jonathan nods without turning around. “Sure,” he says, because it’s the only way he knows how to end the conversation.

*

Last year, in the days after Christmas, was the first time Seth went with his mother to visit the Ens in Wisconsin. Mrs. Groening was related to them by marriage. Mrs. Ens was her sister’s husband’s sister, and the families had been writing back and forth ever since the Ens left Rosedale, seeing each other each summer at the Mennonite Relief Sales in Illinois and Indiana.

Jonathan remembers sitting in Seth’s room, watching as he packed for the trip. It was the day after Christmas. Their parents and siblings were downstairs drinking tea and eating Christmas cookies and zwieback. The sun streamed through the window as Jonathan sat on the bed and Seth methodically gathered his belongings into a duffel bag: one set of trousers, two shirts, a nightshirt, a disposable razor, Barbasol shaving cream, Equate toothpaste, white undershirts, navy blue underpants.

“You briefs are blue,” Jonathan said in surprise, then felt foolish for stating the obvious.

“The Rules & Discipline allow them.”

“Really?”

“It must, or my mother wouldn’t have bought them for me. White, blue, or black. Like our clothing.”

“I guess I should read it sometime. My mom’s only ever bought us white underwear. I thought it must be the rule.”

“She probably just prefers white because she doesn’t have to worry about the color bleeding out when she washes it on hot. My mom washes my underwear with the towels. It’s no big deal.” Seth bent over to rearrange the contents of his duffel.

Jonathan wondered if Seth was wearing blue briefs at that moment. Did they hug him like a swimsuit under his pants? What did he look like under all those clothes with only his briefs on?

What did he look like without his briefs on?

Jonathan needed to stop staring at Seth’s butt. He moved his gaze to the duffel bag, and to Seth’s large hands unfolding and refolding his clothing. They moved like robins, focused and refined.

“Are you courting one of their daughters?”

Seth’s hands stopped moving. “It’s just a visit.”

“Yes. But it’s just you and your mom. None of your brothers or sisters are going.”

“Travel with the whole family gets expensive.”

“Right. But someone else could travel with your mom.”

Seth sat on the little wooden chair next to the dresser. The sun hit his hair, making it shine like a halo. He looked at the floor and frowned. “Martha and I have been writing each other.”

Martha. The oldest of the Ens children. Jonathan remembered that from when the Ens used to live in Rosedale. How long had Seth been writing her? The thought was bitter like milkweed. “She
must write nice letters.” It took all Jonathan’s strength to say it.

“It’s not like that.”

“She writes bad letters?” Jonathan tried to make it sound like a joke.

“Not that, either. She’s interesting enough. But …” Seth’s left cheek twitched, making his eye blink. “I don’t think of her as a wife.”

“Of course not. You’re not married yet.”

“We might never be.”

“But you might.”

Seth looked up at Jonathan, holding his gaze steady even as his eye kept spasming half-shut. “Don’t you think it’s time for me to start looking for a wife?”

“Alvin hasn’t yet.”

“Alvin’s probably not staying in the church. He shouldn’t marry.”

“And you should?”

“It’s what people do.”

“You make it sound so romantic.”

“Marriage doesn’t need romance. Just love.”

“You should say that when you propose.”

“Why are you giving me such a hard time?”

Jonathan’s heart pounded in his ears. This was his opportunity to tell the truth. But if he did that, Seth might never talk to him again. Jonathan couldn’t live with that consequence. “I’m sorry, Seth. I only meant it as brotherly ribbing.”

“That’s all right. I suppose that’s what brothers are supposed to do.” A cloud passed over the sun. Seth’s face when from bright to gray.

Jonathan should say something kind. Something to build Seth up. *Rejoice with them that do rejoice.* “You like her?”

Seth shrugged. “I think my mother likes her more than I do, to tell the truth.” And then, as if he’d only heard the words after he’d spoken them, he began to chuckle.

Jonathan laughed, too. He couldn’t help it. Seth’s laughter was contagious. And maybe it would all be okay. Courtship didn’t always lead to marriage. In person, Martha might bore him. Seth might spend his days in Wisconsin doing nothing but eating and going on long walks to see things he couldn’t see in Rosedale. Perhaps he’d go out hunting just to get away from her. “They have prairie chickens in Wisconsin, don’t they?” They didn’t happen in Ohio, and Jonathan had always wanted to see one.

“Are you comparing Martha to a prairie chicken?” Seth burst into a new bout of laughter.
“Seth!” Jonathan was too tickled to chide Seth as thoroughly as he ought.

This Christmas, Jonathan can’t help wondering what would have happened if he’d told the truth back then. Could he have stopped Seth’s slippery descent? Could he have caught him before he went past the point of no return?

In his room, he takes the cash box from under his bed and pulls out the Christmas card Seth sent him. *The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness cannot overwhelm it.*

He kneels at his bed and prays that Seth’s soul be filled with light.

*

Sebastian’s in France for the winter break, and Dave is in Peoria. Jonathan waffles on whether he wants to drive into Lima this week when Blaine messages him on Facebook: *Stitch ’n’ Bitch tomorrow. Can you come?*

*I don’t know how to do any of that stuff.*

*No problem. We can teach you. Or you can just sit there and drink coffee. Or soda. It’s mostly for the company. The knitting’s just an excuse.*

Jonathan can’t imagine he’ll be comfortable, but he’s itching to get out of Rosedale, so he goes. He doesn’t have the excuse of making a delivery, so he leaves a note on the kitchen table while his mom’s doing laundry that says, “Back by dinner.”

Scandals looks different during the day. Natural light shines in through the windows. The dance floor has been taken over by chairs, tables, and people who have their eyes glued to a football game on the large screen TV. Jonathan heads for the annex, where Blaine told him the Stitch ’n’ Bitch crew usually meets. There are a few people at the pool tables, the balls clacking loudly when they strike each other. That’s when Jonathan notices how quiet the music is compared to evenings. He can barely make “Santa Claus Is Comin’ to Town” beneath the pool playing and the football game.

Blaine’s sitting at a table with three others, his chair pushed back to give his knitting some room. He’s working on a mitten that matches the scarf he showed Jonathan a few weeks before. He looks up and smiles, then pulls back the chair next to him for Jonathan. “I brought an extra pair of needles for you, if you want to give this knitting thing a shot. Origami paper, too. And Shawna can show you embroidery.” He points across the table at a middle-aged woman with long coil of braids wrapped around her head. She holds up the piece of cross stitching and that she’s working on. It’s a complicated sampler with flowers, animals, and curly cues all around the border. In the center, it says *Fuck the Academy* in elegant capital letters.

“That’s … different,” Jonathan says. The woman laughs.

There are also two students from the local college, both girls. Jonathan’s a little disappointed, but what did he expect from an activity called Stitch ’n’ Bitch?

It’s not so bad, though. The girls, Paige and Jessica, swoon over his shirt. He’s wearing one of the ones his mom sewed, but with jeans and no suspenders. They don’t catch on that he’s Mennonite, just think he’s lucky to have handmade clothes, even if he can’t answer any of their questions about what machine his mom uses or where she buys her fabric. They each have hand sewing projects that they brought along, but Paige puts hers down to show Jonathan how to make an origami balloon. He’d rather do that than knitting, because he has actually made origami before, back in elementary school when they learned about the girl from Hiroshima who made a thousand paper
cranes before she died of leukemia from atomic bombs.

Blaine talks about visiting his ex-boyfriend in New York for Christmas.

“A surprise visit? To your ex? I’m not sure whether to call that ballsy or stupid.” That’s Jessica.

Blaine shrugs. “His dad thought it would be okay. I had backup plans if he didn’t want to see me. And it worked out fine. I think… Things are getting better.”

Jonathan wonders what would happen if he showed up on Seth’s doorstep. It’s hard to imagine. He doesn’t even know what Seth’s doorstep looks like. He keeps picturing the white painted porch of the Groening house here in Rosedale.

Shawna raises her eyebrows. “How much better? Did you two hook up?”

Blaine blushes and doesn’t look up from his knitting. “A gentleman doesn’t discuss such things.”

Jonathan’s mind flashes to when Sebastian hinted about Dave’s oral skills. Apparently Sebastian is not a gentleman.

“Oh! So you did!”

“A refusal to answer isn’t necessarily an affirmative.” Blaine unravels his previous stitch and redoes it.

“Fine. But you’re on good ground?”

“We talked. It’ll take time. But I’m hopeful.” Blaine’s eyes are wide and innocent—big and shiny as a calf’s. If Jonathan ever wondered what people looked like when they were lovestruck, he has his answer now.

Of course, Jonathan doesn’t have to wonder. He saw this look on Seth’s face countless times, going back to before they kissed. It took kissing for Jonathan to understand what those eyes meant.

If Jonathan surprised Seth the way Blaine surprised Kurt, would they hook up? It would be hard to with Seth’s wife around. But maybe she’d be off visiting her parents or her sister, or in town buying groceries and thread for her sewing machine. Or maybe she’d be home, and she’d send Jonathan down to the barn to find Seth. Jonathan would surprise him there, and when Seth saw him he would say, “Jonathan,” in that way that makes his name sound like a prayer. They would kiss and hold each other like they did the night before Seth’s engagement party, but without the tears.

Jonathan should feel guilty for having these thoughts. Adultery is sin. But every time Jonathan thinks this over lately, he can’t help feeling that what he had with Seth was the real marriage. Seth is committing adultery with Martha.

How much time would it take Jonathan to convince Seth of that?

The conversation continues around Jonathan, at first with talk about what the others did on Christmas, which mostly involved eating lots of food like Jonathan’s family. Jessica is the only one beside him not to have a Christmas tree, but she’s Jewish. Still, she says she ate lots of Chinese takeout. He wonders if she’s related to Jake the way Jonathan’s related to half the Mennonites in Ohio if you go far back enough on the family tree. There’s talk about movies Jonathan hasn’t seen and comic books he hasn’t read, but it’s not hard to follow because Blaine explains everything to him in an offhand way that doesn’t draw attention to Jonathan’s ignorance. Another person drops in, this time a rotund guy with a salt-and-pepper mustache who might have been one of the Santas the most recent time Jonathan was here. His name is Tracy and he has a high, feminine voice and
lisps on half his words, and when he stands up to get a refill on his hot cocoa, he walks with swaying hips and short, mincing steps. It kind of freaks Jonathan out. He’s never known a woman that womanly. *Judge not, and ye shall not be judged,* he tells himself, and that helps pay more attention to the words Terry is saying and not to the way he’s saying them. And that’s good, because it turns out Terry is funny and nice. He’s also a better knitter than Jonathan’s mom, though of course Jonathan would never say that out loud.

By the time people start drifting off, Jonathan has five balloons in bright colors he can give Marilou when he gets home. Maybe next time he’ll be brave enough to try knitting. Or at least making a crane. He pulls his coat off the back of his chair. He’s graduated from his fall jacket to his winter parka, so it’s not a dead giveaway that he’s a Mennonite.

“Jonathan,” Blaine says, setting down his needles. The rest of the Stitch ’n’ Bitchers have cleared the room. “Can I ask you something personal?”

“Um, okay. I guess.”

“How are things at home? Does your family know?”

“Know what?”

“That you’re— I suppose I shouldn’t assume. But given that I met you at Scandals, I figured you’re gay.”

“Oh. Um. Yeah. I’m … I guess.”

“And from what I understand, conservative Mennonites aren’t usually very accepting of that.”

That, Jonathan can answer more decisively. “No. Not really.”

“So does anyone at home know?”

“No.” That’s all that Jonathan means to say. But if anyone could understand the pain Jonathan’s been going through for the past four months, it would be Blaine. “I mean, there was my … friend, but he’s gone now.”

“Gone?”

“Moved to Wisconsin.”

“I’m sorry. Long distance relationships are hard.”

“Well, we’re not really …” Jonathan scratches the back of his neck. “He got married.”

Blaine’s expression changes. He looks like someone just lanced him through the heart. *Weep with them that weep.* He reaches out and squeezes Jonathan’s wrist. “I can’t imagine how difficult that must be for you.”

“Yeah.” Jonathan can barely comprehend it sometimes, either. Though right now, the relief at speaking the words makes him feel strangely light.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

Jonathan shakes his head. He’s already told Blaine more than he’s told anyone else.

“Well, if you ever need someone to talk to, please don’t hesitate to reach out to me. I’m not an
expert in anything, but I know how much it can help to have someone to talk to. And I understand a little about messy breakups.”

“Was yours… messy?”

“Yeah. I cheated on him.” The candidness with which Blaine says it surprises Jonathan, but maybe it shouldn’t. People here in Scandals are almost always more candid than in Rosedale. “It’s hard to regain someone’s trust after that. But I’m working on it.”

Jonathan mulls that over. He wonders if Seth wants to regain Jonathan’s trust in the same way. Jonathan wants to give it to him.

Later, when Jonathan gets home, he takes the card Seth sent him at Christmas out from its hiding place in his cash box. With a piece of clear tape, he hangs it on the wall next to his pillow. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness cannot overwhelm it. He closes his eyes and prays.

Chapter End Notes

The Fuck the Academy cross-stitch is a tip of the cap to Mary Flanner, who sucked me into fandom and fic writing, and always delighted me with the repeated used of the phrase on her Livejournal.
Chapter 12

There’s no way that Jonathan can keep going to Lima every Saturday without rousing his parents’ suspicions. His uncle doesn’t need that many deliveries to be made now that Christmas is over, and half of them are in the opposite direction of Lima. So Jonathan starts switching it up. Sometimes he goes on Friday, instead, after his shift at the gas station when his parents are already asleep. If it’s Saturday line dancing and he doesn’t have a delivery to make in that direction, or if he wants to go to Stitch ‘n’ Bitch, he implies that he has an extra shift to pickup at the gas station. Unique sometimes comes to Stitch ‘n’ Bitch even though she’s not gay, and it’s always nice to see her.

To bribe Mark into keeping quiet about the nighttime sneaking around, Jonathan switches his cellphone contract to a family plan and adds Mark to it. His parents are certain to start asking questions sooner or later, but he’d like to push it off as long as possible.

The downside of switching up when he goes to Scandals is that he doesn’t get to see Dave as much. Dave often has intramural football on Saturday mornings and for some reason thinks he should get a good night’s sleep beforehand.

Jonathan: I have to get up to go to church on Sundays even when I’ve gone out the night before.

Dave: That’s a little less grueling though, isn’t it?

Jonathan: Depends how you define ‘grueling.’

Dave: Ha ha.

Jonathan: There’s the milking to do in the mornings, too.

Dave: Yeah. I don’t know how you do that after dancing for three hours the night before.

Jonathan: I have more energy when I go out, not less.

I have more energy when I go out, not less. Jonathan hits Send before considering whether the words are literally true. On plenty of mornings after Scandals, he was bleary-eyed and yawning through the whole milking routine.

But he was also happy. That’s its own kind of energy.

It’s a Friday night in mid-February. The wall behind the bar is strung with metallic hearts and squares of foil that glitter like tinsel, and more dangle on fishlines from the ceiling above the dance floor. Paper hearts and foil squares fill bowls on the bar counter. The bartender flits back and forth from customer to customer, a white pair of wings the size of a duck’s propelling him forward. Slung between them is a leather tube with a quiver of arrows with hearts instead of points for the tips. His clothing is scanty—a nearly see-through unitard and a gold lamē sash tied around his waist to obscure the parts that everyone is most interested in seeing.

Valentine’s Day. Jonathan knew it was coming—the little pink teddy bears and bags of Sweethearts on sale this month at the gas station make it hard to forget—but since he can never keep straight the actual date it’s supposed to fall on, it hits him as a surprise. He never had the agony or excitement of having to pick out Valentine’s Day cards for every kid in his class, or of
cutting heart shapes out of folded construction paper to present his parents with on the special day. Valentine’s Day is one of those worldly things the Mennonites in Rosedale ignore.

“What can I do you for?” the bartender says with a wink when Jonathan slides into one of the empty stools. The wink shows off the bartender’s gold glitter eyeshadow. Jonathan wonders if the Sebastian has worn the body glitter Dave gave him since he got it at Christmas. He wouldn’t mind if Sebastian showed up tonight dressed like the bartender, but he’s fully aware that’s just wishful thinking.

Jonathan orders his usual 7-Up.

“We have Cherry 7-Up, too, in case you want to go pink for Valentine’s Day.”

Jonathan has no inclination to do anything special for Valentine’s Day, but he does like cherry. He nods his approval. While he waits for the soda to arrive, he pulls his phone out of his pocket and sends a message to Sebastian:

_I’m here. Are you?_

Scandals isn’t that crowded yet, so it’s unlikely that Jonathan has overlooked him, but you never know with Sebastian. He could be making out with somebody under a table or in the bathroom or in the back of one of the cars in the parking lot.

_You still want to see me?_ is the message Sebastian sends back. Jonathan stares at it, trying to understand what the _still_ means. They talked about meeting up here on Monday. When does Jonathan ever change his mind about something like that?

_Why wouldn’t I?_

Sebastian’s answer doesn’t come immediately. Jonathan sips his drink. It’s very pink, and the maraschino cherry floating on top makes it seem even pinker. He pulls it out and pops it into his mouth. It’s taken on some of the fizziness of the soda. It bursts onto his tongue when he bites into it.

His phone buzzes. _You got the news, didn’t you?_

_What news?_ Jonathan skims over headlines sometimes when they pop up on his phone and it’s unavoidable, but he’s never been much of a news consumer. Most news is only relevant if you follow gossip or politics, and Mennonites in Rosedale aren’t supposed to get involved in either. At home, they listen to the weather radio and get the weekly farm country newspaper and _The Budget_, the weekly Mennonite-Amish newspaper out of Sugarcreek. And it’s inevitable that he sees whatever’s over the top of the fold on the dailies they sell at the gas station. So he knows about the storm on the East Coast and the volcano that erupted in Indonesia. And there’s a war in Syria. His family has sent money and quilts to Mennonite Central Committee to help the refugees. But he doubts Sebastian’s talking about that.

_I keep forgetting how different your world is. Be there in a couple minutes._

Sebastian shows up even sooner than that, his palm between Jonathan’s shoulder blades, his scent sweet and spicy as he slides into the chair next to Jonathan’s.

“That was fast.”

“Yeah, well. I was hiding in the parking lot.”
“Hiding?”

Sebastian looks down at his hands sheepishly. “Contemplating whether or not to get out of my car. I’m not great at awkward social interactions.”

“What are you talking about?”

“At school … you guys didn’t get a notice from the show choir rules committee?”

“Not that I know of. Mr. Shenk didn’t tell us about any letter, at least.”

“And you haven’t seen those videos of our team captain coming out of the courthouse that have been splashed all over the Internet?”

“Nope.”

Bartender Cupid comes by to take Sebastian’s order. He asks for a whiskey sour. It’s the drink Sebastian seems to prefer when he’s in a heavy mood. He turned back to Jonathan. “This is really embarrassing.”

“I still don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“The Warblers got retroactively disqualified from Sectionals. And Hunter, our team captain, ended up getting arrested. Because some of us were using … How do I say this? Performance-enhancing drugs.”

“You mean, there are drugs you can take to make you better at singing?”

“Not singing. Dancing. Hunter made the main dancers shoot steroids leading up to the performance so they’d be better at their backflips. He wanted all of us to take them, and even kicked one kid off the team for refusing, until I pointed out to him that steroids can permanently alter a person’s vocal cords and fuck up their singing voice. So the rest of us … we just took speed.”

“Speed?”

“Like coffee, but stronger.”

“Yeah. I know what speed is.” One of Jonathan’s cousins got addicted when he was doing long-haul trucking. He had to go into treatment after he started to hear voices. “I just … Why would you take it for a singing competition?”

“Hunter thought it would give us more energy.”

That argument would make sense to Jonathan if the Warblers had been working the night shift at a rifle factory. But it’s not like anyone’s life or death hangs on a singing competition. “Why would it matter? No one’s gonna die if you fall asleep at the wheel.”

Sebastian’s gives Jonathan a quizzical look. “Our futures ride on stuff like singing competitions. College admissions boards eat that shit up.”

“So … you took speed to get into college?” Jonathan’s pretty sure that taking speed is not a necessary step for getting into college. He can’t imagine Carlene doing that. Or Sarah. But what does he know? The world works in bizarre ways.

The bartender came back with Sebastian’s drink. The lemon slice on the edge of the glass was cut into the shape of a heart. Sebastian crushed it into his drink and took a gulp. “Sort of. I mostly took
it because I was afraid to stand up to Hunter. I’m such a wuss.”

Jonathan strokes Sebastian’s knee. “Don’t punish yourself over it. We had something similar in our choir.”

Sebastian’s eyes go wide. “The Mennonites were taking performance-enhancing drugs?”

“No. But … we had people in our group who wanted to do things not all of us were comfortable with, and they got their way because none of us wanted to be the squeaky wheel. It’s hard to speak up sometimes.”

“Okay, I’ve got to ask. And I swear, it’s just between you and me. I won’t bring anything to the show choir rules committee. What kind of things were they asking you to do that you are comfortable with? Your performance at Sectionals was so fucking wholesome.”

Jonathan smiles. “Maybe to you. But playing instruments, having soloists, not singing in four-part harmony—all of it was controversial.”

Sebastian gives Jonathan a wistful look. “You Mennonites are so damn cute.”

Heat rises to Jonathan’s face, even though he knows Sebastian doesn’t mean anything by it. Not really. And that’s okay. Jonathan’s still in love with Seth, or would be if Seth would come back to him. But Jonathan wouldn’t mind kissing Sebastian occasionally until that happens. He hasn’t smooched anybody since Scandals’ pre-Christmas party. Not on the lips. Not with tongue.

Oh crap. A hard-on is imminent.

“So you’re not mad? I thought you would be mad.”

“Why?”

“Um. Because we cheated. I cheated. Maybe your team would have won if we hadn’t.”

Jonathan laughs. “There’s no way we would’ve won. We didn’t even dance. Show choirs are supposed to dance, right?”

“But still. Cheating is wrong. Shouldn’t you be judging me for that?”

“Look. From a strict Mennonite perspective, us even competing in Sectionals was wrong. See you didn’t do anything any worse than we did, as far as I see it.”

“Playing instruments is as bad as taking drugs?”

“They all pave the path to hell. Or at least, that’s what I used to think. Now I don’t know. Maybe it’s fine to play instruments. Maybe it’s fine to compete in Sectionals. I don’t know that it’s fine to take speed, since you can get addicted, but that whiskey you’re drinking? All my life I’ve been taught that alcohol is evil. People can be excommunicated from my church for drinking. But if it’s such a sin, why did Jesus turn water into wine? If playing instruments is a sin, why doesn’t the Bible condemn King David for playing the harp?”

“Or for falling in love with Jonathan,” Sebastian says.

“What?”

“What are you talking about? Men kissed each other all the time back then. It was the holy kiss.”

“What? The holy kiss?”

“Um, yeah. It’s what the Bible calls it when two believers greet each other with a kiss.”

“Then why did Jonathan throw his clothes off when he met David? Why did David love Jonathan more than any of his wives? Why was Jonathan’s father so freaked out about their relationship?”

“I don’t remember any of this,” Jonathan says. Of course, he doesn’t read the Old Testament much. It’s full of wars and polygamy and a bunch of other stuff that went out with Jesus. His acquaintance with it comes from whatever gets mentioned in church, school, or the passages his Bible phone app prompts him to read.

“Read First and Second Samuel. It’s all in there.”

Jonathan pulls out his phone and opens his Bible app. He searches his name and comes up with 105 results. It’s too many to sift through on his own. He passes the phone to Sebastian. “Show me.”

Sebastian has only read two sentences to Jonathan when the bartender interrupts. “Are you two reading the Bible at a gay bar? On International Condom Day?”

Sebastian glances at the bowl of square foil packages. “So that’s why so many condoms. I thought it was just because of Valentine’s Day.”

“That too.” The bartender says something else, but Jonathan doesn’t catch it. He’s too busy staring at the bowls. He thought the foil packages were holding some sort of candy—individually wrapped Necco Wafers, maybe. Is that what condom packages look like? He expected them to be more, well, sausage shaped. And why would gay guys need to use birth control anyway? He glances over his shoulder and realizes that’s what’s hanging from the ceiling of the dance floor, too: long foil strips of condoms.

“Don’t worry.” Sebastian’s voice cuts through Jonathan’s shock. He’s still talking to the bartender. “We’re only reading the sexy, gay-positive parts. I swear, some of this shit could be used in foreplay, if you’re into that kind of thing.”

The bartender’s mouth twitches into a smile. “If you’re into foreplay, or into the Bible?”

“Either, I guess.”

The bartender chuckles.

They spend the next hour poring over the story of Jonathan and David, moving to the annex when the bar gets too crowded. Sebastian reads the parts about kissing and disrobing with less suggestiveness than Jonathan would expect. Even so, it all sounds pretty gay. He makes Sebastian reread several parts just to make sure he hasn’t misheard them, then looks over the text himself.

“It doesn’t make sense,” Jonathan says more than once after they get to the end of the story.

“What doesn’t make sense? That gay people have always existed?”

“No. That I never noticed before.”

“I wouldn’t have noticed it if my grandmother hadn’t pointed it out to me.”
“You grandmother?”

Sebastian shrugs as if what his grandmother did is perfectly normal, and Jonathan’s reaction is the thing out of whack. “Yeah. She’s annoyed that my parents never brought me to church as a kid beyond the requisite head sprinkling when I was still in diapers. She gives me the soft sell whenever we visit. I go with her sometimes. The windows aren’t bad.”

“What church?”


“You don’t know that.” Jonathan probably would, but he couldn’t say for certain. He’d never been to a church like that. Just seen pictures of cathedrals in books and on the web, and been told by his parents and teachers that they’re examples of how other churches warp Christianity to be about riches and wealth instead of about Jesus. Whenever he drives by a particularly ornate church, he has a kneejerk reaction of distaste, even if he’s also impressed by the craftsmanship. Everything beautiful should also be functional, or it has no worth.

“No, I suppose I don’t. You ever been to an Episcopal church?”

“I’ve only been to mine.”

“What’s it like? Besides the lack of booming pipe organs and stained glass.”

How does Jonathan explain something that he’s known his whole life and has no point of comparison for? He lists what he can think of. “Besides the singing, there’s a prayer and two sermons.”

“Two sermons? That sounds miserable.”

Jonathan laughs. “It is, sometimes. It all depends on who’s doing the talking.”

“What do you mean? How many pastors do you have?”

“Two. But they invite other men from the congregation to preach, too. Sometimes the bishop visits.”

“How long is the service?”

“An hour and a half. Two hours if someone gets long-winded. What about yours?”

“I don’t know. Like I said, I don’t go much. But I can’t remember any of them going longer than an hour.”

“Do they preach about David and Jonathan?”

“No. But sometimes the pastor will say something about same-sex marriage or LGBT equality.”

Jonathan scratches the back of his neck. “You mean, against—”

“No, no. In favor of it.”

Jonathan’s jaw drops so low a truck could probably drive into his mouth. He knows he should close it, that he looks like an ignorant redneck who left the barn door wide open. That the only thing he seems to be able to close are his eyes. He gives Sebastian a startled blink.
“You know, ‘love your neighbor as yourself.’ What Christians are supposed to do.”

“But …” Mennonites are great at loving their neighbors as themselves. They bring food to the sick. They pay for each other’s healthcare. They don’t buy luxuries so they can give their money to people who need it more. They spend hours assembling school kits for poor kids in Columbus and Lima and every far-flung corner of the world. After Hurricane Katrina, a third of Rosedale’s men and older boys went down to Louisiana and Mississippi to clean up and rebuild homes. The women sewed quilts and clothes and organized auctions to raise money for disaster relief. Every year, they help out with the Ohio Mennonite Relief Sale near Kidron to raise money so Mennonite Central Committee can give people help that they can’t.

But love also means correcting those who are wrong and misled. How can a pastor get up and tell a congregation that two men should be allowed to get married? Sure, he reads stuff online written for gay Christians, but that’s different. He’s not sitting in church, and the people writing aren’t his pastor. Pastors have a different level of responsibility to be careful about what they say. To not speak words that could be misinterpreted. Maybe some men should be allowed to marry. But even if Sebastian’s right about King David and Jonathan, they weren’t married. Or … they did make a covenant with each other. So maybe they were?

Still, parishioners could hear the pastor talking and think that, since it’s okay for some men to marry each other, it’s okay for all men. But the Bible warns against straight men going against their natures to indulge in the flesh of other men. And besides, marriage between two men isn’t as useful as marriage between a man and a woman. Two men can’t make children together the way a man and a woman can. Isn’t it better for a man to marry a woman if he’s capable of loving her that way?

Back when the church first formed, the apostles used to argue about whether or not it was okay to eat meat from animals that had been sacrificed to idols. Since the idols didn’t represent actual gods, any ceremonies involving them had no actual meaning, and so the apostles had every right to eat the meat. But the situation was different for new converts. Eating sacrificed meat reminded them of their former gods, which opened the door to sin. “Meat commendeth us not to God: for neither, if we eat, are we the better; neither, if we eat not, are we the worse,” wrote the apostle Paul. “But take heed that the exercise of your rights does not become a stumbling block to the weak.”

“I can see the gears turning in your brain. Would this help?” Sebastian gestures at his half-finished whiskey sour.

“No.” Jonathan takes a sip of his own drink. “It’s just a lot to think about, is all.”

“What is?”

“Everything.”

Sebastian chuckles. “Maybe we should stop talking religion, and dance instead?”

“That’s a good idea.”

On the dance floor, things feel less confusing. Men embracing each other, their bodies moving in harmony. They’re beautiful together.

Every beautiful thing should have a purpose, or it loses its beauty. The rightness of men falling in love with women has always been obvious to Jonathan because that love is also practical. A husband and wife can have children together, leading more souls into God’s kingdom.

Here on the Scandals dance floor, Jonathan understands something new about beauty. Being with
Seth was beautiful because it made Jonathan feel like he wasn’t alone in the world, that God hadn’t forgotten him. And maybe he deserved to feel God’s love as much as anyone else.

It had its purpose. It still does.

And so does dancing with Sebastian. So does four-part singing. So does a quilt as elaborate as a stained glass window. They all wrap Jonathan in warmth. Make him feel like less of a refugee.

“I can’t believe you’re not mad at me,” Sebastian says several songs in.

It takes a moment for Jonathan to remember what he’s supposed to be mad about. “It didn’t hurt me, what you did. I’m glad we didn’t win.”

“Glad?”

“Yeah. If we had, there would have been another competition to get ready for. I never wanted to compete in the first place.”

Sebastian grabs Jonathan’s hand and gives him a twirl. “I wish I could have that attitude.”

“You probably could, with practice.” At the end of the twirl, Jonathan ends up with his back against Sebastian’s chest, their arms twisted together over Jonathan’s heart like a pretzel. “You’re not still taking speed, are you?”

“Hell no. That stuff was too much. Made me feel like more of an asshole than I already am. Coffee and alcohol are my drugs of choice.”

“You’re not an asshole, Sebastian.”

“That’s nice of you to say.” He kisses the back of Jonathan’s head.

“I’m serious. You’re a good neighbor,” Jonathan says.

“Anytime.” Sebastian reaches up and tugs a condom strip from the streamers above them. He tucks one end into Jonathan’s back pocket. “Play it safe, kid.”

The thing swishes like a stiff tail as Jonathan dances. He feels like an idiot, but he ends up with more guys hitting on him than usual. If he were interested in any of them, that would be nice.

It also makes him desperate to know how gay guys would use condoms. He pulls off on the side of the road to Google it as soon as he’s out of city limits.
He expected them to be more, well sausage shaped
Chapter 13

The road ahead cuts across the white landscape in neat ribbons of black. The last snowfall was light and dry, easy to clear off the asphalt. Earlier in the car ride, Sarah told Jonathan about going cross-country skiing the day before on a pair of skis she’d picked up at the Relief Sale last summer for twenty dollars. “I saw an eighteen-point buck with snow on his antlers like they were tree branches. It was beautiful.”

“Too bad it’s not hunting season,” Jonathan teased.

Sarah laughed. “Can you imagine me trying to shoot from skis? And being as out-of-practice as I am. I didn’t go out at all last season. Too busy helping Mom around the house. In any case, a buck that big would have been stringy. Best to leave him alone.”

Now, Sarah’s quiet in the passenger seat, winding and unwinding her cap string around her finger the way she does when she’s deep in thought. “Jonathan?” she finally says.

“What is it?”

“You go into Lima a lot, don’t you?”

His heart speeds up. “Not that much.” Once a week isn’t a lot, is it?

“Sometimes you go, though, right? To do deliveries for your Uncle Abraham?”

“Well, yeah.”

“You think you’ll be going again soon?”

He can’t say no, because that would be a lie. “I’m not sure when he needs me to deliver there next.”

“You think you could give me a ride in when you do? It’s hard for me to get a car on Saturdays.”

Ah. So that’s what this is about. “What for?”

“One of the colleges I’m looking at is Rhodes State. Used to be Lima Technical College? It costs a little more than Columbus State, but it looks like the classes might be more what I’m looking for. Anyway, I’m not sure I could handle a big city like Columbus.”

“Of course you could, Sarah. You can handle anything.”

“Not anything.” Sarah blushes. “So what do you say? Maybe you could take me by the campus one weekend? I could get a feel for what it’s like?”

Jonathan really doesn’t want to. Lima and Rosedale are two separate worlds that should never mix.

But she’s looking at him like a lost puppy.

“Sure.”
Jonathan shoots a message off to Dave. *If you see me on campus this Saturday, don’t say hello. Unless I’m alone.*

**Dave:** Why would you be on campus?

**Jonathan:** My friend Sarah twisted my arm into bringing her there for a visit. She wants to go to nursing school.

**Dave:** Cool.
**Dave:** I mean about the nursing school. Not about you getting your arm twisted.
**Dave:** I hope it doesn’t hurt.

**Jonathan:** She didn’t really twist my arm.

**Dave:** Good to know. Given what masters at pinching you Mennonites are, I figured an actual arm-twisting would be brutal. :)
**Dave:** I usually stick to the practice fields on Saturdays and am gone by the afternoon. Unless I decide to go to the library. Was going to study at home this weekend though.

**Jonathan:** Okay.

**Dave:** If you guys come and watch us play, I promise not to wave. Even if I really want to.

**Jonathan:** Or make fun of my hat?
Dave: You’ll be wearing your hat?

Jonathan: Yeah. Sarah doesn’t like to break the rules. She’ll probably be in her bonnet.

Dave: Like a Mennonite married couple.

Jonathan: Ugh. Don’t say that.

Dave: Sorry.

Jonathan: My sisters tease me about her sometimes. It’s awkward.

Dave: I’m super sorry, then.

Jonathan: It’s okay. But probably means I won’t be able to come to Scandals this weekend. Unless I accidentally lose her somewhere on campus. Which wouldn’t be nice. So I won’t.

Dave: I’ll miss you. Don’t see you enough as it is.

Dave: Maybe we could meet somewhere other than Scandals sometime. If that would make it easier for you to get out.

Jonathan wonders why the idea never occurred to him before. Probably because Dave doesn’t date, and isn’t going out together a date? Maybe it doesn’t have to be.

The thought of going somewhere other than Scandals makes Jonathan’s stomach flutter. It’s silly. Dave’s not asking him out on a date, because Dave doesn’t really date. Two people can hang out together without it meaning anything, right? It’s not a date when Jonathan drives Sarah home.

There’s something else that makes Jonathan’s stomach fluttery, too. Being gay in a coffee shop or diner isn’t as easy as being gay in a gay bar. Still, neither he nor Dave look very gay. No one would have to know but them. Especially since it’s not a date. Yeah. That would be nice.

*

Sarah has an appointment with an admissions counselor at ten, so they leave as soon as Jonathan’s done with the morning milking. Most of the snow has melted by now, leaving the farm fields a pale winter brown interrupted only by small patches of ice here and there.

The admissions counselor is a blonde woman with teased-out hair who’s shorter than both of them. She’s wearing a navy suit jacket and matching skirt that comes just to her knees. Jonathan can’t imagine her sheer stockings are enough to keep her warm in this weather, but perhaps it’s none of his business. “Welcome to Rhodes State College!” Her grin seems genuine as she shakes hands with each of them, and she doesn’t ogle their clothes the way a lot of people do. It’s nice. “I hope you didn’t have any trouble finding my office.”

“No, the map was easy to follow,” says Sarah. She points to Jonathan. “This is my friend Jonathan. He’s just dropping me off.”

“Great. There’s a café down on the first floor of this building, or if you’d prefer, you’re welcome to join us on the tour. Do you have college plans?”

“No.”

“Well, no better time to think about it. Do you know what career you’d like to pursue?”
“My dad’s a dairy farmer.”

“Great! We have a program in veterinary technology that might interest you. And lots of business courses that can give you a leg up in running such a complex business.”

Jonathan looks at Sarah. They didn’t talk about this. He figured he’d just wander off to see if he could find Dave. Sarah gives a slight nod. Jonathan’s not sure if it’s a “sure you can stay, whatever” nod or a “please don’t leave me alone with this stranger” nod.

He’d like to see Dave. But there’s also getting out of Rosedale to think about, as hard as it is to imagine. “Sure. As long as I don’t steal any of Sarah’s thunder.”

Sarah smirks. “That’s impossible, Jonathan, and you know it.”

The admission officer laughs. “I like you!”

They tour the life sciences building and the agricultural services building. There aren’t many classes on a Saturday, but there are labs full of fancy equipment, classrooms with computers on every desk, and a library that’s bigger than the ones in Mechanicsburg or Plain City. Jonathan gets that itchy feeling he gets whenever he goes into a library. He wants to pull every book off the shelves to see what’s inside.

After the tour, they go back to the counselor’s office to talk more specifics about the nursing program and tuition. It’s a hundred and sixty dollars per credit hour and about twelve thousand dollars to complete the program; if she wants to attend full time, she might also consider Central Ohio Technical College, which offers a tuition discount for full-time students.

“Of course, there are also federal and state aid programs to help with tuition.” The admissions
counselor holds a brochure out to Sarah.

Sarah shakes her head. “I won’t be needing that. We don’t accept aid from the government.”

“Sarah,” Jonathan whispers. Twelve thousand dollars is a lot of money. And he’s pretty sure some of the government programs are loans, not handouts. Besides, they pay their taxes like anyone else. Why shouldn’t they accept help when they need it? He can’t see how it’s much different from the mutual aid they give each other for healthcare, except that outsiders also participate in the pool.

“What about scholarships or loans from private organizations?” The admissions counselor pulls the brochure back like she’s about to put it away.

“I’ll take that,” says Jonathan.

“Jonathan!” Sarah gives him a withering look.

“No harm in reading it,” he says, and looks away from her.

Sarah turns back to the admissions counselor. “Loans are fine. I suppose the scholarship would depend on the requirements.”

They walk out of the meeting with a pile of brochures and a list of places to apply for scholarships online.

“I can’t believe you took that brochure.” Sarah’s voice is clear in its disdain.

“It’s just a brochure. Besides, they can’t hold me to all their rules when I’m not even baptized. You aren’t, either.”

She’s quiet as they walk to the truck, saying nothing until they’re both inside it, the doors closed and the engine warming up. The windows are foggy from their body heat. “I’m thinking about it, though.”

“About what?”

“Starting my baptism preparation.”

“Sarah. You can’t do that.”

“Oh? And why not? When did following Christ become such a bad thing?”

“Baptism is about more than following Christ. It’s about submitting to the church. What if the pastors or bishop don’t want you going to nursing school?”

“They haven’t said anything against it yet.”

“You ever thought that might be because you’re not a church member?”

“They’re not Myron Albrecht.”

“Maybe, but Myron could be the pastor one day.”

“Not likely.”

“What if one of the pastors moves or gets sick or dies? We’ll need a replacement pastor. Myron will be a candidate just like any other man in the congregation. You don’t control who draws
which lots.”

“But God does.”

Honestly, Jonathan’s never been fully convinced of the way they choose pastors. He can’t see how it’s different from any other form of gambling. If saying a prayer is enough to draw the Holy Spirit into the lot-drawing process, it should be enough to sanctify poker and playing slots. But the latter two are impossible to sanctify. Why should drawing lots be any different?

But now is not the time to get into that. Sarah will think him even more of a heretic than she already does. “What if God chooses Myron?”

“Then I’ve misread God’s intentions for me. I’ll have to repent.”

“Sarah—”

“You should think about getting baptized, too. We’re almost out of high school.”

“Baptism doesn’t have a deadline.”

“No. But there’s no point in pushing off the inevitable.”

“Maybe it’s not inevitable. Not for me at least.”

The blood drains from Sarah’s face. “Are you thinking of leaving the church?”

“I didn’t say that. Besides, I can’t leave a church I’ve never joined.”

“You know what I mean.”

“You’re the one that said God doesn’t call all people to follow the same path.”

“I did? I don’t remember that.”

“You did.”

“Well, I suppose that’s true in some ways. Mr. Shenk is a teacher and my dad is a pallet fabricator and your dad is a dairy farmer. And there are people who are born outside of communities like ours and never learn about the plain path but still have Christ in their hearts. But that’s different from God calling people away from the church.”

Despite the defroster running since Jonathan turned on the engine, there’s still a haze of condensation that keeps him from being able to see clearly through the front window. “We should stop talking for a minute. Wait for the windows to clear,” he says.

Sarah glares at him. “If you don’t want to talk about this, you should just say so.”

Jonathan doesn’t answer. It’s true. He does wish the conversation hadn’t gone down this path. But he also needs to see out the window in order to drive.

The fog clears. He pulls out of the parking lot, taking the long way out of campus so they’ll have to drive past the practice fields. He’s not sure why; it’s not like he’ll be able to make Dave out from a distance anyway. Maybe he’s hoping for a visual reminder that the paths God sets out for people are more diverse than Sarah thinks. He tells Sarah he wants her to see more of the place. That’s also true.
The men playing football are closer to the road than Jonathan expects. It’s cold outside, but they’ve been playing hard; their breath comes out of their mouths in rapid puffs, miniature cumulus clouds rising into the air and dissipating, only to be replaced by new ones. None of the players are wearing jackets, and most have tossed their stocking caps to the side of the field; a few are even playing in shorts. They seem to be divided by T-shirt color, white against blue. Dave isn’t hard to spot; Jonathan knows his body better than he thought. Dave’s wearing a short-sleeved white T-shirt over a long-sleeved gray one, chasing down a guy in blue who has the football tucked tightly under his arm.

Jonathan slows down and comes to a stop across the street from the field.

“What are you doing?” Sarah says.

“Watching the game.”

“But it’s football.”

“What’s wrong with football?”

“It’s so violent.”

“So is shooting deer.”

“I suppose.”

Jonathan looks back at the field just in time to see Dave lunging toward the ground, both arms hooked around the thighs of the guy with the ball. They topple onto the dry brown grass, Dave’s chest flat against the back of the other guy’s legs, his ear against his buns. For the first time in his life, Jonathan wishes he knew how to play football. He’d love to be tackled that way.

“Ouch!” Sarah squeaks. “That doesn’t look fun.”

“It looks plenty fun.”

Dave and the guy he tackled are both laughing when they stand up, neither much worse for the wear. Jonathan knows the moment Dave sees him—his eyes land on the truck window and a smile twitches at the corners of his mouth. Jonathan can’t help but smile back.

“Why is he looking at us like that?” Sarah says.

Crap. Jonathan’s been caught. He lifts his foot off the break and pulls back onto the street. “We’re dressed like Mennonites.”

“Yeah, but he wasn’t gawking.”

“Maybe he thinks you’re cute.”

Sarah pokes Jonathan’s arm. “Shut up.”

The mood lightens. On the way out of Lima, they stop at Sonic for jalapeño poppers. They make Sarah’s nose run like the dickens, but she’s a sucker for them.

“Are you really thinking about going to college?” she asks twenty minutes later, when they’re both stuffed to the gills. She uses one of the takeout napkins to dab at her nose for the umpteenth time.

“I don’t know.” Jonathan keeps one hand on the wheel and uses the other to rub the back of his
“It doesn’t hurt to think about it.”

Sarah blows air out between her lips, making them rattle together like a snorting horse’s. “That depends on what you want to study, and where.”

Jonathan has no idea what he wants to study. He just knows he can’t be stuck in Rosedale for the rest of his life. “Maybe I’ll study to be a nurse.”

Sarah laughs. “Who ever heard of a boy nurse?”

“They have male nurses.”

“I wouldn’t want to go see one.”

“Maybe men prefer not to be seen by female nurses. We’re supposed to be modest, too.” As soon as he says it, he knows it’s the wrong profession for him. Seeing naked old men wouldn’t be a problem, but what about the ones in their twenties and thirties? It would be more temptation than he could bear.

“I don’t know. It sounds strange to me. Do you think your parents would let you?”

That’s a different question. He’ll be eighteen soon. Legally, it won’t matter what his parents think. In the church, though, it does. They’re responsible for him until he’s either baptized or moves out. He tries to picture telling his parents he wants to do a woman’s job—Jonathan, who can’t bake a single thing and still hasn’t knitted a single chain despite going to Stitch ’n’ Bitch on a semi-regular basis. He can’t imagine that going over well. “No. Not nursing. Maybe some of those business classes the admissions counselor talked about—stuff we could use on the farm.”

“You should pray about it. Find out if God’s really calling you in that direction. If he is, he’ll provide a way for you to go. You won’t need help from the government.”

“Is God calling you to nursing?”

“I’ve never felt so sure about anything in my life.”

Jonathan wishes he had that kind of certainty.

*

The next Saturday is line dancing. Sebastian won’t be in Scandals, but that’s okay; Jonathan snuck out last night for a couple hours to hang out with him. At a truck stop on the way to Lima, Jonathan puts on his Western shirt and admires himself in the mirror. No one could ever guess he’s a Mennonite in an outfit like this. With all its details—its flowers and shiny buttons, its piping and bright colors—it’s even less plain than his Buckeyes T-shirt. He feels special when he wears it, as unique as one of the flowers that blooms in his mother’s garden in summer. His outsides almost match his insides.

He can’t remember ever feeling that way about his Plain dress.

He waited for his parents to fall asleep before leaving the house, so the line dancing lessons are over and the music is at full blast when Jonathan gets to Scandals. He finds Dave in the middle of the throng next to Alan and Tom, chuckling about something the way people do when they’re having a good time and don’t even need something funny to provoke their laughter. Dave’s smile grows even bigger when he sees Jonathan. He reels him in by the hand and pecks Jonathan’s cheek. Jonathan hasn’t forgotten what it feels like to kiss Dave on the mouth, but he’s not stupid. He
satisfies himself with a quick brush against Dave’s stubble. Jonathan’s nose fills with Dave’s aftershave. He smells like mulling spices and fresh-mown hay.

The line shifts around them to make room for Jonathan.

“Sorry about last week,” Dave says later when they sit down with drinks. He already apologized via text for accidentally making eye contact during Jonathan and Sarah’s campus visit. But apparently guilt still hangs on Dave’s shoulders even after he’s been absolved. “I know I wasn’t supposed to recognize you.”

“It’s really okay. Sarah thought you were gawking at us. We’re used to it.”

“That almost makes me feel worse. Nobody likes to be gawked at.”

They’re sitting on adjacent sides of the square table. Jonathan squeezes Dave’s leg, makes sure to keep it casual instead of lingering the way he wants. He specifically avoids thinking about what it would feel like to be held down by Dave’s tackle. “She didn’t have any idea we know each other. And even if she had, I could’ve said I’d run into you when delivering furniture or something. She wouldn’t have guessed I met you in a gay bar.”

“I suppose not. How was the visit, anyway? Is she going to apply?”

“I think so.”

Dave is silent for a long moment as he sips his cola. “What about you? Are you thinking about going?”

“I don’t know. Most Mennonites don’t go past high school. It’s sort of against our religion.”

Dave starts laughing with cola in his mouth. He has to spit it back into his glass to keep from choking on it. “Why would they open colleges if they didn’t believe in attending them?”

Jonathan keeps forgetting Dave’s cousin goes to Bluffton. “Honestly, the people in Rosedale don’t really think of the Bluffton Mennonites as real Mennonites. If the women don’t cover their hair, they might as well be Methodists.”

“What about the men?”

“What do you mean?”

“It doesn’t matter what the men wear?”

“Not as much. There are Plain communities where men are allowed to wear blue jeans and T-shirts and look like everyone else. The women never do, though.”

“Isn’t that kind of unfair, to hold men and women to different standards?”

“Why would it be? God made men and women different.”

Dave raises his eyebrows but doesn’t say anything, just takes another sip of his drink and doesn’t choke on it this time. “So explain to me why going to college would be bad.”

“I guess because learning for learning’s sake takes your attention away from God.”

“You guys have a lot of rules.”
“Yeah.”

“It must be hard to fit to all of them.”

“Sometimes I hardly notice them. But other times…” Jonathan leaves the rest unsaid. Dave will understand what he means. Jonathan is at Scandals in a Western shirt, after all.

“Okay,” Dave says. “College is bad because it can lead you away from God. Except nursing school is okay because …”

“Not everyone thinks it is. But some people do, because it’s a practical skill. It’s not like studying philosophy or economics or liberal arts, where it’s mostly about gazing at your own navel and impressing other people with how smart you are.”

“You think that’s what studying liberal arts is about?”

“Why? You don’t study liberal arts, do you?”

“Right on the nose.” As if to illustrate, Dave presses the tip of his index finger against his schnoz.

Heat rises to Jonathan face. “Sorry.”

Dave shrugs. “No biggie. But do you even know what liberal arts is?”

Jonathan realizes he has no idea. He smirks at his own ignorance. “Something about being liberal? And artsy?”

“Not in the way we usually mean those things these days. It means studying a little bit of everything so you have a well-rounded education. So where a nursing student’s classes would all be about nursing, this semester I’m taking credits in English, history, math, psychology, and business. It’s kind of like high school that way.”

“But why would you do that? It doesn’t prepare you for anything specific.”

“High school prepares you for stuff, doesn’t it?”

Jonathan’s older brother used to start arguments all the time with their parents and Seth about the utility of a high school education. Alvin thought the Mennonites in Rosedale should do like the Amish and take their kids out of school after eighth grade. He didn’t like wasting his time cooped up indoors all day when he could be making himself useful on the farm. He said any of the math he learned at school, he would learn ten times better by applying it in a business. Why study German in school when they didn’t even speak it in church? And why waste his time writing essays about fornicators in Shakespeare plays when he could be reading God’s word?

Jonathan liked Shakespeare, though. *Romeo and Juliet* had a sad ending, but the part about the secret marriage was beautiful. Later, when he started sneaking around with Seth, he was glad to have the play as a reference point. Just because their relationship was secret didn’t make it any less holy.

Of course, Alvin probably wouldn’t have appreciated that as an example of why to study Shakespeare.

“I don’t know. My brother used to say high school was a waste of time, and anyone with a decent work ethic could learn more by having a job than by going to school.”
“Maybe. But a lot of jobs, you can’t even get without a college degree. I want to be a sports agent, and it’s hard to succeed in that field without at least a bachelor’s. You have to know so many things about the law and contracts and running a business, and it’s almost impossible to learn it all on the fly.”

“And studying English helps how?”

Dave chuckles. “English is one of the requirements for pre-law, and pre-law is one of the things a sports agent should study. After I get my associate of arts degree, I’ll transfer to Ohio State and double major in business and pre-law.”

“How many years will you be in school?”

“Four years. More if I go on to graduate school.”

“And how much will it cost?”

“Thirty-thousand dollars for the bachelor’s degree.”

“That’s a lot of money.”

“It’s less than the price of some cars. And tell me a line of work where you can earn up to four hundred dollars an hour with just a high school degree.”

Jonathan almost drops his glass on the floor. That’s more than he makes at the gas station every two weeks. “You’re kidding me.”

“Nope.”

“Wow. Maybe studying English is practical then.”

“It definitely is. But it also …” Dave takes another sip of his drink and chuckles. “I’m not sure how to say this without sounding weird.”

“Try me. I’m pretty weird myself. Or so I’m told.”

“You’re not weird. You’re different. That’s what makes you so awesome.” Dave leans close and squeezes Jonathan’s thigh. His aftershave is weaker now. He smells like clean sweat and the air after a lightning storm. If only Dave would lean in closer, Jonathan would be able to taste it. But Dave leans away instead, pulling his hand with him. He wraps it around his soda glass. “Promise not to laugh at me?”

“I promise.”

Dave takes a deep breath. “I feel like it’s making me into a better person. I read a book about black guy in the 1950s or a lesbian in Appalachia and I learn about stuff I never really thought about before. People who don’t fit into society’s mold. I see the world through new eyes. And I also find stuff I relate to, even with people I never thought I had anything in common with. It makes me feel less alone.”

“That’s not weird.” Jonathan used to lose himself in the Little House books and the Hardy Boys when he was younger, and sometimes he loses himself again when reading them to Marilou. He’d go back and forth between wanting to be best friends with Frank Hardy or Almanzo Wilder. When he was reading the Hardy Boys, he’d fantasize about kicking Joe Hardy to the curb so it would be just Jonathan and Frank, best friends and comrades, solving mysteries during the day and sharing a
bedroom at night. When he read the Little House books, he swooned over Almanzo Wilder, picturing himself as Laura, except still a boy. They’d ride in horse carts together, build log cabins, and haul bushels of wheat through blizzards to save their families. Almanzo was quiet and strong and courageous, a man of few words who showed his love and loyalty through his actions. When Jonathan felt like no one understood him, there were always Frank and Almanzo.

But Jonathan doesn’t need those guys right now. Here in Scandals, Jonathan has all the friendship he needs.

dave nudges Jonathan’s elbow. “So what about you? What would you study if you went to college?”

Jonathan shrugs. “The woman who gave us the tour told me a little about their business program and their agricultural school. But I’m honestly not sure how much I could learn there that I wouldn’t learn staying on my parents’ farm.”

“Is that what you want to do? Stay on their farm?”

Jonathan shakes his head. “It’s not a matter of wanting. I don’t think I can stay.”

dave frowns. “Because you’re gay?”

Jonathan can’t bring himself to say yes. All he can manage is a curt nod.

“Have you talked with them about that kind of stuff before?”

“It’s not just about what my parents would think. It’s the whole congregation. Everyone is knit so tight together. If one person doesn’t fit in with all the rules, the whole thing unravels. I’d be the snagging thread. So you leave, or they cut you out.”

“Like, literally? They’d throw you out of Rosedale?”

“No. But I can’t join the church. And if you’re not in the church—well, there’s no point living in Rosedale.”

“I’m sorry. I can’t even imagine how hard that must be.”

“You had to leave your school. That’s not too different.”

dave opens his mouth like he’s about to argue, but he sighs instead. “Maybe. Still sucks.”

Jonathan’s eyes sting. “Yeah. It does.”

Without a word, Dave puts down his drink and opens his arms. Jonathan leans into them. Dave is warm and strong, and Jonathan is safe here. Dave kisses the top of his head. “I wish I could make things better for you.”

“You already are.”

Jonathan wants to stay here forever, but the position is awkward with them both still in their chairs. Besides, he shouldn’t get used to liking things that aren’t really his to begin with.

dave pats his back as he retreats. “So you need to plan for a life after Rosedale, huh?”

“Yes.”
“Well, let me know if you want to visit campus again. Without your friend. I can show you around some more, if you think it will help you figure things out.”

“How about this week?”

David looks surprised. He’s also smiling like a kid who won a lifetime supply of candy. It makes Jonathan’s heart go flip-flop in his chest. “Sure. That’d be great.”

* 

A good Christian should live simply, with no care for tomorrow, trusting that the path the church has set forth for them will provide. Jonathan’s models for living have always been the lilies of the field, which “toil not, neither do they spin”; and the birds of the air, which “sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feedeth them. … Take therefore no thought for the morrow.”

But Jonathan realized something a few days ago while watching the birds at the backyard feeder. Countless times, he’s seen chickadees grab seeds from the feeder and flit off to stash them elsewhere: in the aluminum siding of their house, high in the tree branches, and in the grooves of locust bark. Later, he’s watched them return and uncover these caches. Blue jays, too, bury more seeds and nuts than they can possibly eat, and in the process end up planting trees that feed future generations of blue jays.

Even plants plan for the future: if an apple tree is ill and at risk of death, it will throw off more apples in hopes of dispersing its seeds and keeping its genetic line alive.

The Bible got it wrong. The birds plants aren’t waiting passively for God to provide. They harvest and store and plant. Without their own planning, they would die.

So here Jonathan is, sitting across from Dave in Rhodes State College’s career services center on a Tuesday afternoon, their table piled with books with titles like Your Guide to Occupational Exploration, What's Your Type of Career?, Rethinking Work, and 12 Tests to Help You Develop Your Dream Career.

“If you didn’t have to get up before six every morning to milk the cows, what would you do instead?” Dave asks.

Jonathan smirks. “Sleep in.”

“And what would you dream about while you were sleeping?”

Making out with you, Jonathan thinks. Of course, he doesn’t say it. This isn’t a date. They’re not at a fancy restaurant with menu items Jonathan can’t pronounce. Dave is his friend. He’s trying to help Jonathan do what every creature must: plan for tomorrow.

“I don’t know,” Jonathan sighs. “Probably waffles.”

Dave chuckles. “What would you do when you finally got out of bed? If you could do anything?”

It’s a tough question. Nobody in Rosedale ever asks Jonathan what he wants. Not like this. If the decision involves anything more significant than cherry pie versus pumpkin, it’s already been made.

The more Jonathan thinks about it, the more he knows he’d get up regardless of the cows. The couple times he’s tried sleeping in, it hasn’t worked. He gets distracted by the light slanting in
through the bedroom window and, like a wild animal, starts itching to move around. In spring, he needs to see which migratory songbirds are passing through before they go hide in the treetops for the rest of the day. In summer, the fish bite most at sunup and retreat when the sun gets too high in the sky. In fall, the deer are thickest at first light.

“Can I change my answer?” he asks.

“About waffles?”

“No. About sleeping in.”

“Sure.”

“I’d get up and go outside, but not to milk the cows. I’d goof off. Fish or hunt or watch the birds.”

“For how long?”

“All day, if I could. As long as they were around.” Jonathan rubs the back of the neck. “Maybe at noon I’d go back home for lunch. But probably I’d eat outside, especially if I had a friend with me.” Sunday afternoons, when Jonathan wasn’t allowed to work, were some of the best he had with Seth. They’d sit in the grass or walk through the woods with their binoculars and play games of I Spy with everything from grasshoppers to herons. Seth was always weird about fooling around on Sundays, especially after he got baptized, but that was okay. It was even good. The thing between them was about more than kissing and touching. It was about feeling part of God’s world. It was about discovery. Seth was the person Jonathan wanted to show when he saw the first oriole of spring or the last maple leaf turn red in fall.

Dave flips through the pages of the book until he lands on some kind of chart. “You ever think about being a nature guide? Or a park ranger? Or a biologist?”

“I never thought about anything.” Jonathan shakes his head dejectedly. They’ve only cracked open one of the books so far, and already Jonathan has had to answer more questions about the things he likes and doesn’t like, the things he wants and the things he wants to get away from, than he ever has in his life.

Dave nudges Jonathan’s toe under the table. It sends little sparks through Jonathan’s foot. Jonathan never knew his foot could get so aflutter, especially by something that’s not really even a touch, just two shoes banging together. “Hey, no need to get like that. That’s why we’re here, to start the thinking. No one has their whole life planned out at eighteen.”

“Seventeen,” Jonathan corrects. “At least for the next few weeks.”

“Then you have even less reason to get down on yourself. Also, we should do something for your birthday. Unless… It’s not against your religion, is it? To celebrate birthdays?”

“No. We’re not Jehovah’s Witnesses.”

Dave chuckles. “Okay. Then you should think about what you want to do to celebrate. I mean, if you don’t mind doing something with me. Sebastian could come to. We could have the whole Scandals gang. Go to the movies, or an amusement park, or paintball. Whatever.”

“That would be fun.”

“Cool. In the meantime, we should probably get back to finding you a career.” Dave nudges his toe again. Jonathan kind of wishes he could kick off his shoes and socks and rub his naked toes all
over Dave’s ankle. He’s pretty sure that’s not normal behavior for two friends who aren’t on a date, though.

*

Jonathan comes back to campus on Thursday afternoon, on Saturday after delivering furniture for his uncle, and again the next Thursday. He has to slip out of school at the beginning of gym class to be able to get to campus and back to the farm before evening milking, but that’s no big deal. Mr. Shenk doesn’t even take attendance at gym. He trusts the kids to be there when they’re supposed to.

So far, Dave has helped Jonathan come up with two lists: jobs that he can try to get now, without a degree; and jobs he’ll need to get a certificate or degree for. The second list is a lot longer, but a few of the jobs for “now” would pay better than the gas station. He’s shocked at the number of interesting jobs that exist: park ranger, soil scientist, ornithologist, hunting guide, veterinary technician, wildlife biologist, wetland ecologist—and that’s just the tip of the iceberg. He applies for a few summer jobs he might get without a degree: parks maintenance crews of local municipalities, field researcher for the seed companies, camp counselor. His parents won’t be happy if he gets work with the government, even if it’s local government, but he’ll cross that bridge when he comes to it.

“I’m going to apply,” Jonathan says the Saturday they meet at a coffee shop not too far from campus called the Lima Bean. They’re at a two-person table that’s so small their knees are practically knocking together. The tabletop has just enough room for their coffees, their phones, and a large plate with two scones.

“To school?”

Jonathan nods. “Yeah. Yes. Yeah.” He can’t remember the last time he’s gotten so tongue-tied. His face catches fire. “I mean … I don’t know why I just forgot how to speak English.”

“You’re excited. That’s great.” Dave gives Jonathan’s forearm a quick squeeze, nothing that a straight friend wouldn’t do. “I’m happy for you.”

Jonathan’s heart feels like it’s about to hammer out of his chest, and not only because Dave just touched him. “I’m terrified.”

“What?”

“I was terrified, too, when I applied.”

Jonathan startles slightly in his chair. “Why? Didn’t your parents want you to go?”

“Yeah. But I was still afraid. I guess I was worried it would turn out like high school.”

“But it didn’t, right?”

“No. It’s not like high school at all. There aren’t the same cliques. People are there because they want to be. It’s really freeing.” Dave takes a sip of his coffee. “So what are you going to study?”

“I’m not sure yet. But I definitely want to take biology and animal sciences. And probably all the pre-veterinary classes. I’ll have to talk to one of the counselors to figure it all out. I’m not sure if I’ll be able to afford more than a two-year degree. Maybe I should just try for veterinary
“Would that get you outdoors as much as you want?”

“Maybe? I could get into wildlife rehabilitation. Or even if I just worked at a pet clinic, that would give me rent and I could save up to take more school later.”

“You’ve really thought about this, haven’t you?”

“Yeah, I guess I have.” Jonathan’s cheeks ache with how hard he’s been smiling, but he can’t stop. Especially not with the way that Dave is beaming back at him.

* 

For Jonathan’s birthday, he asks Dave to take him to see *Noah*. It’s been almost two years since Jonathan last snuck off to the movies, on one of those hot August days where the only thing to do is stick yourself in a refrigerator and fall asleep. He and Seth and a few of the other boys did the next best thing and drove to the nearest multiplex for a matinee of *Brave*. Alvin thought they were being ridiculous, but he didn’t squeal.

Going to see a movie is like walking through a portal into another world. It’s more intoxicating that reading. Even when the movie is stupid, it consumes every bit of Jonathan’s attention and makes him forget his life outside.

Well, usually. Today, he has Dave sitting next to him, and every time Jonathan reaches for another handful of popcorn, his fingers almost brush against Dave’s. Maybe he shouldn’t be thinking about stuff like that during a movie about the Biblical flood, but he can’t help it. The more times he spends with Dave, the more he wants their casual hanging out to turn into dates. He wants to crawl into Dave’s lap and lick the butter off his lips. He wants to have a boyfriend again. He wants the kissing and the cuddling and the secret looks. And maybe that’s wrong, because he’s still not over Seth—doesn’t see how he’ll ever be, or even if he *wants* to be. But maybe it’s perfectly okay. Maybe dating other guys is the only way Jonathan can get through this.

What would Seth want Jonathan to do? What would *God* want Jonathan to do? The latter question seems less and less relevant as the movie unfolds. The film doesn’t stick to the Biblical story with much fidelity, but Jonathan can’t deny the accuracy of one part: the God of this story is ugly and merciless. He doesn’t care about his children’s happiness. He slaughters millions of people—men, women, children, babies, evil and innocent alike. And it’s not like he makes it quick and merciful. When Jonathan hunts an animal, the goal is for the animal to not even know that death was on the horizon. One second, it’s grazing, storing up calories for the future; the next, the future is gone. But here, God fills lungs with water, smashes bodies against rocks, lets girls get trampled to death. Animals are slaughtered in painful, cruel ways, too, even they took no part in humanity’s sins. The fear of death is so pungent it wafts from the screen.

Inexplicably, a hymn starts moving through his head:

*How happy is our portion here, God is love.*

*His promises our spirits cheer, God is love.*

*He is our sun and his shield by day, our help our hope our strength and stay;*  

*He will be with us all the way, our God is love!*  

The lyrics form a dissonance with the story on the screen. How has Jonathan known this tale for years and never seen before how ugly it is? How did he mistake it as being about love? Why did he think a God who would do these things was worthy of worship?
“Are you okay?” Dave says when the lights come back on. Jonathan is still staring at the screen.

“I’m not used to movies. I’m having trouble focusing my eyes.” That’s true, also.

Jonathan exits the theater with a sense of trepidation, like maybe the whole world has disappeared in an apocalypse while they were inside. It hasn’t, of course. It’s bright and sunny, and a row of forsythias blooms at the edge of the parking lot. Jonathan takes a deep breath. The world is still good.

Dave squints at him in the light. “Those talking rocks … those weren’t in the Bible story, were they?”

“No. But all the death was.”

“Yeah. I never thought about it in so much detail before. When I was in Sunday school, we mostly focused on the cute animals on the Ark. But the story’s kind of … depressing.”

“Yeah.”

They reach the car. Dave presses the key to unlock the doors and they both slide in. “Do you believe it? That God killed all those people?”

“No.” The answer leaves Jonathan’s mouth before he can think about it. But it’s the only answer that can be true. Either the worldwide flood it didn’t happen six thousand years ago, or God didn’t cause it. God is love.

“Yeah. Me neither.”

If Jonathan had gone to see this movie with Seth, they’d probably be arguing right now. Seth would say that even though each human life has worth, it’s not as important as God’s plan for the world. He’d say the innocents ended up in heaven. He’d say the Scriptures are always true, even if they don’t look that way to our mortal eyes. We need to adapt ourselves to Scripture and the Rules & Discipline, not the other way around.

Jonathan reaches for Dave’s hand on the parking brake. “Thanks. For the movie.”

Dave looks surprised, but he’s smiling. “You’re welcome. You liked it?”

Jonathan knows he should let go of Dave’s hand. But he can’t, not yet. “I don’t know. But I’m glad we went.”

“Me too.”

Jonathan wants to lean across the console and kiss Dave. He wants more than that, too. But Dave doesn’t want a boyfriend, and Jonathan doesn’t know if he can do casual. He lets go of Dave’s hand and turns to look out the window as they roll out of the parking lot.
Spring is here, and summer will rush in soon behind it. Jonathan remembers how fast both seasons went by last year. Of course, most of that was because he was in love, and then because he saw the end rushing toward him and couldn’t stop it.

Still. His Western shirt is too heavy to wear outdoors in the summer, and the fabric of his Buckeyes shirt is starting to thin. And he’s getting tired of people at Scandals coming up to him and trying to discuss the latest basketball game.

Besides, it’s hard to get either shirt washed as often as he’d like. He can’t throw them in with the laundry or his mom would see them. The best he can do is wash them in the gas station sink on his way back into Rosedale, then shut them in the back window so that they mostly hang outside and end up blowing dry in the wind.

At the gas station on Wednesday, he eyes the rack of novelty T-shirts by the front of the window. Most of them have punchlines that he either doesn’t understand or that are patently offensive. But the black one with a map of Ohio and the words *I Love Ohio*—a red heart stands in for *Love*—seems pretty safe, and it’s in his size. He brings it up to the register at the end of his shift so Carlene can check him out.

She looks at him, then at the shirt, then at him again. “You can’t buy this.”

“Yeah I can.” Jonathan pulls out his wallet and hands her twenty dollars.

“No you can’t. It’s hideous.”

Jonathan looks down at the shirt. He can’t figure out what Carlene sees that he doesn’t. “Why is it hideous?”

“The design is too busy, the spacing between the letters is all wrong, and they messed up the border with Kentucky. Also, it’s missing Sandusky Bay. Not to mention the islands.” She taps her finger where the southern shore of Lake Erie would be if the shirt were an actual map.

Jonathan looks again. She’s right. Still, it’s a T-shirt, and he gets an employee discount. “Doesn’t matter.”

“It’ll matter to whoever you’re getting this T-shirt for, if they actually love Ohio.” She tilts her head like a dog listening to an unfamiliar sound. “Who is this T-shirt for, anyway?”

He can tell by her expression that she’s already figured him out. “Are you going to let me buy the shirt?”

“No way. You deserve only the highest quality T-shirts for your rumspringa.”

“We don’t—”

“Yeah, yeah, I know. That’s the Amish. Still. If you’re going to rebel, you should rebel in something better than a gas station tee.”

“Like what?”

“Tell you what. We still have a box of my brother’s old T-shirts from when he was in high school.
He was around your size, and half of them I don’t think he ever wore. I’ll bring ’em on Friday and you can pick whatever you want.”

“That would be okay with your brother?”

“Yeah. He took everything he wanted to keep when he moved in with his boyfriend. Well, except some of his old trophies. Mom’s partial to those.”

Jonathan must look like he just swallowed a boat.

Carlene frowns. “I don’t suppose you hold much truck with gays.”

“No, it’s fine.” Jonathan’s heart is ready to hammer out of his chest. “I don’t have a problem with anyone.”

She doesn’t look like she believes him.

“No, really,” he says. “I’m fine with the … gays.”

“Fine enough to wear their clothes?”

Jonathan nods.

“Okay then. Friday.”

She brings the T-shirts on Friday, but it’s three boxes instead of one, too much to carry inside. On his break, he goes out to her car to file through the collection. It’s a bit overwhelming. If he took all the clothes he’s ever owned his life, it wouldn’t amount to this much.
He takes a deep breath and attacks it like he’s reading through course catalog, honing in only on the ones that make his heart skip. There’s also lots of blue, navy, and black, but he skips over most of those—they’re too reminiscent of what he already owns. Some of the shirts have plain fronts and others have front pockets, but most have some sort of logo or emblem. There are shirts for this regional track meet and that state championship. He likes some of them, but dealing with Buckeyes questions is awkward enough. It would be even harder to answer questions about track meets he’s never been to.

He’s drawn most to the shirts in bright colors that not even the women in Rosedale ever wear. He picks out three plain-fronted T-shirts in orange, green, and turquoise. He also picks a black T-shirt that says DeWalt on the front in big, yellow block letters. He can answer questions about DeWalt tools. His uncle uses them in the carpentry shop.

Carlene looks disappointed when he shows her his selections.

“Did I pick wrong?” he says.

“No. Just … That’s all you’re gonna take?”

“Carlene, this is probably more than I need. I now own one T-shirt for every day of the week. And I only go out once or twice at most.”

Carlene arches a brow. “Where do you go out to?”

“Around.”

“You don’t have to be so secretive. I’m only trying to live vicariously through you. I can’t remember the last time I went out. Nevaeh, work, and occasionally sleep. That’s all I have time for.”

“I mostly just hang out with friends. It’s not that exciting.” It’s a borderline lie, because it is exciting for him. But he can’t imagine Carlene would get much out of going to Stitch ’n’ Bitch, line dancing night at Scandals, or flirting with gay boys.

“Friendship is the most exciting thing in the world,” Carlene says. “Well, other than having kids. That’s pretty exciting too. Did I tell you Nevaeh tried to cut her own hair yesterday?”

“No, you didn’t.”

“Well …” And then Carlene launches into a story that lasts through seven customers and gets funnier by the sentence.

“Thanks again for the T-shirts,” Jonathan says again when he gets off his shift.

“Well, if you ever decide you need more, you know who to call.”

“Thanks, Carlene.”

She gives him a solid wink. “Anything for my favorite Mennonite.”

* *

It’s a Saturday in April, just after the wild ginger has started to blossom. Dad’s in the barn. The younger kids are out picking fiddleheads for canning. Though it’s warm today, they haven’t seen the last frost yet. Jonathan brings in an armful of logs from the wood pile and sets it next to the
woodstove, and is on his way through the kitchen for another load when his mother says, “Jonathan, wait a minute.”

“What is it?”

“I have something for you. Up on top of the cabinet—the one over the refrigerator.”

“Oh? That’s an out-of-the-way place.”

“I didn’t want any of the others getting into it. Do you mind getting it for me? My hands are rather …” She holds up her hands, the skin drenched in flour and meat juices.

“Yeah, sure.” Jonathan hangs his hat on the hook by the door. He drags the stepladder out from its hiding place next to the refrigerator and climbs to its highest rung. Even from here, the top of the cabinet is a bit of a stretch. He wonders how his mom got so high. She must’ve really wanted to hide whatever it was.

He reaches over and feels the rough, crinkly edge of a brown paper bag. “Is this it?” he holds it out for his mother’s inspection. The bag is light, almost weightless, but there’s clearly something inside it: a small paperboard box, perhaps, or a stack of cards.

She nods. “Yes. Bring it down.” Her expression is strange. She turns back to the meatloaf, her eyes fixed on it as if it requires all her attention, not something she’s made a thousand times.

He sets the bag on the table. “Do you want me to open it?”

“No,” she says. “Not here. You may do so in your room when your siblings aren’t around. Keep them somewhere they won’t find them.”

Huh. Whatever’s inside the bag is plural. Jonathan picks it up and shakes it a little. “What is it?”

His mother clenches the meatloaf batter. Jonathan can tell she’s overworking it, and he’s never even made meatloaf. She seems to become aware of what she’s doing and lets go. “I hear you coming in late at night. And I’ve seen the clothes you try to hide in the truck.”

Crap. He’d started to think this conversation was never going to happen, that his parents really were oblivious. “I’m sorry,” he says, and then immediately regrets it. Because it’s not sorry for any of it. He’s only sorry that he’s been caught.

“I don’t know if the reason you’re running off so much has to do with some girl, and frankly, I don’t think I want to know. I’ve done my best to raise you right, and at a certain point I have no control over your decisions. Each of us must decide for ourselves whether the path we follow is going to be the Lord’s or the world’s.”

“Mom, it’s not a—”

She raises her hand to interrupt him. “Every decision a person makes has consequences. I can’t stop you from making the wrong decisions, but I can hopefully help ensure that ill-informed decisions you make in your youth aren’t … irrevocable.” She looks back down at the meatloaf batter, picking it up and shaping it on a cookie sheet. “If there is a girl, be careful with her. The last thing you want is to get unequally yoked for the rest of your life. And if you need any more of those—” she nods toward the bag “—just look on top of the cabinet. I’ll make sure to keep them in supply.”

The knowledge of what’s inside the bag hits him like softball to the muzzle. He peeks inside with cold dread. TROJAN in all capitals. “Mom, if I— I didn’t. I haven’t.”
She doesn’t look at him as she rinses her hands in the sink. “Then what have you been doing?” She shakes her head. “No. Don’t answer that. The less I know, the better.”

He sets the bag on the table. “But I need to tell you.”

“No, you don’t. Some things are between you and God.” She pumps soap into her palm and lathers up. She’s washing herself of this conversation. She’s washing herself of him.

He won’t let her. He’s not ready for her to know everything, but this part, he can tell. “Yes, I do, Mom. You’ll find out sooner or later.”

“Fine.” She says it with the same tone as No. She wipes her hands off on a dish towel. “What is it? Off to become another prodigal son like Alvin?”

Jonathan winces. Prodigal son? If that’s what she thinks of Alvin, what will she think of Jonathan? “I’m not following the Amish.”

“Well, that’s one way to put a positive spin on whatever you are doing.”

“I’m …” He looks down at the floor. It’s been the same vinyl tile for as long as he can remember. Some of the gray squares are chipped at the corners. “I want to go to college, Mom.”

She gapes at him. Whatever she was expecting, apparently it wasn’t that.

“Community college. Learn something useful. I could study veterinary science. It could help out on the farm.”

She’s still staring at him.

“Mom?”

“You don’t need veterinary science to understand cows.”

The oven beeper goes off to indicate it’s done preheating. Jonathan’s mother takes the meatloaf and slides it in. Then she gestures at Jonathan to sit down at the kitchen table. He does as she directs, slipping off his jacket and hanging it off the back of his chair since he’s apparently going to be here for a while.

She opens the tin of pinwheel cookies Hope and Joy baked this morning and slides a few out on a plate. She pours two glasses of milk and sets them on the table before sitting across from Jonathan. “Is this about Sarah? Is she why you want to go to college?”

“No. It’s not about Sarah.”

“You never talked about going to college before. Now Sarah is off to study nursing, and you’re talking about it.”

“Don’t blame her.”

“That’s not what I mean. I just know … you care a lot about Sarah. Maybe you think this will get her attention?” She snaps one of her cookies in half. “Because if that’s what this is about, Jonathan, you don’t need to worry. You already have that girl’s attention.”

He gapes at his mother. “Mom, I just said I’m not—”

“Of course you’re not fooling around with Sarah. She’s a good girl, if a bit too strong-willed. And
because she’s a good girl, she would never tell you that she has her eye on you. But she does. I don’t understand why you’re not doing anything about it. She won’t be single forever.”

“Mom.” Jonathan feels his face going hot. Sarah does not think about him that way. And even if she did— “We’re still in high school.”

“And soon you won’t be. Soon you’ll be baptized and ready to start a family. And Sarah’s a good friend. That’s important in a marriage.”

How did this conversation go from his Mom accusing him of sleeping around to her trying to set him up for marriage? He’s dizzy from it. “Can we … Can we just talk about school?”

His mother takes a dainty bite. “How much is tuition?”

If he tells her it’s ten thousand dollars for two years, there’s no way this conversation will end well. “About a hundred and fifty dollars per credit hour.”

“How much is that per class?”

“Four or five hundred dollars.”

“And how many classes do want to take?”

All of them. He takes a pinwheel and bites into it so he has time to think. It’s soft and chewy, with more vanilla flavor than chocolate. It’s good, but not heavenly. “It doesn’t matter, actually.”

“What do you mean, it doesn’t matter? Of course it matters.”

“I mean, you don’t have to worry about the money. I’ll pay for it.”

“With what?”

“I have my money from the gas station.” He turns in half of each paycheck to his parents put in the family savings account, but they keep track of it. He supposed to get most of it back when he’s ready to move out on his own.

“That’s supposed to be for the future.”

“Classes could help me with my future.”

“I meant it’s for when you get married and start a family. You’ll need money for a house, or to start a business if the income from working on our farm isn’t enough.”

Jonathan has to suppress the urge to laugh. Income from working on the farm? His parents have never paid him for his work, unless you count his weekly allowance of ten dollars. It’s his duty as a family member to help keep things running. And he knows how much money the farm brings in. It’s not enough for two families to live off of.

“Mom, you know this farm can’t support more than one family, and the money I saved isn’t enough to buy land with. What other kind of business would I start?”

“You could get into woodworking like your uncle. Or—remember when you fixed your truck with Seth? You could become a mechanic.”

“I’m terrible at woodworking. And if I want to be a mechanic, you have to go to school for that these days and get licensed.”
“Yes, but they’re not science classes. They’re not things that are going to lead you away from God.”

“Mom, they teach science at Rosedale Mennonite.”

She takes a sip of milk, giving him a scrutinizing look over the rim of her glass. “They teach good science at a Rosedale Mennonite. They teach it from a biblical perspective.”

“Sarah’s going to have to take science classes, too. But I don’t see how that could damage her faith. She’s planning to get baptized this summer, you know.”

“Well, if you were baptized, I would have fewer worries about you being led astray. Of course, I wouldn’t want to pressure you into getting baptized. That’s a decision that each person must make for himself. But perhaps you should pray about it and see where God leads you. You’re at a dangerous time in your life, when people are prone to all kinds of temptation. The church can be your harbor. The guidance of the brethren can help steer you to safety.”

They’re at a standstill.

“I’ve been praying, mom, and I’ll keep praying. And I think this is what God wants for me. Will you pray, too?”

“Of course I will. And will have to talk about this with your father and the Bishop.”

“Does the bishop really need to be involved if I’m not a church member?”

“Your father and I are church members. We’ll need help discerning whether or not it’s right to support you in this.”

“But it’s my money.”

“And you still live under our roof.”

Jonathan looks down at the table. “Of course. You’re right.”

They don’t say much else as they finish the cookies on the plate. The paper bag with the condoms in it sits at the center of the table, watching him like a hawk. Jonathan moves to take the empty plates to the sink, but his mother shoos him away. “I can handle the dishes. Go finish with the wood—and deal with that.” She neither looks nor gestures at the paper bag. It’s still obvious what she means.

“I don’t need them, Mom.” Jonathan wills himself not to turn pink. He hasn’t done anything wrong. He turns pink anyway.

“Throw them in the trash, then, as long as it’s somewhere the others won’t find it.” She looks up. “Also, I don’t like those clothes you keep in the truck, but I like even less the idea that they’re probably not getting cleaned. Put them in laundry.”

“But then the twins will see them.”

“The twins have seen jeans and T-shirts before.”

“Okay.” He’s not sure what else to say. Well, politeness never hurts. “Thanks, mom. For that. And for listening to me.”

“It’s what a mother does.”
The bag sits heavily in his pocket as he brings in the rest of the firewood. He could shove it in the truck, in the same place where he hides his clothes, but if his mom knows about that hiding place, then probably all his siblings do too.

He decides the best place for now is in his cash box. He goes upstairs and gets it from under the bed. There’s not enough room for the whole condom carton, so he dumps it out. The foil packaging strips drop right onto an old photo of Alvin. Whoops. Jonathan rearranges the contents of the box in a more respectful manner. Twelve condoms. Dang. His mother must have thought— Yeah, he doesn’t want to know what his mother thought.

He’ll keep the carton in his pocket the rest of the day and toss it in Lima so his brothers don’t find it.

When he goes to lock up the cash box, a small piece of white paper folded to be even smaller than the condom packet catches his eye. It’s printed with TROJAN again in those intimidating letters, “How to Use a Condom” in smaller letters, and a picture of an old Roman soldier’s helmet in the corner. It strikes Jonathan as ironic that his Mom picked a brand with military imaging on the packaging. Maybe it was to up the guilt factor and make him think twice about having sex. Or maybe she’s so Mennonite she didn’t even register what the imagery meant.

He unfolds the instructions, unable to resist his curiosity about what they might say. But he doesn’t get as far as the words. His eyes are drawn instead to a series of line drawings of an erect penis in various stages of robing and disrobing. He’s not sure the picture is supposed to be sexy, but Jonathan doesn’t get lots of chances to look at peters that aren’t his own. His mouth waters in Pavlovian response. He bets Sebastian’s done this dozens of times. And maybe Dave, too. Did Sebastian wear one when Dave gave him a blowjob? Jonathan can’t decide if that’s sexy or not. One of the best things about being with Seth was the way he tasted. But maybe the condoms taste
The front door open downstairs and a cacophony of voices pours into the house. His siblings are home. Jonathan tosses the instructions in the cashbox and grabs a strip of two condoms, shoving them in his pocket without letting himself think about why.

* 

Since his parents know he’s running around, there’s no point in waiting to go to Lima until after they fall asleep. That doesn’t keep him from feeling sheepish when he says at afternoon tea, “I won’t be at dinner tonight.”

Mark gawks at him. The twins squint suspiciously. Marilou is too busy singing to herself and drawing patterns on her zwieback with the strawberry jelly to notice anything odd. His parents barely look at him.

“Oh? And why is that?” His father says finally.

“I want to go study at the campus library.”

“Why can’t you study at home?”

“They have more books at the campus library. It’ll help me do a better job on the report I have to write for chemistry class.” Also, Dave will be there. Jonathan doesn’t say that part.

“When will you be home?”

“I don’t know.” Jonathan wants to go to Scandals afterward, and there’s no point in lying.

His father nods grimly. “Don’t get in too late. There’s milking and church in the morning.”

“Of course.” Jonathan doesn’t dare say thank you, because that would imply that his parents are giving him permission to go. That’s not what’s going on here. They’re simply not standing in his way.

He leaves the soon as they’re all done eating. He wishes he’d taken a blue shirt from the huge collection that Carly had offered him, because blue is the color of his eyes, and Dave’s mentioned them before. He settles on the turquoise one as close enough. He does have a few streaks in this irises that are almost turquoise. Maybe Dave will notice that, too.

Dave stands with a thousand-watt smile when Jonathan finds him in the library. “That’s a new shirt!”

“Sort of. My manager at the gas station let me have the pick of some of her brother’s old clothes. Didn’t look like he’d even worn half of them.”

Dave pats Jonathan on the arm, just below where the T-shirt sleeve ends. The touch sends warm shivers through the entire left side of Jonathan’s body. “It’s a good color on you.”

“Thanks.”

They really do study. Dave is a stickler for getting most of his homework done before he’ll head out on a Saturday night. Jonathan likes that. At home, schoolwork is important, but never the most important thing. Work and church and family duties come first.

“Will you study with me next year, when I’m in school?” Jonathan asks, overlooking the fact that
his parents haven’t yet given him the okay. He’s eighteen now, and while that may not count as an adult at home, it counts as one under the law. He’ll figure out a way to go to school one way or another. “Help keep me on track?”

“Of course I will,” Dave says. “But you seem pretty motivated already. I’m not sure you need me.”

“I do, though.” The words come out of Jonathan’s mouth before he can think over whether they’re the smart thing to say. But he won’t take them back. He needs Dave, and he needs everyone else he’s found here in Lima. No one can survive alone. That’s what makes the idea of leaving Rosedale so terrifying. That’s his family, his community, his people. They’re interconnected parts of a body. And now he’s going to be transplanted into a new one. One that includes Dave, Sebastian, the line-dancers from Scandals, and the Stitch ‘n’ Bitchers. And maybe it won’t always feel easy, but it will be right. He needs these people and this place.

Dave looks at Jonathan with this half-startled look, like he sees something he didn’t notice before. “Thanks.”

They pick up dinner at Fat Jack’s Pizza, then head to Dave’s house so Dave can drop off his laptop. Dave’s house is nice, if a little over-decorated. Even having been in Marley’s house and the homes of his uncle’s customers, it’s hard for Jonathan to get used to all the gewgaws people collect on their shelves and the pictures they hang on their walls. People are a lot like crows, eager to snatch any shiny thing and weave it into their nests. But so is he, in some ways. He just keeps most of his gewgaws in the cashbox under his bed.

Jonathan becomes increasingly self-conscious about the condoms in his jacket pocket as they climb the stairs to Dave’s attic room. He’s thought more than once about rolling around with Dave, usually in a car or on a sofa with most of their outfits intact. But now they’re headed for a bedroom, which has an actual bed in it. People do things on beds. Illicit things. Things that Jonathan has only ever done in the dirt or grass or the back of the Groenings’ minivan.

Dave pushes the door open and oh. There it is, the only thing Jonathan can see from where he stands in the hall. It’s framed by the doorway, perfectly centered, and big enough for two. There are two pillows set neatly at the head of the bed over the thick blue comforter, and at the foot is a white crocheted afghan, neatly folded across the width of the mattress. It looks warm and homey and just the kind of bed Jonathan would love to curl up in.

But then Jonathan follows Dave into the room and notices everything that’s not the bed. And there’s a lot of it. One dresser is lined with gleaming trophies. A pair of fuzzy dice hangs from the tallest. There’s an American flag poster on the wall, an actual flag jutting out of a pencil holder, another strewn over a lampshade. From the ceiling hang several model airplanes, and though Jonathan’s no expert, he knows enough to recognize them as fighter planes. A television blocks the bottom half of one of the windows.

Jonathan’s dinner lurches in his stomach. This isn’t how he pictured Dave’s room. He thought it would be simple and spare, with small touches of extraneous beauty here and there: a quilt, maybe, or a few dried flowers hanging from a peg in the wall. An interesting rock serving as a paperweight on his desk. A couple of cowboy hats hanging from a rack on the back of his door. It would be unpretentious, the way Dave is.

But it’s the opposite of that. The room is a temple to individualism, patriotism, and violence.

Dave bends over his desk, emptying the contents of his backpack onto it. He plugs in his laptop and turns the power strip on, fooling with a few things as he hums to himself. Jonathan sinks on the wooden chest at the foot of Dave’s bed and closes his eyes. It’s disconcerting to hear Dave’s
familiar voice amid the strangeness of this room. Jonathan’s dizzy from the incongruity—too dizzy to even shake his head. “No. I— No.”

Jonathan hears Dave’s footsteps on the carpet. He feels Dave’s solid warmth settle next to him. Their arms brush. Jonathan’s glad of it. This bit of contact is proof that the Dave he thought he knew isn’t a figment of his imagination. He’s still real.

“You okay, Jonathan?”

Jonathan takes a deep breath. “It’s … a lot.”

Dave doesn’t say anything for a few moments. “I’m not sure I know what you mean.”

“I’m just … overwhelmed, is all. Give me a minute.”

Jonathan feels Dave’s hand on his knee. Good. That’s good. It’s a lifeline, another reminder that the chaos in his brain isn’t real, but Dave is, and Jonathan is. They’re moving through the galaxy at a hundred twenty-five miles a second, but they’re solid. They’re here. “Can you look at me?”

Jonathan’s not sure. He doesn’t want to take in the chaos of the room again. But looking at Dave is never chaotic. If he turns his face at just the right angle, it will be Dave he sees when he opens his eyes, and nothing else.

He can handle that.

“Yeah.” Jonathan turns. He ekes his eyes open.

Dave’s looking at him, his brows furrowed, his eyes worried. Brown, like earth. Gold, like hayfields in autumn. Jonathan can almost smell the outdoors. He squeezes Dave’s hand.

“Jonathan, I didn’t bring you up here to fool around, if that’s what you’re thinking. I wouldn’t— I know that’s not a casual thing for you. It wouldn’t be for me, either. Not with you. And I’m not … I’m still figuring myself out.”

Oh. Oh. Jonathan feels both completely transparent and completely misunderstood. Also, a little disappointed. Yes, he was thinking about fooling around. No, that’s not what freaked him out. Not exactly. Because fooling around with Dave would mean opening himself up, and he’s still not sure he can open himself up to anyone but Seth.

“It’s not that. It’s the—” Jonathan starts looking over his shoulder to indicate the trophies, but he spots another American flag as he turns his head and thinks better of it. He anchors his eyes to Dave’s face. “Your room. It’s …” What’s a polite way to say this? “You have a lot of stuff.”

Dave doesn’t frown. He doesn’t smile either. There’s no judgment in his face. “I do, don’t I? I guess you’re not used to that.”

Jonathan shakes his head. His dizziness is mostly gone now, so at least he can do that.

Dave takes both Jonathan’s hands. “C’mon. Let’s get out of here.”
Back in his truck with the windows rolled down, Jonathan feels foolish. He can’t understand why he freaked out so strongly. He’s seen American flags before. There’s a car dealer on the way into Lima that lines the entire parking lot with them, and every summer Rosedale has a Fourth of July celebration and all the non-Mennonites come out of the woodwork to parade downtown and shoot off fireworks in red, white, and blue that spook the cows. He’s seen trophies—his choir won one at Sectionals, though being stuck behind a broom as it is, it’s not something he notices very often. “I’m sorry. I don’t know what got into me.”

“You don’t have to be sorry about it. I do have a lot of crap. I keep meaning to weed through it, but life gets in the way.”

“Still. I didn’t have to freak out.”

“It happens to the best of us. I used to have a panic attack every time I went to Target.”

“At Target?”

“Yeah. That store has so much stuff in it. If there was a zombie invasion, you could live there for weeks off of the candy aisle alone. So I’d start thinking about how many people would actually have to shop at the Target to buy all this stuff, and how long it would take them to use it up, and what percentage of toys and school supplies would actually get used and what percentage would end up in the garbage, and then I’d start thinking about credit card debt and adjustable rate mortgages and the financial crash of 2008, and how the world had gone to shit and wasn’t going to be any better by the time I was old enough to buy a house, and why did I think I was ever going to need a house if I was a closeted queer, because queers can’t have families, and—well, panic
“attack.”

“That sounds awful.”

“Yeah. I’d go out into the parking lot to cool off, and my mom would come out half an hour later and yell at me for being a useless lump. It was awesome.” Dave doesn’t smile.

“You mind if I drive us down to the river first? I could use some more fresh air.”

“Sure. That would be nice. I’ll text Sebastian and let him know we’re running late.”

Jonathan finds a spot that’s almost remote for the city. The streetlights are sparser here, and Jonathan can make out a few of the stars in the sky. They climb up on the hood and look up, not saying much. They don’t have to. This is how the world should be: open, quiet, and with a friend always by your side.

“What does your room look like?” Dave says after five or ten minutes of just breathing. His words feel just as natural as the silent. They’re like the bubbles that start to form in a lump of bread dough after it’s been sitting quiet for half an hour. They were always there, forming; now, they’re just visible.

“White,” Jonathan says. “I mean, the walls are white, and the bedsheets. My mom likes white sheets because she can bleach them, but I hate them because she can see everything.”

Dave snickers. “You mean …?”

“Yes. It’s weird knowing your mom will find out every time that happens.”

“I’d just wash my own sheets when I’d have wet dreams.”

“I wouldn’t know how. I’m not allowed to touch the washing machine.” At least, Jonathan thinks that’s true. He’s never asked. “You don’t have them anymore? I mean … the dreams?”

“No.” Dave chuckles. “I jerk off too much.”

Jonathan sees things he can’t unsee. Heat rises to his face. He’s glad it’s dark out here. “I don’t get much privacy with seven people in the house.”

“I don’t imagine you would. … So what else? White walls, white sheets …?”

“Oh. A bunkbed. My uncle built it. He’s a carpenter. I get the bottom, my brother Mark has the top bunk. A dresser, a desk, a chair …” Jonathan tries to think what else. “A green window quilt.”

“What’s a window quilt?”

“It’s like a Roman shade, but insulated to keep out the cold. Our windows aren’t very good. And we have a closet, of course.”

“Every gay boy needs his closet.”

Jonathan’s ears burn to cinders. “I meant an actual closet.”

Dave takes Jonathan’s hand without looking at him. “I know what you meant, cutie. Tell me about your closet doors.”

“They’re white. And they open.”
“Good. Closet doors that open are the best kind.”

Jonathan titters. It’s a stupid joke, but it’s also hilarious. He laughs so hard the stars start to shake.

“Any pictures? Stuff on your walls?”

Jonathan shakes his head. “Not much. I have a photo of my class from when we had a field day with another Mennonite school in Kidron. And—” Jonathan pauses. He’s not sure if the other thing is too private to speak.

“What?”

Jonathan takes a deep breath. “Next to my bed, I have the card my ex-boyfriend sent me at Christmas.”

Dave turns then. “The Mennonite you told me about when we first met? The one you were in love with?”

Jonathan nods. “Yes.”

“I wondered.”

“You wondered what?”

“I wondered if you two dated. Your loneliness didn’t seem to be just about being in the closet. It seemed bigger.”

That sadness comes back to Jonathan now, lodging in his throat, solid as ice. “He got married. To a girl. Last fall.”

“Shit.”

“Yeah.”

They don’t say anything for a few minutes. Jupiter shifts in the sky. “Jonathan?”

“Yeah?”

“In my room, was it just the amount of stuff, or was it the stuff itself?”

Jonathan feels like whatever wall existed between him and Dave has evaporated. He can’t evade the question. “Both.”

“I wondered about that before you came upstairs. I didn’t think you’d like the trophies.”

“It’s stupid,” Jonathan says. Dave gives Jonathan a startled look, and Jonathan tumbles over his words to make himself clear. “I mean, not the trophies. My reaction to them. They’re not idols. But that’s how it feels, when I look at them. We’re not supposed to want to stand out. Ever.”

Dave looks back up at the sky. “They’ve been there so long that I hardly see them anymore. But there was a time when I needed them. My mind would be telling me I was worthless, but I could look at them and see, ‘Hey, I’ve done something good with my life. I’m not a loser. I don’t deserve to disappear.’”

Jonathan can relate to that. That’s why he holds onto the wild geranium Seth picked for him last June, and the letters Seth sends. It’s why wearing the shirt Dave gave him makes him feel
invincible. He reaches for Dave’s hand. “If that’s what they mean to you, I love them.”

“You sure?” Dave’s tone is half-teasing. “I can definitely see how they’d come across as kind of gaudy.”

“Sometimes shiny things are gaudy, and sometimes they’re fabulous. Like Sebastian in glitter paint.”

“He really is kind of fabulous in glitter, though, isn’t he?” Dave’s smile is audible even though Jonathan’s not looking at him. “I should get him some more.”

“Maybe I should start wearing it too.” Jonathan lowers his voice. “My parents know I’ve been sneaking out. I wouldn’t have to worry about the glitter giving it away.”

“Shit. Are you in trouble?”

“They’re not happy. But it doesn’t seem like they’re going to try to stop me. They still don’t know about … me. So that’s good. But I told my mom I want to go to school. She’s not happy about that, either.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. I’m not surprised. I’ll figure it out.” Jonathan shifts his hand a little so it fits more snugly against Dave’s palm, their fingers interlocked. “Can I ask you something?”

“Shoot.”

Jonathan takes a deep breath. “Those planes on your ceiling. Are those … warplanes?”

Dave’s palm goes clammy. He lets go of Jonathan’s hand. “Yeah. I didn’t even think about how that would look to you.”

Jonathan has the urge to chase Dave’s hand, but it doesn’t feel respectful. “I don’t want to judge you. I’m tired of judging people. I want to understand.”

“My great-grandfather was in the Flying Tigers—the group that flew the shark airplanes in China during World War II. And my great-grandmother was a mechanic in the air force. I know not all the Japanese guys they killed deserved to die—they had families, and they were following orders—but the Chinese and Burmese the Japanese were bombing didn’t deserve to die, either. Things are … messy, sometimes. It’s not right to kill people, but it’s not right to let people be killed, either. My great-grandparents made the best choice they could. I know your church teaches that it’s the wrong choice, but I respect what they did. Good and evil are always complicated by the facts on the ground.”

Jonathan doesn’t answer. He’s never thought about it that way, that taking a life might be saving others. It’s one thing for Mennonites to decide that they’d rather be killed than to kill; it’s another thing to ask people who don’t share their convictions to die without any defense. Does he expect deer not to defend themselves against coyotes, or starlings not to defend their broods from hawks?

He thinks also about his own facts on the ground. What he had with Seth was supposed to be evil, to draw them both further from God. But Jonathan never felt God more than when he was with Seth. All his life, he’d hoped to gain the fruits of the Spirit told of in the Bible: love, joy, peace, patience, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, and self-restraint. It was with Seth that he truly learned them.
“Thank you,” Jonathan says after a long while.

“For what?”

“For meeting me where I am.”

*  

On the last Saturday in April, Blaine skips into Stitch ’n’ Bitch with a smile the size of Madison County on his face.

“Someone’s got a rainbow up his butt,” says Shawna. Her current cross-stitch project says Smash the Patriarchy.

“Kurt and I are back together.” Blaine sits down at the table and crosses his legs primly.

Shawna looks up. “I thought he was dating someone else.”

“Not anymore!” Blaine pulls a new project out of his bag. “I’m making him a summer scarf to celebrate our reunion.”

“That’s nice yarn,” says Jonathan. He still doesn’t know the first thing about knitting, but he knows lovely when he sees it. The yarn is variegated blues and purples, from plum to indigo to pale lavender. It reminds Jonathan of twilight.

“Thank you,” says Blaine. “I picked it out because it matches the outfit he was wearing when I proposed to him.”

Shawna’s needle clatters on the table. “Proposed? As in marriage?”

Blaine’s smile grows bigger than Madison County. It now encompasses all of Ohio. “He said yes.”

Shawna huffs. “Kids these days. When I was your age, I was trying to overthrow all that patriarchal bullshit. But congratulations. You seem happy.”

“I am.”

Blaine regales them with the details of the proposal as the rest of the Stitch ’n’ Bitches show up. A brass band, four show choirs, confetti, and the Dalton staircase, which Blaine describes like it’s one of the Seven Wonders of the World. Blaine may or may not have a rainbow up his butt, but he definitely has several shooting out of his eyeballs.

“Weren’t you guys still estranged, like last week?” says Jessica.

“No. We’ve been talking again since Thanksgiving. We took the time we needed. When it’s right, it’s right. He’s the love of my life.”

Jonathan looks down at the friendship bracelet he’s been working on since Tracy started teaching him macramé. He’s been planning to give it to Dave partly to thank him for all his help with the college and career stuff, and partly because he gets overwhelmed sometimes by this weird impulse to give Dave things. It’s masculine and understated, in various shades of blue that hint at the colors of Rhodes State College. But as he stares at it, all he can see is Seth in one of his plain blue workshirts, his own hand wandering lazily over the buttons as they laze in the shade of a river birch.

That’s how they were last August when two impossible words slipped from Jonathan’s mouth.
“Marry me.”

Seth pulled Jonathan closer and kissed his forehead. “You know that’s impossible.”

“It’s legal in some parts of the country. We could move away.”

“Man’s laws don’t mean anything. Only God’s do. And I promised Martha.”

Jonathan sat up. The August heat was sticky and warm, but he felt cold without Seth wrapped around him. “Then why are you even here?”

Seth looked away. “Because you love me more than God does.”

“Don’t say that. That’s not true.”

“Then why does he let me be this way?”

“Maybe he made you this way. Because he loves you. Maybe we were meant for each other. Maybe this is what God wants us to have.”

Seth sat up and touched his palm to the small of Jonathan’s back. It made Jonathan feel secure, grounded, despite the discord between them. He leaned into Seth’s shoulder. Seth whispered into his scalp. “I want to believe that.”

“But you don’t. You don’t believe it, do you?”

Seth didn’t answer for a long time. Jonathan would have thought he was asleep if they weren’t both sitting up. A droplet of water fell onto his shoulder. He looked up at the sky, but it looked too clear to rain. Then he felt Seth’s body shake. “Leaving you is the hardest thing I’ll ever do, Jonathan.”

Jonathan turned. Seth’s cheek was twitching a mile a minute, so hard that Seth’s left eye was almost welded shut. His eyes were rimmed with red and his face was blotchy and wet. Snot dripped from his nose. Jonathan didn’t care. He kissed him. “Then don’t leave, Seth.”

“I have to. Can’t keep my hands off of you when we’re together. We’ll slip, eventually.”

Silly Seth, talking as if they hadn’t slipped already. As if getting tangled half-naked in the brush had nothing in common with the things that husbands and wives do in their beds. Seth was always struggling against the descent.

But Jonathan only wanted to fall farther. “How can something be a sin when it’s done out of love?”

“I don’t know.”

They kissed, and kissed some more, and Jonathan showed Seth he loved him the best way he knew how. It might not technically count as sex, but to Jonathan, it felt like making love.

“Leave me, if you have to,” Jonathan said after a long while, because loving someone means wanting what’s best for them. “But I will always love you.”

Seth turned to him, his eyes fierce with the afternoon light. “I don’t think I can ever really leave you. Not in my heart.”

The sound of music jolts Jonathan out of his memories. Blaine has his tablet out now, and the rest of the Stitch ‘n’ Bitches are huddled around him to look at the screen. Jonathan sets down his macrame and leans over to see what all the fuss is about. It becomes clear from the shaky camera
angles and the presence of the brass band and the Warblers—oh, look, there’s Sebastian!—that this is the proposal.

_All you need is love, all you need is love …_

Is love really enough to hold two people together? Is love enough to reunite them?

Blaine betrayed Kurt’s trust as much as Seth betrayed Jonathan’s. And they were broken up just as long. And Kurt’s heart wandered, the way Jonathan’s has started to.

Now they’re getting married.

Maybe Seth and Jonathan will have their reunion one day, too.
Chapter 15

It’s a beautiful Friday in May: sixty-five degrees, sunny, a mild breeze. Last night, Jonathan went out and watched the woodcocks do their bizarre courtship flights. Two years ago, he watched with Seth, who’d ostensibly come over to visit with Alvin and check on how Jonathan’s truck was running. Alvin was off working at uncle Abraham’s—stupid Jonathan, it took him countless more of these visits to figure out that Seth knew Alvin’s schedule as well as anyone did. He wonders sometimes if he’d understood earlier, if he had known what he was to Seth back then, would it have kept Seth from going down the path he did?

Jonathan was sixteen then, Seth nineteen and still not baptized. Hadn’t even started baptismal classes. Alvin hadn’t either, but the reason for that was obvious; he was already talking about leaving for the Amish.

“Are you going to join the church?” Jonathan kept his voice low so they could still hear the *peent peent* of the male woodcock preparing for his flight. They were lounging on the grass, propped up on their elbows and peering at the woodcock as he did his strange ground dance.

“I’m not ready yet. I suppose eventually.”

“When you’re sure of your conversion?”

“Sometimes I think I’m converted. But then…” Seth twisted a piece of grass around his finger, then let it go.

“My parents say we shouldn’t rush it. It’s the most important decision you can make in your life. Even more important than who you're gonna marry.”

The woodcock took flight then, its wings whistling their sharp, delicate tune as it rose into the air. The sound turned into a soft *kiss kiss* as the flight crescendoed.

“Funny, the things animals do for love,” Seth said.

“I think it’s beautiful.”

Seth turned to him, his brown eyes dark in the dusk. They held an expression that Jonathan had never seen before. Seth smiled in a way that made Jonathan feel like his own wings might sing.

“You’re right.”

They’d watched again last year—or rather, half-watched, too busy with their kissing to give their full attention to each woodcock’s flight. Kissing Seth was more beautiful that anything Jonathan could observe in nature.

Mark had wanted to come out with Jonathan last night, but Jonathan told him he could go find his own patch of dirt to sit in. He felt bad about it later, but he needed the time alone. To see if he could watch the woodcocks without remembering the feel of Seth against his hands and lips.

He couldn’t.

He awakes this morning to the sun streaming through his window and a message from Sebastian on his phone: *Friday! You coming to the party tonight?*

Sebastian's been talking about the Warblers’ end-of-the-year party for weeks. Even though they
lost sectionals through disqualification, they have plenty to celebrate: Hunter’s been kicked off the team, no one ended up addicted to speed, and the guys who were on steroids can still sing—even if their voices don’t sound quite the same as they used to. They’ll have a parent-free mansion all to themselves for the weekend. Plus, Sebastian is graduating. It’s his last big celebration with the guys before he heads to Princeton in the fall.

Which is exactly why Jonathan doesn’t want to go. This party is for the Warblers, not for him. He spends enough of his life feeling like an outsider as it is. He doesn’t need to go somewhere where the fact he doesn’t belong is ten times more obvious than usual.

“No, it’s not like that,” Sebastian told him last Saturday at Scandals. “Everybody invites friends. The more the merrier. You won’t be only non-Warbler there. Or the only kid who doesn’t go to Dalton.”

Jonathan poked Dave’s leg under the table. “Are you going?”

“He can’t,” Dave said. “It’s my dad’s birthday. I’m taking him to Columbus for a Clippers game.”

“You could come by after,” Sebastian said. “We’re going until the morning.”

“We probably won’t get back until 2 a.m. as it is. At that point, I sleep. I’ll pass.”

On the other hand, going to the party would mean being surrounded by gorgeous gay peacocks all evening. How lonely could he feel in a place like that.

He messages Sebastian back.

Jonathan: Don’t know yet. Let you know after work.

Sebastian: The Warblers are super gay.

Jonathan: Not as gay as Scandals.

Sebastian: I’ll wear my tightest T-shirt.

Jonathan: And why would that make any difference?

Sebastian: Don’t be coy. I’ve seen you looking.

Jonathan: Not as much as you look at me.

Sebastian: Touché.

School feels interminable. The outdoors calls to Jonathan all day through the open windows. He eats lunch at one of the picnic tables behind the school building, but that’s only fifteen minutes so it hardly counts, even if he does see two orioles and a purple finch at the feeders.

Jonathan’s ready to ditch school altogether when Mr. Shenk comes to his senses. “It would be a shame to spend the afternoon indoors when all creation is singing,” he says, canceling their music class so they can go play softball instead. The boys toss their hats in a pile at the side of the field, and everyone counts off to figure out who will be on which team. Edna jogs out past the pitcher’s mound with Jonathan—he’s playing centerfield, she’s playing left. “I’ve been meaning to tell you, we got a letter in the mail from Seth yesterday.”

“Oh?” He tries not to be jealous. The last time he heard from Seth was a brief letter about a
snowstorm in March. “How is he?”

“They’re expecting!” Edna’s jog turns into a skip. Her cap strings bob and swing against her neck and shoulders like willow branches. “I’m going to be an auntie!”

Jonathan plays a terrible game. He drops most of the balls he catches and can’t aim his throws to the basemen if his life depended on it. “What’s up with you today?” hollers Alfred, who’s playing right field. Jonathan shrugs. Frustrated with his ineptitude, Edna and Alfred encroach so far into his territory that he might as well not be there.

Up at the plate, it’s no better. Jonathan’s shoulders are tight and his stance awkward. “Relax your shoulders,” Seth used to say to him when he’d get like this in pick-up games, rubbing his hands over Jonathan’s shoulders until they were just the right balance of tense and loose like rubber bands. The memory makes Jonathan’s shoulders go even tighter. He swings strike after strike. He just wants the game to be over.

His team loses. The final bell of the school day rings. Finally. He needs to go shoot things. Squirrels if he can’t find any rabbits; bottles if he can’t find any squirrels. That, or drive somewhere far, far away. His first instinct is Wisconsin, to go shake some sense into Seth. But Lima would probably be a better idea. The dancing wouldn’t have started yet, but Sebastian says it’s never too early for drinking. Jonathan could try his first beer—or his first twenty. Then he’d have plenty of bottles to shoot.

Sarah’s waiting for him at the truck.

Fuck. It’s Friday.
“You look like you just saw a ghost,” she says. “You feeling okay?”

“Yeah. I’m fine.”

“You’re pale.” She reaches toward him, pressing her wrist against his forehead. “And clammy. Your game was off, too. You want me to drive?”

“I have to go to the gas station.”

“I can drive you there and have someone pick me up.”

“No. I’ll be okay. It’s just …” He flails for a physical explanation that wouldn’t be a lie. “I have a bit of a headache.” That’s true enough. Every muscle in his body, from his toes to his scalp, is clenched like a vise.

“Getting too much sun does that to me sometimes.” Sarah reaches into her bag and pulls out a bottle of generic acetaminophen and a bottle of water. “Take these. And drink that whole bottle. You might be dehydrated.”

“Yes, Nurse Sarah.”

She smiles. “How about I drive us as far as my house so the medicine can kick in?”

Ever since his mom said that thing about him having Sarah’s attention, Jonathan’s been more careful to keep his guard up around her. He doesn’t want her to get the wrong idea. Being in love with someone who can’t love you back sucks.

But Jonathan can’t be strong right now. “Yeah,” he says. “That would help. Thanks.”

He keeps his eyes closed as Sarah drives. Opening them is too dangerous. Every inch of the landscape is attached to Seth’s memory. Still, he’s familiar enough with every dip and rise on this route that he knows their location just by the way the truck moves and the smell of the air coming through the cracked windows. He feels the truck rise to the top of the hill that looks down on the Big Darby Creek, where he used to catch smallmouth bass with Alvin and Seth. When it swerves right, he knows they’re coming up to the Boehm’s pick-your-own pumpkin field, where the boys go after late frost to throw rotten pie pumpkins at each other. Even when he was little, he had a single-minded fixation on tackling Seth, and the fact that the chase usually ended up with Seth pinning him to the ground and smearing slimy pumpkin innards all over his jacket never dissuaded him from trying the exact same tactic again the next year.

The truck takes a soft swerve to the left and the scent of the apple blossoms becomes overpowering. It’s the Pfeiffer’s orchard. He and Seth came here last summer when the Pfeiffers were out of town and it was too rainy to go to the creek. They parked out behind the Pfeiffers house and lay in the back of the minivan, the back seats folded flat and piled with old picnic quilts to provide a makeshift bed. Even there, with one blanket above them and one blanket below, Seth wouldn’t let Jonathan take off all his clothes.

“We can’t.” Seth’s hand was firm on Jonathan’s wrist. “‘If a man lieth with a man as he lieth with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination.’”

“I’ve never lain with a woman,” said Jonathan. “So how can it be an abomination?”

“You know that’s not what it means.”

“No, I don’t. As far as I can tell, that verse is about husbands not cheating on their wives with other
“You’ve been reading things again, haven’t you?”

“If by things, you mean the Bible—yes, I have. And the only things I can find warn against men going against their natures, Seth. Maybe you should think about that before you visit Martha again.”

“Jonathan—”

“Do you love me, Seth?” Jonathan’s eyes stung. His head ached. He was angry. He’d probably be better off marching home by himself in the rain.

But he couldn’t stop looking at Seth, who was looking at him the way he so often did: like a miracle was unfolding in front of his eyes. Seth let go of Jonathan’s wrist. “If I didn’t, I wouldn’t be here.”

“Then don’t go against your nature.”

The rain thudded like pebbles against the roof as they kissed, pounding even faster than Jonathan’s heart. Steam condensed on the windows. Seth pulled Jonathan closer, lining their erections together even as their pants remained tangled around their legs. Stupid Seth and his stupid rules, as if a piece of cloth made the difference between sin and salvation.

This would always be salvation, no matter what anyone said.

The truck slows down and makes a right onto uneven ground. Sarah pulls the brake. “We’re at my house. You sure you’ll be okay the rest of the way?”

Jonathan blinks his eyes open. Sarah’s smiling at him the way Seth used to. Jonathan doesn’t want to think about what that means right now. “I’ll make it.”

He’s not at all sure it’s true.

*  

His plan for work is to shut himself in the cooler and not come out until his shift is over. But he’s not there for two minutes before the bell rings, beckoning him up to the front of the store to help at the registers. He makes mistakes and the customers get surly with him.

“Jonathan, you feeling okay today?” Carlene says with a concerned look when the last of the customers trickles out.

Jonathan grabs his work hoodie from under the counter and pulls it on over his head. “Why does everyone keep asking me that?”

“So you’ve been this way all day?”

“No.” He doesn’t look back.

“With a girl?”
“No!” He slams the cooler door behind him. Two hours later, he’s stocked everything he possibly can. Nothing else will fit on the shelves. If he stays in here, he’s only hiding. And honestly, being alone isn’t really helping. Unbidden images of Seth in bed with Martha—on top of her, inside of her, every last piece of his clothing removed—keep stabbing through his brain.

Also, he feels like throwing up. He should probably eat some saltines to calm his stomach.

Or punch something.

He stands at the stockroom door, listening for activity in the front. All he can hear is Carlene singing offkey along with the radio. The store must be empty. She never sings when she thinks anyone might hear her.

She looks up from her phone when he rolls in with his cart of fruit for the produce island. He stops by the soup station to grab a couple packets of saltines and accidentally slams his finger in the dispenser’s lid. “Crap!”

“I’ve never heard you swear before.”

“Well, today is a pretty crappy day.”

“Apparently.” She sets down her phone and leans both hands against the counter. “You’re not going to punch a hole through the wall or anything like that, are you?”

“No.”

“And you’re not going to tell me what’s bothering you unless I drag it out of you?”

“No.” He pushes the cart to the produce island, pulling the old bananas to the center and stocking the fresh ones on either side. He keeps his back toward her.

“Did something happen at school? Bad grade, teacher was a jerk, someone threw a softball at your head—”

“No.” Apparently she wasn’t joking about dragging it out of him.

“A fallout with one of your friends?”

Crap. She’s good. But this fallout happened so long ago. It’s just that the wound has reopened.

“Maybe. Sort of. Not really.”

“And it’s not a girl.”

He doesn’t dignify that with an answer.

“Are you going to be offended if I ask if it’s a guy?”

Jonathan’s arms freeze midair. He has two bunches of bananas in his hands, but he’s suddenly forgotten where to put them.

“Because I wouldn’t mean it as an offense, my brother being gay and all.”

Jonathan’s mind comes back to him. He sets the bananas on the shelf where they belong. “No.”

“No, you wouldn’t be offended? Or no, it’s not a guy?”
“I—” Jonathan feels like a fly is caught in his throat. His eyes sting. He won’t cry. “I won’t be offended.” He croaks out the words.

“Oh, honey.” Carlene comes out from behind the counter. He hears her footsteps moving toward him, the air swishing around her. “Please let me hug you.”

There are cars out in front of the store, one at each pump. Someone could come inside at any moment. If she touches him, he’ll lose it. “I can’t.”

“I’m not worried you’re going to feel me up.”

He laughs in spite of himself. “Yeah, you shouldn’t be.” A tear runs out his nose. He sniffs to draw it back. “I just ... can’t, right now.”

Carlene nods. “Okay. But we’re not done talking.”

“Aren’t we supposed to be doing work?”

“We can do both things at once when there aren’t any customers around.”

Like magic, the chimes on the front door ring as a customer walks in.

Carlene pats Jonathan on the arm. “You can hide out in the back is much as you need to, okay, hun?”
Later, when his shift is over, she gets the hug she wants. Jonathan’s prepared for it, so he doesn’t break down. “You have my number,” she says. “I’m here for you. Do need somewhere to stay tonight?”

“I haven’t been kicked out of my house.”

“Would you be?”

“I don’t know.”

“Do you have any other friends who know? Who you can talk to?”

Jonathan’s phone buzzed half an hour ago with a message from Sebastian reminding him about the party and the password to get in, along with Dave is still being a loser and hanging out with his Dad and then *sleeping*. Ugh. I shouldn’t have said that. Now you definitely won’t come. Jonathan’s got no plans to talk about Seth with Sebastian. Talking isn’t what he needs right now. He just needs to forget. He’s going to the party. “Yes.”

*

The party is in a fancy suburb of Columbus, in a mansion that’s four times as big as the dairy barn. Jonathan has to talk into an intercom to get in through the front gate, and the driveway is a quarter-mile long. Normally, the ostentatiousness of the scene would be too much for Jonathan, but his brain takes it in stride. He can’t get any more shocked than he already is.

Dozens of cars cram the cul-de-sac at the end and spill over onto the lawn: shiny black BMWs, gleaming mauve Audis, shimmering Priuses, modest Chevys and Fords, and a meticulously maintained 1940s roadster. Jonathan parks next to an old Ford that’s seen better days so his truck
won’t stand out too much. He texts Sebastian to let him know he’s there. On the front door, there’s a piece of paper with “HOUSE RULES” printed in all caps at the top and a list of enumerated points:

1. Turn in your keys when you arrive. No one who has been drinking will be allowed to drive themselves home.
2. No drinking in the pool. No being drunk in the pool.
3. There are plenty of guestrooms if you need to sleep your drink off.
4. You don’t have to drink. There are plenty of nonalcoholic things to imbibe.
5. Help yourself to food. Yes, you’re welcome to eat breakfast here.
6. Play safe. Always get consent. Condoms are in the guestrooms and bathrooms.
7. That said, we don’t have to take our clothes off to have a good time.
8. Be prepared to sing.
9. Don’t trash the place.
10. Most importantly, have fun and don’t be a douche!

Inside, in an enormous vestibule with a skylight in the ceiling, sit a couple of younger Warblers in small upholstered chairs. At least Jonathan assumes they’re Warblers, with their upright postures and their matching blue T-shirts with a bird on the front and “Warblers Can Really Sing” on the back. They’re playing cards, using a two foot tall portable safe as their card table.

“Welcome to the best party in the universe. Keys and password, please.”

Jonathan gives them both, and then the blond one points to a diagram behind him. It’s an architectural map of the house, with the pool in the back highlighted in bright blue. “You can refer to this if you get lost,” the kid says.

“Jonathan! You’re here!” Sebastian’s voice bursts from the end of the corridor. Jonathan looks up to find him in nothing but swim shorts. He has more hair than Jonathan expected. Water glistens from it as Sebastian darts down the hall toward Jonathan. It’s hard not to stare. Sebastian throws his arms around Jonathan. “You’re not wearing your Buckeyes shirt. I almost didn’t recognize you.”

It takes a moment for Jonathan to figure out what Sebastian’s talking about. He’s too distracted by Sebastian’s damp body and the water seeping from his swimsuit into Jonathan’s jeans and the faint, sweet smell of alcohol on Sebastian’s breath. Sebastian pulls away and Jonathan looks down at himself, recognizing the green T-shirt he changed into right before leaving the gas station. “A friend from work gave me this.”

Sebastian clapped him on the shoulder. “Green looks good on you. Want to swim?”

“I don’t have a suit.” Jonathan doesn’t even own a suit. When he goes swimming, he usually does it in his trousers, with the legs rolled up above his knees. But he’s in civilization here. He doubts that would be acceptable.

Sebastian waggled his eyebrows. “You can go in your underwear. Or your birthday suit.”

“My birthday suit?”

“Oh, Jonathan, still such an innocent. I love that about you.”

Jonathan has no idea what’s Sebastian’s talking about. At least he’s wearing navy boxer briefs, which kind of look like a swimsuit. He talked his mom into buying them after he saw Seth’s. “Maybe I’ll swim. But I’d like to have a snack first. I just got off work.” Sebastian grabs Jonathan’s hand and drags him through a crowded living room, stopping every two feet to
introduce Jonathan to yet another hot Warbler. They’re everywhere Jonathan looks, sitting and
dancing and drinking and laughing. Most of them are dressed in shorts, their legs bare, miles of
naked skin sprouting from the floor like grass shoots in spring.

There’s a smattering of girls, too, but Jonathan doesn’t pay much attention to them, especially the
ones in halters or tank tops. It embarrasses Jonathan to look at them.

“How do you know Sebastian?” says a tall, Asian-looking kid whose name Jonathan doesn’t catch
over the music. It’s something like Sam or Dan or Stan. Maybe Van?

Jonathan could mention that they technically encounter each other for the first time at sectionals,
but the last thing he wants to be tonight is a Mennonite. He wants to be someone different.
Confident. Brash. “He hit on me at a gay bar.”

The look on Sebastian’s face is worth it. It’s a mixture of shock, bewilderment, and pride.

The other Warbler smiles. “He has good taste.”

In the kitchen, Sebastian points Jonathan to the pizzas as he grabs a beer from the fridge.

“The house rules say no drinking and swimming,” Jonathan says, taking a slice topped with
everything but the kitchen sink.

“It says no being drunk in the pool, and this is only my second drink.” Sebastian takes a swig. “But
you have a point. Tipsy probably doesn’t cut it, either.” He sets the bottle on the counter and
pushes it toward Jonathan so it’s out of convenient reach.

Jonathan looks at it if he bites into his pizza. Pizza and beer, he thinks. Those are supposed to go
together, aren’t they? No better time to find out than now.

Jonathan doesn’t let himself think about it. He lifts the bottle and sucks in a mouthful. It’s bitter
like unripened chokecherries and gives him the strange sensation that he’s sucking on cotton. He
almost spits it out. “That’s disgusting! How can you drink that?”

“What’s gotten into you? I thought you were a teetotaler.”

“Mennonites are teetotalers. I’m not a Mennonite.” The words come out angrier than Jonathan
meant them to.

Sebastian tilts his head. He’s clearly trying not to react, but his eyes go slightly wide. “Oh?”

“I’m not baptized, am I?”

“Not that I’ve heard.”

“So no point in acting like I’m a church member.”

“True. But that hasn’t stopped you before.” Sebastian steps around the counter until he’s side-by-
side with Jonathan. “Did something happen?”

Jonathan shakes his head. “Not really. Nothing new.” It’s not really a lie. Martha’s probably been
pregnant for months. It’s just that Jonathan didn’t know about it. Knowing alters things more than
it should. Seth is no farther away from Jonathan then he was yesterday, even though the change
feels seismic. “I just need to let off steam.”

“Well, you came to the right place.” Sebastian rubs the small of Jonathan’s back. He still has no
shirt on. Jonathan hasn’t stopped noticing. He leans in to the touch, wishing his own shirt were gone. “But if you’re going to jump off the bandwagon, you want to start with something a little lighter than India pale ale. There’s an entire microbrewery to choose from in the fridge. You probably want to try a honey ale. You want me to grab you one?”

Jonathan’s pretty sure he’s going to need the liquid courage if he’s going to strip down to his underpants in front of a pool full of strangers. Then again, the liquid courage might qualify him from entering the pool. “Will it make me too drunk to swim?”

“You should be fine with just one. But we can wait until later, if you prefer.”

Jonathan settles on passing the bottle back and forth between himself and Sebastian as they walk out onto the patio. The honey ale doesn’t taste much different from fresh-baked bread, but in liquid form. He thinks he could grow to like it.

There are fewer people in the pool than Jonathan expected. Most of them are lounging in the chairs on the deck, lying with their stomachs or backs exposed to the sky as if they hoped the moonlight might give them a tan. Two guys are lying together on a double lounger, their legs and hands tangled, and no one’s even looking at them. Over by the cabana, a girl in a bikini has her arms wrapped around a boy in a T-shirt and shorts. They’re laughing about something, and when they stop she suddenly kisses him on the cheek. The boy looks surprised, but then he kisses her back; a few seconds later they both obviously have their tongues in each other’s mouth, not caring at all that anyone could see what they’re doing.

Jonathan pulls off his shirt and jeans before he can think about it any longer.

Sebastian stares at him, mouth open.


“You just took off your clothes.”

“Isn’t that what people usually do before they go swimming?”

“Yeah, but …” Sebastian blinks for the first time in this part of conversation. He glances at Jonathan’s chest, then further down, his cheeks flushing in the patio lights when his gaze hits Jonathan’s underwear. “I guess I didn’t actually expect you to do it.”

Heat stirs in Jonathan’s groin. Sebastian’s still not looking at his face. That, combined with the alcohol’s warmth, gives Jonathan more courage than he’s used to. “You like what you see?”

Sebastian steers his eyes back to Jonathan’s face. “Shut up.” It’s defensive and saucy. Jonathan feels like they’re playing some kind of game and he’s won this match.

He’s also pretty sure he’s going to get hard if he doesn’t get in the water now. “Time for my baptism as a heathen!” He makes a dash for the deep end and cannonballs in.

Fifteen miles from Rosedale lies a spring-fed pond that’s always cold, even in the dog days of summer. When he and his brothers would finish their chores, they’d pile into the family van and drive around Rosedale picking up friends until no one else would fit. Seth almost always came along. The first summer after Seth went through puberty, Jonathan couldn’t help but stare when Seth pulled off his shirt and hung it on a nearby branch for safekeeping. He looked so strong, with muscles in his arms and chest that had never been there before.

Alvin poked him in the ribs. “What are you staring at Seth for?” His tone implied Jonathan was
doing something wrong.

“He looks different.” The words felt inadequate. All of his friends looked different than they had the summer before. His brothers, too. Each of them was taller, their hair a little longer or little shorter. Some had lost teeth and some grown new ones. Alfred Stoltzfus no longer wore his leg brace. Kevin Phelps had a broken arm.

But Seth was the only one where the change mattered. He was … Could a boy be beautiful? That was the only word he could think of to describe what he saw.

“No, he doesn’t,” said Alvin. “He looks the same as always. And you look like an idiot staring at him.”

From then on, Jonathan was always careful not to stare when they went swimming. He split his gaze among the branches and the sky and the waterstriders skimming over the surface of the pond. He only looked at Seth out of the corner of his eye, and only touched him when they played chicken.

Here, Jonathan doesn’t have to look away from what he wants.

And he definitely wants.

Up until now, his attraction to Sebastian has been almost abstract. Yes, he’s touched himself once or twice while thinking about Sebastian—to memories of kissing and dancing, or when he’s wondered what, exactly, Sebastian likes to do when he wanders off with other guys. He’s done the same to thoughts of Dave, and even once while thinking about Blaine, of all people. (Jonathan made the mistake of looking at Blaine’s butt one afternoon at Stitch ’n’ Bitch. Blaine no longer seemed as innocent as a baby cow.)

But he’s never dared to think about Sebastian the way he’s thought about Seth—with his clothes off or their bodies entwined. He’s never allowed himself to imagine licking down Sebastian’s chest or pressing against his groin. He’s never fantasized about the sounds that Sebastian might make when he’s close to coming.

He lets himself think about those things now. No need to save himself for Seth’s return anymore.

No need to wait until he can offer his heart to someone new.

Jonathan will never give his heart to anyone again as long as he lives.

“What are you staring at?” Sebastian asks. They’re both in the deep end of the pool—Sebastian stretched out on the back of an inflatable flamingo, Jonathan treading water with the help of a red swim noodle. The water feels warmer than the night air. Sebastian’s wet chest hair curls darkly around his erect nipples before trailing down the center seam of his abdomen and disappearing under the waist of his swim trunks.

“You.”

Sebastian sputters. “Jesus, Jonathan, you can’t say that.”

“Why not?”

“Because you’re Jonathan.”

Jonathan lets go of the noodle and swims the two strokes to Sebastian’s flamingo. “And who is Jonathan supposed to be?”
The pool lights illuminate Sebastian’s face. He’s not quite pink as his flamingo, but he’s getting there. “Sweet.”

“I can’t be sweet and stare at you at the same time?”

“No. Not if we’re friends.”

“That doesn’t make sense.” One of the first things Jonathan learned about Sebastian was he had no qualms about friends being hot for each other. If he did, he wouldn’t have hooked up with Dave.

“It does if you live inside my head.”

Jonathan rests a hand on Sebastian’s calf. It’s half in and half out of the water. The hairs here are almost as thick as the ones on his chest. They drape against his skin like lake weeds washed up onto a rocky beach. His skin is as slick as those rocks. Jonathan knows the danger of holding too tight to something that slippery. He keeps his grip loose, letting water wash up between his palm and Sebastian’s leg as the other swimmers send waves through the pool. He meets Sebastian’s eyes. “Do you want me to stop?”

“I don’t know.” Sebastian’s voice is quiet. “No.”

“No, you want me to stop, or no, you don’t want me to stop?”

Sebastian shifts in the flamingo so he can get a better look at Jonathan’s face. He studies Jonathan for a long moment before speaking. “What’s going on with you and Dave?”

The mention of Dave’s name makes Jonathan feel even warmer than he already is. But Dave is far away right now. Sebastian is here. “I don’t know.”

“You two haven’t hooked up? You’ve been spending a lot of time together.”

“No.”

“Do you want to?”

“I don’t know.”

“But you want to fool around with me.”

Jonathan should be embarrassed that his eyes go straight to Sebastian’s groin. But then they go to Sebastian’s eyes, moving from Jonathan’s lips to his eyes to his lips again, and he can’t be embarrassed.

“You’re not as innocent as you look, are you, Jonathan?”

“No.”

Jonathan’s words are answered with a loud splash. Sebastian’s leg slips from his hand. The flamingo bobs sideways in the water.

“What the—” Jonathan spins around, trying to get his bearings. Sebastian is nowhere in sight.

“Over here!”

Jonathan turns to see Sebastian on the other side of the pool, one hand clinging to the exit ladder. “What are you doing?”
Sebastian smirks. “For me to know and you to find out.”

“What are you, seven?”

“Definitely not seven.” The surface of the water distorts how the light shines up on Sebastian’s face. Fine white lines flicker and flare against his skin. It looks like fire.

“Seven,” Jonathan says, because he doesn’t know what else to say. All the blood has gone from his brain into his groin.

“Are you going to come over here, or is your bark louder than your bite?”

Jonathan dives under the water, his eyes open as he moves toward Sebastian. The chlorine stings, but Jonathan has never swum in water this clear before, and rarely toward something so worth looking at. Sebastian swim trunks billow around his groin. It could just be the movements of the water making them bulge out, but Jonathan doesn’t think so.

Jonathan breaks the surface. He’s inches away from Sebastian. Maybe he should ask Sebastian what he wants, but he doesn’t have to. Sebastian keeps looking at his mouth the way Seth did when he wanted to kiss.

No. Not Seth. This is not Seth. This is about forgetting Seth.

Jonathan isn’t conscious of moving forward. All he knows is that his mouth is on Sebastian’s, his hands in Sebastian’s hair, Sebastian’s hands on Jonathan’s bare waist. Everything is so wet. They should slip apart. But they just keep moving closer, chests sliding together, tongues sliding together, Sebastian’s erection nudging Jonathan’s hip. Sebastian lets out a low, quiet groan when Jonathan brushes against it.

“This is a bad idea,” Sebastian mutters against Jonathan’s lips.

Jonathan draws back just enough to focus on Sebastian’s eyes. “We’ve kissed before.”

“Yeah, but I want to do a lot more than kiss you.”

“Good.” Jonathan kisses Sebastian again. He tastes like chlorine and beer. Funny, beer tastes much better when it’s mixed in with Sebastian’s tongue.

A wolf whistle pierces the air. It might be directed at someone else, but it’s probably directed at them. Jonathan’s surprised to find the thought turns him on even more. If he wasn’t submerged in water, he might combust. He dips one hand under the water and brushes it across Sebastian’s nipple.

Sebastian gasps. “Are you planning to make me come in the swimming pool?”

In fact, Jonathan hasn’t been planning anything at all. That’s what makes this so freeing. But now that Sebastian’s mentioned it, he wishes everyone else at the party would leave so he could.

Unlike their kiss at Christmas, this one has no coda. When Sebastian breaks away, it feels more like a pause. “C’mon. Let’s cool down. I’m not walking around the deck with a hard-on.”

“I have to go back out there in my wet underwear. That’s worse.”

“No it’s not. Your underwear is blue. It’ll pass for a swimsuit.”

Sebastian knows the color of his underwear. Jonathan’s secretly satisfied with that. It means
Sebastian spent enough time looking to notice.

They swim back out to the floating flamingo. Neither of them climb onto it. They just hang onto its wings and talk about stupid things like the weather and their favorite flavors of ice cream—anything that doesn’t have to do with emotions or erections.

Sebastian leans his head back to look at the sky. “Hey,” he says. “I can see the North Star.”

Jonathan looks up. He’s unimpressed. “From my backyard, you can usually see the Milky Way.”

“Don’t be a buzzkill, Jonathan. Not on the one rare moment I decide to commune with nature.” Sebastian smiles. He’s teasing Jonathan the same way he teases Dave. Jonathan likes that. It means Sebastian doesn’t think of him as fragile anymore.

* *

“My clothes are in one of the guestrooms,” Sebastian says as he towels off by the side of the pool. “I’ll change and meet you back here.”

“I’ll go with you.” Jonathan really needs to take his underpants off. They weigh about a hundred tons with all the water they’ve wicked up. Sebastian said he wanted to do a lot more than kiss, and if Jonathan takes his underpants off while Sebastian takes his swimsuit off …

“No, you won’t.” Sebastian hands the towel to Jonathan. It’s big and blue, and even though Sebastian’s already used it to dry off, it’s still fluffier than any of the bath towels Jonathan’s family has a home.

Jonathan wraps himself up in it. It doesn’t smell much like Sebastian. Just like pool water. “I’m not going to spend all night in my wet underwear.”

“You don’t have to. There are changing rooms behind the cabana.” Sebastian gestures over to the structure with his chin. “Or you can change inside. But you’re not going with me.”

“But you said you wanted—”

“I don’t always do what I want. One doesn’t have to be a Mennonite to practice self-control, you know.”

The words sting. This evening is going downhill. He understands Sebastian almost as little as he understands Seth. “Why?”

“Why would a lowly non-Mennonite know how to practice self-control?”

“No. Why would you want to?”

“I ask myself the same question sometimes.” Sebastian leans forward and kisses Jonathan’s damp forehead. It’s the least sexy kiss Jonathan’s had all night. “I’ll see you in a few minutes.”

Jonathan doesn’t feel like waiting for Sebastian once he’s got his jeans and T-shirt back on and his underpants are hanging to dry with strangers’ swimsuits behind the cabana. It leaves him time to think, and the last thing he wants to do tonight is think. He heads back into the house. More people are dancing now, including that Stan or Dan guy who implied earlier that Jonathan was handsome when he said that Sebastian had good taste in men. He seems to be dancing with a couple of girls, but it’s kind of hard to tell because they’re not touching and, half the time, not even looking at each other. Jonathan grabs another beer and steps into the throng, his head bobbing to the music. He
makes eye contact with Name-Rhymes-With-Ann. A few songs later, the girls the Warbler was
dancing with have disappeared, Jonathan has learned the guy’s name is actually Graham, and both
of Graham’s hands are on Jonathan’s hips as they dance precariously close. Jonathan shuts his eyes
and pretends he’s perfectly comfortable dancing with a complete stranger. After all, Graham is tall
and good-looking and has nice, warm hands.

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and good-looking and has nice, warm hands.

Jonathan slugs down the rest of his beer. It doesn’t taste as good as Sebastian’s beer breath, but it
will have to do for now.

“There you are! I’ve been looking for you forever.” Sebastian’s voice is close behind him. It
sounds totally unfazed, as if Sebastian sees Jonathan pseudo-grinding with total strangers every
day. Delighted, almost. It’s the way Sebastian sounds when he’s had one too many drinks and the
world becomes all candy and roses.

Jonathan feels Sebastian ease up behind him. The heat from Sebastian’s body touches Jonathan
skin before Sebastian does. Sebastian wraps his arms around Jonathan’s waist so that they’re
nestled right above Graham’s. He presses his chest flush against Jonathan’s back. Jonathan wishes
they both still had their shirts off.

“Hello, Sebastian,” Graham says, laughter in his voice.

“Oh. Hi, Graham. Sorry, I didn’t see you.”

Graham gets the hint and disappears. Jonathan doesn’t miss him. It means now he can dance with
his eyes open. Sebastian leans into Jonathan’s ear. “It’s funny how a couple of vodkas can totally
change of person’s point of view.”

“Oh?” Jonathan says.

“You’re killing me, Jonathan.” On Sebastian’s tongue, there the sexiest words anyone has ever
spoken.

Jonathan turns around and Sebastian’s arms. Sebastian’s green eyes are almost black. He’s looking
at Jonathan like he could devour him. Jonathan doesn’t remember anyone ever looking at him that
way. “I don’t kill people. I’m a Mennonite.”

Jonathan leans in closer. Their noses touch, then their lips. Jonathan can taste the vodka on
Sebastian’s breath. It’s mixed with a sour hint of lime. He runs his knuckles over the bare skin
peeking out of Sebastian’s waistband.

Sebastian shivers. “Jesus Christ.”

“You know how I feel about that kind of language, Sebastian.”

“No, I don’t. You’re a stranger.”

“I’m the same person I—.”

Sebastian presses his fingers to Jonathan’s lips. “Shhh. I like to make out with strangers.” He kisses
up Jonathan’s jaw to his ear. “And other things.”

Jonathan curls his fingers into Sebastian’s hips and pulls him flush. The hard thing Jonathan feels
against his pelvis is definitely not Sebastian’s fly. His own erection must be as impossible for
Sebastian to miss.
The groan that Sebastian makes is barely audible above the music. But it’s there, and real. More real than Seth has been these past nine months. It skitters down Jonathan’s spine as Sebastian leans their foreheads together.

“I hate you sometimes,” Sebastian gasps, the puffs of air almost as solid as a kiss against Jonathan’s lips. They don’t feel like hate at all.

“No, you don’t.”

“No. I don’t.”

They’re not really dancing anymore, if they ever were to begin with. Their hips are swaying, but not with the music. They’re surrounded by people and Jonathan doesn’t care.

“Maybe you two should get a room,” says a girl’s voice, not unkindly.

They do.

It’s all amazing—Sebastian’s chest hair tickling against Jonathan’s nipples, legs tangling, every piece of clothing gone, nothing between them, everything mixing together, sweat and spit and breath, and Sebastian whispering dirty things that Seth would never have said, like *I’m going to suck you off*—until Sebastian’s mouth is right where he promised, wet and hot and like nothing Jonathan has felt in months.

Even with the condom, Sebastian’s mouth feels too much like Seth’s.

Everything comes rushing back to Jonathan: the weight of Seth against his thigh, the memory of Seth’s hand on his mouth to keep him from crying out, the smell of his skin. Seth’s mouth taking him in. Consuming him.

“Se—” Jonathan bites his tongue. Tries to reform the word into *Sebastian*. But “Se—” is all he can manage again.

Sebastian hums. The sensation vibrates through Jonathan’s hips. He opens his eyes and looks down at Sebastian’s head bobbing, his lips stretched. He takes note of everything that’s different—the color of Sebastian’s hair, the angles in his face, the shape of his eyebrows and nose; the fact that they’re doing this in a bed, with a roof over their heads and the hum of a ceiling fan, in front of wallpaper with a geometric pattern in silvers and blues. But then Sebastian does this thing with his tongue and Jonathan’s eyes shut of their own accord and he’s descending again, golden sunlight in Seth’s hair, dirt under his fingernails, his back arching toward the sky.

A sob rattles Jonathan’s lungs. His face is wet with tears.

“Jonathan?” Sebastian’s mouth isn’t on him anymore. No. Sebastian is right next to him, looking into him with those piercing green eyes—except that Jonathan can hardly see those eyes through all his tears. “Hey, hey, what’s wrong?”

Jonathan rolls into Sebastian’s arms. He buries his face into Sebastian’s shoulder. It’s not as strong as Seth’s. Relief washes over him. “I’m sorry.”

“No, no.” Sebastian’s hand is warm on Jonathan’s back, moving like a windshield wiper on the intermittent setting. “You don’t have anything to be sorry for.”

For some reason that only makes Jonathan cry harder. Sebastian’s skin grows clammy from Jonathan’s tears and snot, but he doesn’t want to move.
“Tell me what’s wrong, Jonathan. Did I— Is that not what you wanted?”

Jonathan shakes his head, only realizing as Sebastian bristles and draws back that Sebastian misunderstood his answer. Jonathan chases Sebastian across the sheets. “I mean, yes. It’s what I wanted. It’s what I want.” He gulps air into his lungs. “I just had a really bad day.”

Sebastian turns back to him, pushing a strand of Jonathan’s hair back over his ear. “How bad?”

“The worst.”

Sebastian gets up from the bed and, without bothering with his clothes, walks over to the bathroom. That’s how fancy this house is. Even its guestrooms have their own baths. He comes out half a minute later with a box of Kleenex and a glass of water, after Jonathan has pulled the mint-flavored condom from his shriveling penis and dropped it in the trashcan near the bed.

“Drink this,” says Sebastian, handing Jonathan the glass of water. “There’s plenty more where it came from.”

Jonathan gulps down half of it while Sebastian stands there, his now-relaxed peter at Jonathan’s eye level, as if standing around naked as the day you were born is the most normal thing in the world.

Birthday suit.

Jonathan hands the glass of water back to Sebastian. His sobbing turns into a chuckle.

Sebastian eyes Jonathan curiously. “What’s so funny? Hopefully not my dick.”

Jonathan shakes his head. “I just figured out what you meant by ‘birthday suit.’”

“When did I say ‘birthday suit’?”

“Earlier. At the pool. You said I could go swimming in my birthday suit. I never heard that one before.”

“Mennonites don’t spend much time running around in their birthday suits?” Sebastian slips back into the bed and pulls the sheets up over their laps. Jonathan kind of wishes he wouldn’t. Somehow, their nakedness makes them feel more secure.

“No. My boyfriend wouldn’t even let me take off my clothes when we’d fool around. Or his.”

Sebastian’s head jerks like an owl’s. “You had a boyfriend?”

“You know I’ve kissed other guys before.”

“That doesn’t mean you’ve had a boyfriend. I never have. So was he Mennonite?”

“Yeah. He got baptized and everything.”

“Ow.”

“That’s not the worst part.”

“It’s not?”

Jonathan tells Sebastian everything. It’s good Sebastian brought the Kleenex, because Jonathan
starts crying again. Not as hard as he did before, but just as steady. Sebastian fetches two, three, four more glasses of water to replenish Jonathan’s supply. He tells Sebastian about falling in love, about Martha, about the baptism. He tells Sebastian about the last time he saw Seth, how frantically they kissed and touched behind the barn, how he could hardly smell Seth for the odor of cowshit permeating the air, how he kept whispering, “Don’t go,” against Seth’s skin, and then, when Seth protested too many times that he had no choice, Jonathan changed his words to, “Don’t forget me.”

“I won’t,” Seth said. Jonathan took it as a promise.

Jonathan tells Sebastian about their in-jokes and their arguments, about the cryptic letters that come in the mail, about the bits of fact and conjecture he gets from Edna.

He tells Sebastian about the baby.

“No wonder you haven’t been yourself tonight,” Sebastian says when this story is through. “You’re on one hell of a rebound.”

“You keep saying that.”

“What?”

“That I’m not myself. But I am.”

“You usually randomly screw people at parties?”

“You’re not random. And we didn’t… screw.”

“Fine. Have sex. Whatever.”

Jonathan’s heart lodges in his throat. “Wait. Is that… I thought sex was only, um…” As if Jonathan’s face weren’t already hot enough from all the crying, it goes even hotter.

Sebastian laughs and kisses Jonathan on the nose. “You’re so cute when you get flustered. And I mean that in a good way.”

It’s an innocent kiss, but they are naked under the sheets. “Cute enough that you want to try again?”

Now it’s Sebastian’s turn to go pink. “I don’t know. We should probably be on the same page about stuff.”

“Like sex? I mean, people’s definitions differ, but for me, when two or more people try to get each other off, that’s sex. Are you okay with that?”

“Seth didn’t think it really counted if you kept your clothes on.”

“Did you?”

“Yeah. I mean, I wasn’t sure if it was sex. But it definitely counted. You know what I mean?”

Sebastian wraps his fingers around Jonathan’s hand. “Yeah, I do.”

Handholding turns into kissing, and kissing turns into touching, and soon enough the sheets are thrown back and their legs are tangled together. Jonathan doesn’t let Sebastian go down on him this time. He needs to look into his face, to remember where he is, to know who he’s with. They laugh
and crack jokes and tease, and Jonathan feels safe. Rosedale is a million miles away.

*

Jonathan’s alarm goes off just before 4 a.m. He doesn’t immediately turn it off because Sebastian’s erection is right in his butt crack and that’s a lot nicer than getting out of bed.

“What the fuck?” Sebastian rolls over and whacks the alarm clock on his nightstand, which has no effect.

“It’s my phone. I’ll get it.” Jonathan reaches over to his own nightstand and sets the snooze. He turns on the bedside lamp.

“What time is it? Isn’t it the weekend?”

“I still have to milk the cows.” Rosedale is only half-hour from here, so he’s got some time yet. He has an erection almost as insistent as Sebastian’s. Maybe they could do something about that before he leaves.

Sebastian turns back toward him and pulls him close. His breath is warm from sleep, the odor of alcohol mostly gone. “That’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard.”

Jonathan laughs. “It’s my life.”

“Sorry. I wasn’t trying to insult your life. I just …” Sebastian looks sheepish.

“Are you hungover? Do you need me to turn the light off?” Jonathan made sure Sebastian drink plenty of water before he went to sleep, he’s not really sure how the whole hangover thing works.

“No. It’s just…” Sebastian bites his lip. “I’ve never actually slept over with anyone before. I feel like I should make you breakfast or something.”

“It’s okay. I’m not really hungry. I never eat breakfast until after morning chores.” Jonathan drags his finger down the center of Sebastian’s chest. He likes how the hair grows thicker the lower he goes. “But we could do something else. I don’t have to leave for more than an hour.”

Really, if he doesn’t want his dad to see him driving up to the house, Jonathan should leave in half an hour, maybe forty-five minutes at the latest. All that seems insignificant at the moment.

“Yeah? Like what?”

Jonathan curls his hand around Sebastian’s erection. “That.”

Sebastian hisses. “Do you really think we should do that again?”

“Yes.”

“You don’t think it’s, perhaps, the biggest mistake of our lives?”

“No. Why would it be?”

“We’re friends.”

“It’s okay, Sebastian. It doesn’t have to mean anything.”

“Speak for yourself.”
“You fooled around with Dave.”

“I guess so.”

“Also, I’m pretty hot.”

Sebastian chuckles. “And modest.”

“I’m trying to turn over a new leaf.”

“Well, if I really am your friend, I suppose I should help you.” Sebastian rolls on top of Jonathan, giggling. It takes nowhere near an hour for both of them to come. Jonathan has time for a quick shower, and in the kitchen he makes one of those pod coffees before reclaiming his keys at the front door from the key guards, who have been replaced by a fresh set of Warblers sometime in the night. They have a breathalyzer thing, and he has to prove he can walk in a straight line. He admires their thoroughness.
It’s 5:23 when he pulls up to his driveway. He kills the light and the engine, coasting downhill to park near the garage. His dad is usually up at 5:30, and Mark at 5:45. Jonathan squats behind the truck to change his clothes out of view of the windows. His plain dress is a little wrinkled from being stuffed under the seat all night, but there’s nothing to do about that.

Inside, he starts the coffee and grabs a cookie from the jar to tide him over until breakfast. His activities of this morning and the night before burned off more calories than he realized.

“You’re up early,” his dad says when he comes downstairs.

“Yes,” Jonathan says. He dips his cookie into his mug and takes another bite.

“Thanks for making the coffee.”

“You’re welcome.”

His dad eyes Jonathan as he pours his own mug. “You don’t usually eat with your coffee, do you?”

“No.”

“Must be hormones.”

“Oh?” Jonathan hides his face behind his coffee cup.

Jonathan’s dad sits down across from him. “Another growth spurt. I had my second one at your age.”

“I’m already as tall as you.”

“Every generation gets taller than the one before. Alvin was bigger than me, too.”

Jonathan notices his father’s use of the past tense. He wants to say, Alvin’s not dead. But it’s first thing in the morning, and Jonathan’s already walking a tightrope as it is.

Then Mark storms into the room and pushes Jonathan right off it. “There you are, you jerk! You could have texted me! I thought I was going to have to do all your work for you!”

Dad jumps out of his chair. “Mark!” His whisper has the force of a shout. “Your mother is still sleeping!”

“Why am I in trouble?” Mark lowers his voice, but his anger is just as fervent. “He’s the one who didn’t come home last night! He could have been dead.”

Their father looks at Jonathan. “Is this true?”

Jonathan sets down his coffee and sits up straight. “Yes.”

“What were you doing?”

“Sleeping over with a friend.”

“What friend?”
“You don’t know him.”

“Were girls involved?”

Jonathan looks down at his mug. He’s never lied to his parents outright. Yes, there were girls at the party, but they weren’t involved in anything Jonathan was up to. If he tells his father they were, he’ll jump to the wrong conclusion. “No.”

His father’s eyes linger on him for too long. “We’ll talk about this later. The cows can’t wait. Get to work.”

“Yes, Dad.”

Out in the barn, Mark grumbles at Jonathan every chance he gets. “I don’t see what you’re so mad about,” Jonathan says. “It doesn’t affect you.”

“Yes, it does.”

“How?”

Mark looks up from the teat he’s washing off. “I couldn’t sleep. First I couldn’t sleep because I expected you to come home any minute and make a bunch of noise—”

“I don’t make noise when I get home.”

“You make enough to wake me up.” Mark grabs a paper towel to wipe the girl off. “And then I couldn’t sleep because it was 2 a.m. and you still weren’t home. For all I knew you’d gotten drunk and driven your truck into a ditch.”

Before last night, Jonathan could have assured Mark he didn’t drink. He couldn’t do that now. “I’m not stupid. I wouldn’t do that.”

“Yeah, well. It doesn’t matter anyway.”

“It doesn’t matter if I’m dead or alive?”

Mark stares at the teat thoughtfully. “You’re going to leave us like Alvin did, aren’t you?”

The cookie Jonathan swallowed half an hour ago rises up into his gullet. “I don’t know.”

“Why can’t we just be a normal family? Why can’t you just marry Sarah and stay here like everyone wants you to? Who’s going to run the farm when Dad gets old?”

“You, maybe.”

“I’m too young.”

“You won’t be forever.”

“I already lost one big brother. I don’t want to lose both.”

Jonathan thought he cried himself dry last night, but new tears push up now. “You won’t. I promise. Not unless you push me away.”

Mark looks up at Jonathan for the first time. His look is incredulous. “Why would I do that?”
Because there’s no room for me in your world. Because once any of you know who I am, I’ll become invisible. Jonathan sniffs his tears into the back of nose. “I don’t know. You just might.”

“No. I write to Alvin. If you don’t go Amish, I can do better than that and call you.”

Jonathan chuckles. “I’m not going Amish.”

“I didn’t think so.” Mark pats his girl on the flank and turns back to work. “They’re stuck-up jerks.”

“Mark!”

“You know it’s true. Besides, I heard they don’t read music and they sing all their hymns in unison. You’d hate that.”

“I can’t disagree with that point.”

“Of course you can’t, Jonathan. I know you better than you think.” Mark looks at Jonathan again, his gaze so piercing that Jonathan has to turn away. He hopes both that it is true, and that it isn’t.

* By the end of the milking and breakfast, Jonathan is ready to crash in bed and not wake up for the next two days. But that’s not an option. His mother sends all the other kids out of the house—even the twins, who usually spend all Saturday morning baking—and it’s just him and his parents around the kitchen table.

“What’s going on with you, Jonathan?” his father asks. Jonathan’s parents sit side-by-side across from Jonathan, an inquisitory panel. “And don’t tell me disappearing all night has something to do with going to college.”

“I had a bad day yesterday. I wasn’t thinking. I’m sorry.”

“Are you doing drugs?”


“Drinking?”

Telling the truth will make his parents angry, but not as much as if they knew everything he did last night. He’ll give them this. It will deflect their attention. “Not generally. But last night, I tried some. I know I shouldn’t have, but I also know people shouldn’t drive in that condition. I tried to make the best decision I could, given that I’d already made one mistake.”

His parents look at each other, doing that creepy silent communication thing they’re so good at. It involves subtle movements of their faces, like nostril flares and eyebrow twitches and long, meaningful looks. Jonathan feels like he should be able to crack the code after all these years, but he still can’t.

His father turns to him. “Jonathan, it’s not unusual for boys your age to wander. That doesn’t make it wise or right.”

Jonathan swallows dryly. “Yes, Dad.”

“However, you are not a member of the church. We have no power to stop you. Everyone must figure out for himself whether he is going to live a life of God, or live a life of the world. We
cannot make that decision for you. But no matter what kind of life you decide to lead, as long as you live in this house, you have certain responsibilities toward this family. You must do your part to contribute to this household.”

“Of course. That’s why I—I came back for the milking, Dad. I didn’t miss my work.”

“It’s not only about work. You must also exert a good influence on your brothers and sisters. What kind of example are you being for Mark, when you drink and stay out all night?”

Jonathan looks down at the table. It’s not a fair question. Mark is younger than him. Jonathan wouldn’t want Mark to go out and do what Jonathan did last night, because Mark isn’t old enough to do those things. They’re not a set of Uncle Abraham’s chairs, all made from the same pattern and finished on roughly the same day. They’re different, and have different lives to lead. Jonathan takes a deep breath. “Mark’s too young to make those kinds of decisions.”

His father studies him. “And you’re not?”

“No, I’m not.”

The silence that follows is overwhelming. There’s not even the sound of a pin drop to break it. Jonathan looks at his parents, and they look at him. Their faces are impassive, impenetrable. He can only wait.

“The world isn’t a playground. Playing in it isn’t harmless. It can leave you broken. Too broken to find your way back.”

“I’m already broken.” The words come out before Jonathan can think them through.

His parents go wide-eyed. His father is the first to regain his composure. “What else have you done?”

Jonathan’s too exhausted to equivocate. “It doesn’t matter what I’ve done. It matters who I am. And who I am will never fit in Rosedale.”

The dam that’s always worked so well to stop up Jonathan’s emotions was obliterated last night. He’s too worn out to rebuild it now. Tears push out from the corners of his eyes and run down the sides of his nose. They roll into his mouth, salty and sweet. His lungs tremble.

“Jonathan.” It’s the first word his mother has spoken since breakfast. She reaches across the table as if to take his hand. But his hands are folded in his lap, out of her grasp. “Is this about college?”

He sniffles. She’s offering him an out without knowing it, a way to keep this conversation from turning into a disaster. He doesn’t know whether to take it. Part of him wants to tell them the whole truth and get over with it. But he honestly has no idea how they’d react. He could be on the curb within minutes, and no plan. They still have half his money from the gas station. “Sort of.”

“I don’t understand. You never talked about going to school before.”

It’s true. He didn’t. He believed what the Bible told him about the birds of the air. He thought that he could move into the future with no real planning. But now he knows he was wrong. “I know,” he says. “But now I’m growing up.”

His father sighs. “Look, Jonathan. I don’t like this talk of you going to college. I’m not sure what a degree would do for you that on-the-job experience wouldn’t. That said, I don’t think there’s any harm in you taking a course or two in skills that would help you out on the farm. Animal biology,
perhaps, or accounting. Heck, I took a couple classes in business planning when your mother and I were first married.”

Jonathan looks up, startled. “You did?”

“Yes. There’s nothing wrong with learning. It’s learning for learning’s sake that I worry about. Last week in the paper, I read about a study where a bunch of chemists were trying to figure out how to uncook a boiled egg. Now, what’s the point of that? That’s just people trying to prove to each other how smart they are, like the builders of the Tower of Babel. People go down rabbit holes in search of answers to questions that they never should have asked. They lose sight of God.”

“I don’t want to learn for learning’s sake, though,” Jonathan says. “I want to be prepared for the future.” A future away from here. He’s not ready to say the latter part.

“Come with a list of classes you want to take and we’ll talk about it, alright?”

Jonathan nods. “Yes, Dad.”

The following week, he shows his dad the curriculum requirements for the veterinary technician program. He’s not sure that’s exactly what he wants to do as a career, but most of the classes are biology-related, so he’d want to take them, anyway.

His father looks it over, ticking little checks next to the ones he approves of, and crossing out the ones he doesn’t. “Psychology of Human Relations? What good could that possibly do you?” Half of the classes are inked out when Jonathan gets the paper back. But half of them aren’t.

“I can enroll, then?”

His father nods. “As long as it doesn’t interfere with your duties at home.”

Jonathan practically skips the whole way out to the creek. He sprawls out on the grass and dials Dave’s number. They haven’t talked since before the Warblers party, even though Jonathan probably should have at least texted Dave after Sebastian sent a message saying, I think Dave is onto what happened. Do you want to talk to him, or should I? Jonathan told Sebastian he would, but then he didn’t. He’s not sure what he would say. It’s not like there’s anything going on between him and Dave, really. Explaining things would be … presumptuous.

Jonathan doesn’t think about any of that right now. He follows his heart. There only one person he wants to share the news with. “I’m going!” he shouts as soon as Dave picks up the receiver.

“Jonathan? Is that you?”

“Who else would it be? Of course it’s me!”

Dave chuckles. “Going where?”

“To college! My dad said it was okay. At least, he approved two semesters’ worth of classes. So that’s a start.”

“You’re kidding me! That’s great!”

“I’m not kidding.” Jonathan’s heart feels like it’s going to swell out of his chest. A red-winged blackbird letting out its territorial trill but doesn’t swoop toward Jonathan, instead veering in the other direction. The world is perfect, here in this moment.
But it could be even more perfect.

“Can I see you tonight?” The words slip out of Jonathan’s mouth without forethought. That seems to be happening a lot lately.

“Jonathan, it’s a school night.”

“I know. I just— A lot has happened since I last saw you. I— I want to tell you about it.”

Dave doesn’t answer for a moment. Then, quietly, “Jonathan, I know.”

Funny, how Jonathan has lived with his parents for eighteen years and still can’t read their secret language. But Dave speaks three vague words, and his meaning is perfectly clear. Dave knows what happened between him and Sebastian.

The blackbird is suddenly quiet. For a moment, Jonathan’s convinced it’s flown into his throat and become lodged there. “It’s not— It didn’t— It doesn’t mean anything. Sebastian says I’m on the rebound.”

“He’s probably right.” There’s something about Dave’s enunciation that makes it easy for Jonathan to picture his facial expression: that half-smile he has sometimes that’s a wistful mix of compassion and regret.

“Did he— Did he tell you what happened with my ex?”

“No. And he didn’t tell me anything specific about the party, actually. I just … read between the lines? He’s kind of easy to see through, even though he tries not to be.”

“I’m sorry.”

“You have nothing to apologize for.”

“I’m not who you thought I was, though, am I?”

Another long silence. “I don’t know, Jonathan. But even if you’re right, that’s not necessarily a bad thing. If I had you all figured out, we’d be bored of each other by now.”

Jonathan sucks in his bottom lip. “So … we’re still friends?”

Dave laughs again, but not as freely as he did when he first answered the phone. There’s a tinge of sadness to it that makes Jonathan’s heart ache. “Of course we’re still friends. I mean, I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t a little jealous of Sebastian, but I told you myself I can’t get into anything serious right now. And it would be, I think, if I were with you. Serious.”

I love you. The words are crystal clear in Jonathan’s mind. He bites the inside of his cheek to keep from saying them. The words are true, but probably not in the way that Jonathan wants to mean them. Jonathan’s on the rebound. He’s looking to replace what he lost. But Dave’s not Seth. He plays football and drinks beer and decorates his room with American flags. And honestly, Jonathan is in no shape to fall in love with someone new.

“Dave?” Jonathan says.

“Yeah?”

“I’ve never had a friend like you.”
That Friday, Jonathan gets a letter from Seth:

Dear Jonathan,

I am going to be a father. We aren’t telling many people outside of our immediate families yet, but it only seems right that you should hear it from me first.

Yesterday, Martha and I were talking about baby names and she asked me, if we had a boy, what did I think of the name Jonathan? Her grandfather was named Jonathan and she knows the name is special to me, as well. I started to get teary-eyed, but of course couldn’t explain all the reasons why. She joked that the pregnancy hormones were getting to me. She is a funny girl. You would like her.

I have always wanted children of my own, but now that it is happening, I feel unprepared. We started breeding dogs this winter, but I think we will have to step up production now. We don’t have enough land to make a go of just farming. It is much easier to deal with animals than humans. Martha does the books for her father’s construction business, but with children she wouldn’t have as much time to work. I wonder how capable I am of raising a family, with all the mistakes I’ve made in my life and the temptations that still sometimes beset me. But then I think perhaps I am too hard on myself. They are not as strong as they once were, thanks to Christ’s forgiveness. If I stay close to Him, I cannot lead my family astray.

I think of you often, and I always pray for Christ’s presence in your life. I hope you are considering joining the church. It is not always an easy life, but it is a good one. If we are faithful in a few things, God will make us rulers of many things, and we will enter into the joy of the Lord.

Yours in Christ,
Seth

*Jonathan comes careering toward the bar at the speed of freight train. “Give me all the alcohol!” he says, pounding his palm on the counter.

The bartender looks up at him in disbelief. “I’ve never seen you drink before.”

“There’s a first time for everything, isn’t there?” Jonathan says.

Sebastian’s hand comes down on top of Jonathan’s. It’s gentle, without any of the rage that’s coursing through Jonathan’s body. That makes Jonathan inexplicably angrier. He’s angry. His friends should be angry. Nothing is right.

“Slow down, cowboy,” Sebastian says much too calmly. “What’s going on?”

Jonathan tears the letter out of his back pocket and throws it at Sebastian.

“Holy shit,” Sebastian says when he’s done reading it. “This guy is a basketcase.”

Jonathan grumbles a worthless reply.

“Seriously. Is he trying to seduce you, or convert you? Or maybe a bit of both?”
“Just let me order a beer.”

“Honey, you can’t turn to beer every time your ex does something crazy.”

“But I can turn to it today.”

Sebastian huffs out a sigh. “And how, exactly, are you planning to get home?”

“Oh.”

“Yes, oh.”

A third voice chimes in behind them. “What’s ‘oh’?”

It’s Dave. Jonathan turns around and his heart does this hopeful little lurch when he sees him. He orders it to be quiet.

“Jonathan wants to get drunk,” Sebastian says. “I pointed out he needs a way to get home.”

Dave doesn’t say anything for a second. He moves his jaw side to side like he’s mulling things over. “We could tag team.”

Sebastian’s jaw flies open. “You raunchy bastard!” He’s never sounded more impressed.

Dave rolls his eyes. “That’s not what I meant. One of us drive him home in his truck, the other one of us follows. Then, we carpool back to Scandals.”

Sebastian frowns. “I’m not as into that kind of tag teaming as much as the other kind. But it only
seems fair. I’ve gotten more than my share of rides home from Scandals. I suppose I could help a brother out for once.”

Jonathan looks at both them. “Seriously? You guys would do that just so I can get drunk?”

Sebastian pats him on the back. “In my years of observing broken relationships, I’ve learned that anger drinking is an important step in the rebound process. Drink until you’re dizzy, then puke the evil spirits out.”

Dave raises an eyebrow. “Did something else happen? With your ex?”

Jonathan snatches the letter from Sebastian handed to Dave. He feels a little guilty for sharing this private communication with two people already. But it’s gratifying, too. This thing with Seth has been a secret for so long, and so has his grief. This makes it real. Tangible. And if it’s tangible, maybe he’ll finally be able to untangle this whole snarled mess eventually.

“Um, I’m not the most experienced when it comes to relationships,” Dave says when he’s done reading, “but it sure sounds like this guy is sending you some mixed messages.”

“Bingo!” Sebastian says, then turns to Jonathan, who now has a beer in his hand. “You should probably take a sip every time someone says ‘bastard,’ ‘fucked up,’ ‘mixed messages,’ or ‘bingo.’”

Jonathan takes more than a sip. He downs half the glass. “I hate him sometimes.” Whoa. Has the alcohol already hit Jonathan’s bloodstream? Mennonites don’t hate. Except Jonathan does. Right now. He wants to drive to Wisconsin and beat down Seth’s door and show him what temptation really looks like. He wants to make Seth fall farther than he ever has before—so far that he can never write one of these insulting, pious letters again, with I want you and I hate myself written in invisible ink under each line. Jonathan feels sick and angry. He also wants to rescue Seth. Badly.

Jonathan slams down his empty glass. “Let’s dance.”

It’s not as awkward as it should be, dancing with the guy you’ve had sex with and the guy you might be in love with if your heart wasn’t a worthless piece of used-up junk. The booze helps, and the fact that they’re all friends helps.

It also helps that they’re friends later, when Jonathan has to puke his guts out and Dave and Sebastian take turns making sure he doesn’t miss the toilet when he retches.

Dave drives Jonathan’s truck home, Sebastian following behind. “I’m sorry I’m so messed up,” Jonathan mutters probably a million times between drifting in and out of fitful sleep.

“We’re all messed up.” Dave pats Jonathan’s knee, and that feels good. Centering. He reminds himself but that’s real too, just as real as his broken heart.

When he gets in bed that night, he sees the Christmas card from Seth on his wall right next to his pillow. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness cannot overwhelm it. He still hasn’t moved it, in spite of his anger. As bitter as he is, he doesn’t want his pain to drown his love for Seth out.

* 

The next week at Scandals is better. Jonathan’s burned the letter (okay, he took a photo of it first with his cell phone just in case he ever wanted to read it again—so sue him), and it felt like a weight lifting off his shoulders. The week’s been a bit of a mess, but whenever he felt like he was losing balance, he texted David or Sebastian are both and he didn’t feel so crazy anymore. So he’s
glad to see them on Saturday night. He dances with both of them, and when a hairy dude with a beard as overgrown as an unweeded garden in July keeps winking at Dave and Dave keeps batting his eyes back, Jonathan pushes Dave toward him. Dave deserves his fun, too. And if, after Dave leaves with said hairy guy, Jonathan drags Sebastian into the bathroom and learns how to put a condom on someone without using his hands, it’s not only because he wants to be doing this with Dave or because he’s angry with Seth. It’s because it feels good, and it makes Sebastian runs his fingers through Jonathan’s hair like a tractor combing a hayfield, and because sex doesn’t always have to be about breaking your heart open. Sometimes, it’s about learning to heal it.
Graduation at Rosedale Mennonite Secondary School is a sedate affair. There are no caps and gowns and no procession, just a brief assembly with a prayer and a short sermon, and a chance for a couple of the seniors to reflect out loud on how their educations brought them closer to God, and how they’ll use what they learned to serve him. Lisianne Pfeiffer talks about the joy of serving through small things, such as teaching her younger sister to read or baking treats for a sick girl in Lima. Harry Thiesen talks about evangelizing through word and deed; he’s off to volunteer with the Mennonite Central Committee’s portable cannery all summer. Jonathan stares at him as he talks, remembering the desire that used to thrum through his veins whenever they were close. It feels like centuries ago now.

Jonathan gets a three-quarters-time job with one of the local townships doing park maintenance. It helps that he knows stuff about tractor engines. A lot of it is boring crap like mowing around baseball fields, but for a few idyllic weeks in July he does almost nothing but erosion control on a local creek bed, hauling rocks and planting shrubs with nothing but the sounds of his shovel and the birds to keep him company. He comes home sweaty, exhausted, and hungry enough to eat two dinners. It’s perfect.

He still has his job at the gas station, and on weekends he continues to drive the occasional delivery for his uncle. He opens his own bank account and puts his paychecks there. His parents question him about it, but it’s not like he’s not pulling his weight around the farm—he still milks every morning and most afternoons. He’s paying his rent, even if he’s not handing over any money.

He heads into Lima whenever he can—usually just once a week. The best Saturdays are when he
can Stitch ’n’ Bitch in the afternoon and hang out with Dave and Sebastian in the evening. He fools around with Sebastian more often than he probably should, but he’s not going to think too much about it. It’s easy, and Jonathan has never had anything easy in his life.

Sebastian leans in close and softly bites Jonathan’s earlobe just the way he likes. “I like variety, but I also like getting laid. The way I look at it, when I came here before, it was only fifty-fifty that I’d score. Now, it’s almost one hundred percent. Can’t complain about that average. Also, the way I look at it, I’m performing a valuable public service.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. Helping you get over that douchebag ex of yours.”

Jonathan scowls. “He’s not a douchebag. He’s just—”

“Misunderstood. Yes, of course. And until you’re done saying that, my public service won’t be through.”

On a Sunday after church in early August, Edna comes up to Jonathan with a frown on her face. “Martha miscarried. Would you reach out to them? They’re having a hard time. And I know … your friendship always meant a lot to him.”

Even though Jonathan ate breakfast three hours ago, he manages to somehow throw all of it up. It would be so much easier if Seth had a cell phone. Jonathan can’t bring himself to call the house phone and risk Martha answering. He’d feel guiltier than he already does. He knows his anger didn’t end her pregnancy, but it feels like it did. He pulls his Bible from his desk drawer and reads 1 Corinthians 13:4-7 over and over again:

Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not irritable, thinks no evil; does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

If he really cares about Seth, he needs to do better.

Jonathan writes a dozen versions of the letter before finally sending it:

Dear Seth,

Edna told me what happened. I’m so sorry for your loss.

I haven’t been a good friend since you’ve left. I’ve been selfish. I haven’t thought a lot about how different your life must be now, and what it’s like to fit into a new household and a new community. I hope you have friends there who are there for you the way I want to be. I hope you’ll forgive me.

Seth, your friendship made me a better person. I don’t know if you’ll believe that, but it’s true. I don’t know if those are the right words to say to give you comfort. But I’ve never been good at putting words together. The Apostle Paul says to mourn with those who mourn, and that’s all I know how to do.

Love,
Jonathan

What it has is this: There’s nothing to forgive. I was the one who wronged you. Seth goes on to tell Jonathan the mundane details of his days, the friends he’s made, and the people who aren’t quite
friends yet, but could be. He tells Jonathan how it’s taken time to get used to the church services in Wisconsin, because even though the format is almost exactly the same, the song leaders here are constantly choosing hymns that got skipped over in Rosedale. *I would say my sight reading is getting better, but I think what’s really saved me is my habit of always sitting next to Kevin Neudorf in church. He’s my age but has lived here his whole life, and he’s a strong singer, like you.*

Jonathan ignores the little clenching in his heart that someone else has taken Jonathan’s place beside Seth in church, and deliberately avoids turning that fact over in his mind to find what might lie beneath it.

Jonathan writes back, and soon the letters come so regularly Jonathan could base a calendar system on them if he had a mind to.

The weekend before Sebastian leaves for Princeton, they have one last hurrah at Scandals. Jonathan brings a kissing orange for the occasion, but this time the game has a twist: Sebastian holds onto the orange all night, holding it out to whomever he wants to kiss, but never relinquishing it. Naturally, Sebastian makes out with half the bar, including a session with Dave that has Jonathan wishing it wasn’t against etiquette to jerk off in the middle of the dance floor. He doesn’t end the night frustrated, though. When it’s time to leave the bar, Sebastian hands Jonathan the orange and announces Jonathan is coming home with him. This time, Jonathan texts Mark a warning that he won’t be back until sunrise. It’s the first time he and Sebastian have fooled around in an actual bed since May, and it feels weightier than it should—perhaps because it’s Sebastian’s bed and not some stranger’s; perhaps because they have all night; perhaps because Jonathan will miss Sebastian more than he wants to admit.

“I’ll miss this,” Sebastian says in one of the lulls. Jonathan has his cheek pressed to Sebastian’s shoulder; Sebastian’s arm is wrapped around his waist.

Jonathan tries to make a joke out of it. “The sex, or the cuddling?”

Sebastian doesn’t laugh. “The cuddling, of course. I can screw anybody.”

In the predawn, as Jonathan gets dressed to return to the farm, emotions press against his throat. There’s something he has to say to Sebastian, but he can’t quite figure out what it’s supposed to be. It’s not *I love you;* Jonathan does, but not in the way it’s usually meant when two people get naked together. The words come to him when he leans over and kisses Sebastian’s forehead. “Thank you.”

“For a good lay?”

“For everything, you jerk,” Jonathan says with a smile.

Sebastian pulls Jonathan to his lips. It’s a kiss that makes Jonathan hate leaving even more. “You’re welcome,” Sebastian says smugly when Jonathan finally pulls away. It’s cocky and irritating. It’s also sort of perfect. Jonathan doesn’t want it any other way.

* *

Classes start in September. Jonathan meets with the admissions counselor to find out what mix of credits he’ll need if he wants to transfer to a four-year institution after two years at technical school. He takes his vet tech classes he talked about with his dad, but he also squeezes an English class into his schedule. He downloads most of the books he has to read on to his phone so that Sarah and his family are none the wiser.
What Jonathan doesn’t hide are his clothes. He’s gotten a few more hand-me-downs from Carlene’s brother and bought an extra pair of jeans at the Farm & Fleet store, and that’s how he usually dresses when he heads to campus. His parents give him looks of chagrin at breakfast every morning, but he’d rather have that than people on campus asking him a million annoying questions about Mennonites, the way they do Sarah. As the weather gets cooler, he sometimes compromises and wears one of his homemade shirts over a T-shirt. Sarah likes to tell him, “That combination is an abomination!” but since she bursts out laughing every time she says it, it doesn’t worry him too much.

Jonathan’s still getting letters from Seth, every Thursday like clockwork. He tells Dave about them, because he can’t help himself. He feels so happy every time he gets one—because now he knows that forgiveness is truly possible, that reconciliation isn’t just a pie-in-the-sky thing the pastors preach. It’s a real, honest-to-goodness fruit of the Holy Spirit. He has to share that joy with somebody.

It backfires. Dave thinks that writing to Seth on a regular basis is a terrible idea.

But Dave also admits he’s never had a relationship like the one Jonathan had with Seth.

“I’ve known him almost my whole life, Dave. I can’t just forget he exists.”

“There’s a difference between acknowledging that someone exists and writing love letters to them every week.”

“They’re not love letters.”

“You keep telling yourself that. Just like I used to keep telling myself that I didn’t have the hots for Kurt Hummel.”

“Wait. Blaine Anderson’s fiancé? You know him?”

“Of course. We went to the same school.”

It takes several lunches for Dave to tell Jonathan the entire sordid story, by the end of which it becomes clear to Jonathan why Dave is so squeamish about serious dating. He would be, too, in the same situation. He gets it, though. It’s not always easy to tell the difference between love and hate. He was pretty close to hating Seth this summer.

He has lunch with Dave often, but with the commute and a homework load that’s heavier than in high school, Jonathan doesn’t get to Scandals as much as he did in the summer. He’s mostly okay with that, though. He’s pretty sure if he went to Scandals alone with Dave, he’d end up hitting on him, and that’s not a good idea. Dave deserves someone who will take him home and introduce him to their family, not a closet case who’s still terrified of getting discovered. Someone who has a clear vision for his life the way Dave does, not some kid who’s muddling his way between two universes. Someone who’s not writing weekly letters to his married ex-boyfriend and secretly hoping to reconnect with him somehow again.

Jonathan should probably take a sabbatical from dating altogether, the way Dave did in his first year of college.

“Tell me more about this no-relationships thing you did last year,” Jonathan says over lunch one day. “Would you recommend it?”

“I guess it depends on a person’s circumstances.”
“What about for me?”

Dave’s eyes go wide. It’s hard to tell whether it’s from enthusiasm, shock, or disapproval. “That’s really something only you can decide, Jonathan. I don’t live inside your head.”

“Yeah, but you know me.”

“Which is even more reason I can’t tell you what to do. Friends tend to have biases that make them see things less objectively.”

“You’re starting to talk like your psychology textbook.”

Dave laughs. “Yeah, maybe.”

Jonathan toes Dave under the table. “Okay, just tell me one thing. Do you feel like you’re better off for taking a break?”

“Yeah, but that doesn’t mean it’s right for everybody—”

“Cool. That’s all I need to know.”

*

While Jonathan ponders embarks on his adventure in not dating anyone seriously—or rather, continuing it, since he and Seth have been technically broken up for more than a year now—Dave moves in the opposite direction, going on repeat dates with a few of the same guys for the first time since Jonathan’s known him. Jonathan feels slightly jealous when Dave tells him about the dinners and baseball games and movies, partly because Jonathan’s never been on a date, but mostly because he worries that Dave will fall for one of these guys sooner or later.

Jonathan asks God to help him be a better friend; love does not envy. He tells himself that there are too many things about him and Dave that wouldn’t work together—though most times he’s at a loss to list anything other than the excess of American flags in Dave’s bedroom. And Jonathan’s not even sure now how bad that is. Loving one country doesn’t mean you have to love it at the expense of others. And what’s so bad about loving this one? His ancestors faced discrimination in Europe; this one gave them freedom to be who they felt called to be.

Well, there are the model airplanes, too. It would be awkward to make out under tools of war.

“Tell me about this Dave guy,” Sarah says one gorgeous Indian summer afternoon as they drive home. Jonathan had succeeded in keeping them apart up until today, but at lunch she surprised him by getting out of one of her classes early and practically tripping over him and Dave as they ate on the lawn. They made small talk for a couple minutes before Sarah ran off to get a library book before her next class.

Jonathan was hoping Sarah had forgotten about it. “What do you want to know?”

“I don’t know. He looked familiar.”

Jonathan knows exactly where Sarah’s seen Dave before. It was that day they visited campus together and they drove by the practice field. “We’ve been in classes for a month already. Maybe you ran into him on campus somewhere?”

“Maybe. I feel like it wasn’t that recent, though.”
Jonathan shrugs. “He’s in his second year of classes. Maybe you ran into him on one of your visits last semester.”

“I guess it could have been that. Are you taking a class together?”

Fudge. “Um … we met in the library.” Technically it’s true. Jonathan *has* met up with Dave in the library before.

“How?”

Wow, *she’s persistent.* “What is this, Sarah? Twenty questions?”

“No. I’m just curious. I haven’t made many friends in my program yet. I thought maybe you could give me some tips.”

“Oh.” *Not dressing like a Mennonite might help.* “Look for people who do well in class and ask them to study with you.”

“Is that what you did? Walked up to him in the library and just asked him to study with you?”

No. His friend walked up to me in a gay bar and the rest was history. “We shared a table. We started talking. That’s all.”

“I don’t know. You two looked pretty tight for only knowing each other a couple weeks.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Just that there must be more to it than just being nice to someone. You’ve got to find the right person to be nice to.”

“Well, keep being nice to everyone, and eventually you’ll find someone you click with.”

Sarah sighs. “I suppose.”

*

Sarah gets baptized in November with several other of the young adults. Laura Dyck, who’s still in high school, is among them. The oldest is Alvin’s age, twenty-three. Jonathan remembers Seth’s baptism viscerally: the tension that wound through his body as Seth answered each of the baptismal questions in its turn, the vise that tightened on his heart when the last answer was given in the affirmative. But he also remembers the way Seth’s shoulders relaxed when the deacon held the small baptismal pitcher over Seth’s head and poured out his share. The relief in Seth’s posture was almost palpable—at least to Jonathan, who knew the terrain of Seth’s body intimately, had felt it in every state from despair to ecstasy. He remembers how Seth glowed for days afterward, so beautiful that it pained Jonathan not to touch him.

He remembers how that glow faded after they finally touched again.

*

When Sebastian comes home for Christmas, they hook up again. “You really need to get a boyfriend,” Sebastian says.

“No, I don’t. *You* don’t have one.” Jonathan realizes after he says it that he doesn’t actually know that. They’ve been in touch through email and text throughout the semester, but it’s been sporadic lately with term papers and exams and making travel plans. “Do you?”

“How do you know what I want?”

“You’re still writing to Seth, aren’t you?”

Jonathan wishes he weren’t naked right now. It would be immature to pull the covers over his face and pretend he was invisible. He goes for something only slightly less immature by turning his face to the ceiling and saying, “Maybe.”

It’s not maybe. He gets his letters from Seth on Thursday—Friday if there’s a holiday or the whether is slow. He sends his own letter each Saturday. Seth mentions his new friend Kevin Neudorf entirely too often, but not as much as often as he mentions Martha. It’s okay. Jonathan’s glad Seth’s found some friends in his new home. And he’s glad they still have a connection to each other, after everything. It proves the love Jonathan felt from Seth wasn’t all in his head.

“I keep telling you, you have to let that guy go. First loves are great, but they don’t last forever.”

“How would you know?”

“I know a lot of things. I go to Princeton.”

“If my father was here, he’d tell you that academic knowledge doesn’t make up for life experience.”

Sebastian guffaws. The corners of his eyes squint into crow’s feet. He’s lovely when he smiles. “If your father were here, his opinions about academic knowledge would be the least of our worries.”

* 

In his second semester, Jonathan signs up for Introduction to Political Science. He needs social sciences credits to transfer, and his academic counselor thinks it would be good for him to have an understanding of how the government and public policy works. “For most of the careers you’re interested in, you need to have at least a passing familiarity with this stuff. Working in parks, conservation, scientific research—you’re going to come up against public policy sooner or later.”

He likes the class. He’s learning more than he has in any of his other classes, though that’s no surprise since his knowledge going into it started at absolute zero. He has to look up a lot of terms on his phone and sometimes when the professor makes a statement that everybody else in the class nods along with as if it’s plain as day, he has to go up afterward and ask what the heck they were talking about.

And then he gets caught.

He gets home from his Wednesday shift at the gas station to find his father sitting at the kitchen table, his political science textbook splayed open, a look of disgust on his father’s face. His father is never up this late unless the cows are giving birth. None of them are due to, and if they were, he’d be outside, not in the kitchen.

He pushes the book toward Jonathan. “Your mother was looking for a calculator to use and found this in your backpack. Why do you have it?”

“It’s one of my textbooks.” Jonathan’s not trying to be a smart aleck. He’s simply too shocked to come up with anything else.
“When you said you wanted to apply to school, we went over what classes were appropriate and which were not. I don’t remember political science even being part of the conversation.”

“It wasn’t. I decided on that later.” Jonathan’s hands start to shake. He’s nervous, but not just that. He’s angry. He’s the one paying for his tuition. He’s the one putting in the work. He’s the one who has to live with the consequences of the decisions he makes or doesn’t make have on his own future. He is the steward of his own life.

His father nods his head. “Sit down.” It’s not a request. It’s a command.

Jonathan sits.

“Was there anything you didn’t understand about the guidance I gave you?”

“No.”

“So you willfully disobeyed me?”

“Yes.”

“And then you snuck around about it.”

“Yes.”

“Why? What’s so important about political science that it’s worth deceiving your parents, being a poor role model for your siblings, and betraying the memory of the martyrs who died for the right to live apart from the world?”

Jonathan grips the sides of his chair to keep himself from punching the table. His father’s going to bring Dirk Willems and Felix Manz into this? “Is that what my life is? A debt to others, with no responsibility for myself?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I never asked the martyrs to die on my behalf.” Jonathan knows it’s a mistake as soon as he says it, but it’s too late.

His father slams his hand against the table. “If they hadn’t died, you wouldn’t be here today. You wouldn’t have this family or this faith. You’d be a slave to the Catholic Church and know nothing about Christ.”

Jonathan takes a deep breath. “So why did Christ die? Was it so I’d never be exposed to new ideas, so I’d be closed off to the world around me, so that I’d look down upon everyone who doesn’t fit into the Rosedale mold? Whatever happened to ‘Judge not, that ye be not judged’? Where in the Sermon on the Mount does Christ say I should be afraid to learn?”

His father’s eyes are like those of an agitated bull. Pure fire. “You’re trying to provoke me.”

“I’m not. I’m trying to understand. Because I don’t. I can’t figure out what’s so terrible about taking a different path than the one you took. God made me different from you.”

“It’s not only my path. It’s the path all who follow Christ are expected to take.”

“Expected by whom? By Christ or by man? Because I’ve met Christians at school who’ve never heard it’s a sin to study or wear T-shirts or play the pipe organ.”
“And that’s exactly why it’s dangerous to stray. The world is full of wrong ideas.”

“So is Rosedale.”

“Enough!” His father’s hand comes down on the table once again. Jonathan hears Marilou stir upstairs, her small voice asking Daddy?, one of the twins hushing her quiet. “I won’t argue with you about God. Are you going to live by the rules of this family or not?”

“I already do. I milk the cows. I take care of Marilou. I go to church every Sunday. I cut the firewood. I fix the tractors.”

“I’m not asking about the letter of the law. I’m asking about the spirit.”

“You mean, am I going to drop my political science class?”

“Among other things, yes. If you have enough time and money to take political science, you clearly don’t need to learn anything more about biology. You’ll stop going to school at the end of this semester.”

Jonathan realizes he’s still holding onto the sides of his chair. He loosens his grip. He knows his answer, and he understands what the consequences will probably be. “No.”

“And if I have the bishop talk to you? If it stands in the way of your baptism?”

“No.”

His father’s face is red. “If you’re not willing to live by the rules of this family, and you’re not willing to submit to the Rules & Discipline, do you think it’s right for you to continue to live as part of this family?”

“That’s for you and mom to decide.” Instead of the terror Jonathan expects to feel on uttering the words, a strange feeling of lightness washes through him—warmth too, and joy. It’s not unlike the sensation Jonathan used to have when lying along the creek, watching Seth’s face as he slept. Or the sense of safety he feels when Dave reels him in for a hug.

But it’s deeper than that. It flows through his body, but also seems to move beyond it, enveloping him in a cloud of light. He thinks this might be what people mean when they talk about having the companionship of the Holy Spirit.

He carries that feeling with him over the next few weeks when his parents tell him he has to move out, when Carlene offers him her brother’s old room in exchange for cheap rent and some help with childcare, when Marilou chases him out to his truck when he gets ready to leave for the final time as a resident of Rosedale. She’s plucked one of the prized, winter-blooming Christmas roses from their mother’s garden bed and hands it to him. Its nectarine-pink petals are sunshine in the gray winter light. He says a quick prayer that she doesn’t get in trouble for picking it, then tucks it into the passenger seat in hopes that no one looking out the window will see. “Will you still come over and read to me?”

“Yes,” he says. He’s not being banished. His parents have made that much clear. And he loves his family. Leaving them doesn’t change that.

He kneels into the frozen dirt to hug her. From this position, she’s almost as tall as he is now.

The others come out to wave him off as he leaves, as if he’s not being kicked out, but is off for some grand adventure. Well, half that equation is true.
Jonathan writes to Seth with his new address in a three-bedroom quad apartment closer to Lima than it is to Rosedale, but still close enough to the middle of nowhere for the rent to be cheap when it’s split among three adults. Seth already knew he was in school; now Jonathan tells him the full extent of it—or almost the full extent. He tells Seth that he’s pursuing a degree. He doesn’t tell Seth that it looks less likely every day that he’ll ever get baptized, at least in a Mennonite church.

(Perhaps one day, when the wound’s not so raw, Jonathan will ask Sebastian to introduce him to the Episcopalians.)

It’s like sitting on pins and needles, waiting for Seth’s reply. Jonathan’s more distracted than usual. He drops a couple of the dishes while washing them. Carlene jokes that if he’s breaking the dishes on purpose in hopes he’ll get out of dish duty permanently, he has another thing coming. Jonathan also has cooking duty, even though he’s never done much more than boil water in his life. He makes macaroni and cheese from a box and boils the noodles too long. Nevaeh thinks it tastes good anyway.

On Monday over lunch, Jonathan complains to Dave about his own ineptitude in the domestic arts. “Maybe I should go back to Rosedale and get married,” he says, only half joking. “My upbringing didn’t really prepare me to take care of myself.”

“It’s all stuff you can learn,” Dave says. He has this way of talking with food still in his mouth, but it’s never gross because he’ll pocket whatever he’s working on into his cheek like a chipmunk. It’s kind of adorable, actually. “If you can pass your chemistry lab, you can learn how to cook.”

“The semester’s not over. I might not pass.”
Dave rolls his eyes. “You’ve been getting all A’s so far. I’m pretty sure you’re going to pass.”

They make a regular date-not-date for Dave to come over and teach Jonathan how to cook. Burgers, tacos, spaghetti and meatballs, tuna casserole, quesadillas, pork chops, sweet potato fries, and meatloaf. The meatloaf is nothing like Jonathan’s mom’s, but it’s good in its own way.

On Sundays he drives out to Rosedale and has dinner with his family after church. Sometimes he even joins them for church, dressed in the clothes his mother sewed for him even though they’re starting to get too tight. Singing the hymns with the rest of the congregation makes them feel like there’s still some sort of place for him here, even if it’s hard to find.

His parents don’t like that he’s living with a woman, even though he’s explained to them a thousand times that it’s not like that. Unless he also explains to them that he’s gay, they won’t ever believe him. Given what they understand about homosexuality, probably that wouldn’t help. So, per his parents’ request, he doesn’t talk about Carlene or her mother at the dinner table. They don’t like him talking about school, either, so mostly he doesn’t speak at all except to ask about the cows. It’s not that different from before.

Dave also teaches Jonathan how to do the laundry after he accidentally shrinks half of his shirts.

“Though, to be honest, they look better on you now that they’ve shrunk,” Dave says, his eyes skimming over Jonathan’s torso. They’re in basement of the apartment building, where the quarter-operated washing machines are kept. No one else is down here. Jonathan’s pretty sure if he looked back at Dave the same way and stepped a little closer, Dave’s mouth would be on his in no time. The thought makes Jonathan’s heart beat almost out of his chest.

But Jonathan doesn’t follow his heart. Instead, he turns back to the clothes they’ve been sorting and rolls his eyes with a saucy, “Oh, shut up,” and Dave quietly chuckles.

It’s easier this way. Jonathan and Dave have been not-dating so long now that Jonathan’s afraid of anything changing. Also, because the things that Seth has written lately have pulled his heart in another direction.

Seth was much more understanding about the whole college thing than Jonathan expected him to be. So understanding, in fact, that Jonathan kind of fell in love all over again:

_I think you’re doing the right thing. You were always so smart. I don’t think God wants us to squander those kinds of gifts. Whenever I have a problem with one of the dogs, I think about the classes you are taking and how good it would be if you lived here. When we were younger, I used to dream about us living next door to each other and being in business together. I sometimes still wish it could happen. I do love Martha, but I miss your companionship. I used to think the way I felt about you was worldly. But being apart from you and still caring for you even though we never see or touch, I know there’s nothing worldly about it. I can no longer believe that God condemns the way I feel about you._

Jonathan writes to Seth and tells him to read the story of King David and Jonathan, son of Saul, in the Bible. He daydreams about moving to Wisconsin and figuring out a way to share Seth with Martha. It gives Jonathan knots in his stomach to think about Seth having sex with Martha, but maybe that’s because Jonathan simply isn’t attracted to women’s bodies in that way. He never felt bad watching Sebastian make out with other guys. In fact, it turned him on. If he’s in love with Seth, shouldn’t he be even more willing to share? King David was married to dozens of women, but was Prince Jonathan jealous? _Love does not envy. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things. Love never fails._
Martha gets pregnant again. Jonathan refuses to have a tantrum about it. Seth wants children, and Jonathan can’t give him any. *Love endures all things.* He sends a congratulatory card to both of them.

Martha has another miscarriage. Jonathan fights back tears when he gets the letter, and he’s pretty sure it’s because he’s sad. If relief is part of what he’s feeling, he doesn’t let it come to the surface. *Love does not rejoice in iniquity.*

He’s never called Seth in Wisconsin before, always afraid that Martha would answer the phone. Tonight, Jonathan calls Seth and hears his voice for the first time since he left Rosedale, and listens to him cry.
For the summer, Jonathan gets an internship surveying wildlife and wetlands around Superior National Forest in Minnesota. The hourly rate isn’t as much as he got last summer mowing baseball fields, but if he sticks through with it for the whole season, he’ll get scholarship money for next year. Plus, the internship is based in the middle of nowhere, so it includes housing. Dave has relatives in Duluth he wants to visit, so they decide to road-trip it out there together. It’s while they’re at Scandals one Saturday afternoon to plan their route to sleep, their highway atlas spread open to Wisconsin, that Jonathan notices how close they’ll be going through the Wisconsin Dells, which isn’t far from Seth’s town.

“Do you think we could…?” Jonathan can’t finish the sentence, because Dave is already giving him that look he reserves for when someone says something truly inappropriate. Jonathan has only ever seen Dave give Sebastian that look before, and it’s always been funny then. It’s not now. It feels weird to be on the receiving end of Dave’s disapproval.

“Please don’t tell me that the words I think are about to come out of your mouth, are about to come out of your mouth.”

“That depends what words you think are about to come out of my mouth.”

“You want to visit your ex.”

“He’s more than my ex.”

Dave sets down his beer. “So, remember that little story I told you about my obsession with Kurt Hummel? Did things turn out so well when I showed up at his school in a gorilla costume with a bunch of balloons?”

“That’s different. Seth and I are friends.”

“No, it’s not. You’re holding on to something in the past because you’re too afraid to deal with the present.”

Something snaps in Jonathan. The weight of all the changes he’s borne over the last year is too much to carry alone. “I’m afraid of the present? Me? I left my family, I left my home, I left everything I know so I could have a future. Do you see me running away from learning how to cook or clean or do a million other things I’d never have to learn if I’d stayed in Rosedale? Do you?”

The bar seems to go quiet around them. Even the clack of the wooden balls on the pool table seems somehow muffled. Dave’s answer is equally hushed. “No. But that’s not what I meant.”

“Then what did you mean?”

Dave doesn’t look at Jonathan. He stares at his beer bottle the way a green-backed heron watches the water: stock still, waiting.

That Dave can be so stolid at a moment like this irritates Jonathan. Dave’s acting just like a Mennonite. Jonathan pokes Dave’s elbow, but his voice is gentle this time. He really wants to know. “What did you mean?”

“Forget about it. I was being an asshole.” Dave sips his beer. He looks up at the television screen
behind the bar. A baseball game is playing. He becomes suddenly interested in it. “What’s the score?” he says to the bartender, and the conversation is over.

Later that evening, Dave texts him: *Sorry I was so crabby today. We can swing by to visit your friend if you want.*

Jonathan vacillates between writing Seth and calling. They’ve talked on the phone a couple times since the miscarriage, but more often than not when Jonathan calls, it’s Martha who answers, and that’s always weird. He has to make small talk with her like he actually cares, and still he doesn’t get to Seth because more often than not he’s outside working. He hates asking for Seth to call him back, because they have to pay long-distance with their landline, and they’re poor enough as it is. Besides, there are only so many things Jonathan can say when Seth’s wife’s around, and fewer things that Seth can say to him.

So Jonathan writes. It’s less awkward, and it won’t put Seth on the spot.

*Of course you can come visit,* Seth writes back. *I long to see you again.*

*

Jonathan doesn’t let himself daydream about the visit. There are too many possibilities for how it could go. They could have zwieback and tea, with Martha hovering over them so close that they never get to say much of anything. Or Martha could be gone, running errands or working in her father’s office. Or perhaps she’ll be home but not close, hovering on the edge of Jonathan’s consciousness like she always does now when he thinks of Seth.

“Have you ever thought he might actually love his wife?” Dave says when they cross the state line into Wisconsin. They’re taking his car, and he’s at the driver’s wheel.

“I’m sure he does, in his own way. That’s what Christians do—love people.” Jonathan swallows heavily. “Besides, he’s said he does.”

“That he’s in love with her?”

“No. That he *loves* her. It’s different.”

“He loves his wife, but you’re going to go visit him and hope for … what?”

“I don’t know. I just … I need to see him. Things didn’t end right between us.”

“And that’s what you want to do? End things right?”

Of course not. That’s the last thing Jonathan wants. His friendship with Seth is his only connection to who he used to be. He doesn’t want to lose everything he once was. “Maybe.”

“I just …”

Jonathan waits for Dave to start up again, but several seconds pass, and then what feels like a whole minute. Jonathan doesn’t say anything. He knows it can be hard for Dave to put words together sometimes. Hell, it’s hard for Jonathan, especially when it’s about the stuff that goes on inside him. It’s one thing to have feelings; it’s another thing entirely to name them. As desperate as Jonathan is for some sort of reassurance that the past couple years of his life haven’t been based on some crazy misunderstanding, it wouldn’t be fair to try to drag the words out of Dave.

Jonathan watches the countryside roll by. The weeds on the side of the interstate are dried out,
though he can identify some of them by the shapes of their spent seedheads. Leafless staghorn sumacs sprawl out like the antlers of twenty-point point bucks, the clusters of dried red berries at their tips like tongues of flame.

They pass one green mile marker, and then another. A red tail hawk sits at the top of a highway sign up ahead. Jonathan points without saying anything.

“Gorgeous,” Dave says, and smiles.

Jonathan finds himself smiling, too, in spite of himself. It’s hard to stay agitated when Dave’s not.

But then Dave’s smile turns into something more contained and pensive.

“I don’t want to see you get hurt again, Jonathan. If you start things up with him again, there’s no way it’s not going to be messy.”

Jonathan chews on that thought. “Do you think it’s possible to be in love with more than one person at the same time?”

“Do you mean, do you think it’s possible for Seth?”

“Let’s keep this conversation abstract.”

Dave gives a wry chuckle. “I don’t know. I’ve dated people and had some intense feelings going on for someone else at the same time. But… I haven’t actually been in love with anyone I’ve dated. So I don’t know.”

Jonathan turns toward Dave. “You’ve never been in love?”

“I didn’t say that.” Dave keeps his eyes on the road, his left hand on the steering wheel and his right fiddling with the tab in his coffee cup lid. “Jonathan, there’s a whole wide world of men out there who would kill to be with someone like you. I’d hate to see you spend your whole life getting your heart broken by this jackoff. You deserve better.”

“He’s not a—”

“Yeah, I know. I can’t help feeling that way about him, anyway.” The tab breaks off from Dave twisting it so hard. Dave tosses it into the footwell switches to tapping a vague drumbeat on the lid instead.

Jonathan hates to see his friend worked up so much at his expense. He reaches out and puts his hand on the back of Dave’s. Dave’s fingers still, the nervous energy draining from them almost instantly.

“I’m sorry, Jonathan. It’s not easy for me to like him.”

“You have nothing to be sorry for.”

*

Dave found an online deal for a double room at one of the cheaper resort hotels in the Wisconsin Dells, which includes unlimited use of the attached waterpark. It’s early afternoon when they get in—they left before sunrise—and Jonathan’s steps into the bathroom to take a quick shower and change into some of his plainer clothes. He still wears his shirts from Rosedale every once in a while even in Lima, but this is the first time he’s worn broadfall pants and suspenders outside of
church since moving out of his parents house. They don’t feel quite right on him anymore—he must still be growing—but he wants to dress himself the way that Seth is used to.

Dave’s wearing nothing but flip-flops and a pair of American flag swimshorts when Jonathan steps out of the bathroom. Jonathan can’t help but stare. Dave’s got more chest hair between his nipples than Sebastian and Seth have on their whole torsos combined. Jonathan wonders what it would feel like tangled around his fingers.

Dave quickly grabs a red T-shirt from his duffle bag to cover himself up. “Sorry. I thought you were going to announce yourself.”

“I didn’t mean to startle you.”

Dave shrugs as he pokes his head out of the T-shirts neck hole. “No biggie. I’m sure you’ve seen plenty of shirtless guys before.”

Yeah, but not you.

Dave gazes at Jonathan so long, Jonathan wonders if he said what he was thinking out loud. Then he remembers his own clothes. “Is it … too much?” Jonathan says.

Dave shakes his head. “Nah. You look good. You’re kind of cute in suspenders. Seth will have a hard time resisting you, if that’s your goal.”

“That’s not…” Jonathan doesn’t finish his sentence. He honestly doesn’t know what his goal is.

Dave looks at the floor. “Sorry again about what I said in the car. I know he means a lot to you.”

Jonathan wants to step over to where Dave’s sitting and rest his hand on that broad shoulder. He wants to settle next to him onto the bed and say, You do, too. But there’s a gulf between them that he just doesn’t know how to cross—is scared to, if he’s honest with himself.
A woman answers the door. Jonathan’s prepared himself for this by looking at Martha’s and Seth’s wedding photos on Edna’s Facebook feed. The woman looks like those pictures, with the same small nose and almond eyes, the same scattering of freckles across her face, and the same white prayer cap that’s less transparent than the ones women wear in Rosedale. Her blue dress is a simpler design, as well, and made of solid, unpatterned cloth—no tiny calico flowers to make it stand out.

What Jonathan hasn’t prepared himself for is the small girl she’s carrying on her hip, or the other one clinging to her skirt, peering at him from behind the safety imparted by the curtain of fabric. They both have hair the color of Seth’s sticking out from under their prayer caps.


“Martha Groening,” she says, her voice tight. “You’re Jonathan Unruh. I remember your face from the engagement party. Seth said you were coming.”

“Is he—?”

“He’s down by the pond,” she says, pointing to a dirt path that winds downhill, its destination obscured by a cluster of Russian olive trees. “Working on a duck pen. I told him I’d send you down when you arrived.”

“Oh. Okay.” Jonathan can’t seem to make himself move. The girl behind Martha’s skirt is getting braver now. She inches out so that her full face is visible to Jonathan. Her face is like Martha’s. Jonathan wonders where she came from. She couldn’t have popped out of Martha’s womb fully
formed like that in the time since Jonathan last received word from Seth. The baby, neither, who must be at least six months old. Another possibility occurs to him. “Are these … your nieces?”

Martha’s eyebrows shoot up. “Seth didn’t tell you?”

Jonathan can barely get out a “Tell me what?” before she continues.

“No, I suppose not, it only happened a few nights ago. These are our foster daughters, Kynleigh and Brayden. Their mother’s in the prison east of here. For twenty years.”

“Oh. Um …” Jonathan feels like an idiot. There are foster families in the congregation back in Rosedale, and one of his cousins in Lancaster County adopted three children from the women’s prison in Philadelphia. That should have been his first thought. “Congratulations.”

Martha shrugs. “It’s a blessing to be able to help our neighbors in need.” The baby gurgles, and Martha looks down at her like she just shit a rainbow. Jonathan seems to disappear completely from Martha’s view, even though he’s right in front of her.

“I guess I’ll go find Seth.”

Martha’s eyes refocus on him, like a hawk honing in on its prey. “Wait a minute. Let me send a snack down with you.” She invites him into the house and sets the baby in a hamper. The older girl follows her as she zips around the kitchen, packing scones into a plastic tub and filling a Thermos with coffee. “Do you take cream, no sugar? That’s how Seth prefers it, but I’m sure he’ll live this once with sugar if you’d prefer it.”

That’s not what Jonathan remembers. Seth always mixed in at least two teaspoonfuls of sugar for every cup he drank. “That’s fine,” Jonathan says.

She puts the thermos and container in a cloth grocery bag and hands it to Jonathan at the front door. He steps back onto the porch and turns to leave.

“Jonathan,” she says sharply.

“Yes?” He faces her. Her eyes are still those of a raptor.

“Don’t make this harder on him than it already is. He’s made his choice.” She shuts the door before Jonathan can answer.
Jonathan almost gets back into the car after that interaction. Dave was right. Jonathan shouldn’t have come here.

But then he hears Seth’s voice on the wind, singing a hymn out of tune:

*Abide with me, fast falls the eventide;*
*The darkness deepens, Lord, with me abide;*
*When other helpers fail and comforts flee,*
*Help of the helpless, O abide with me.*

Jonathan walks toward the song. It’s accompanied by the arhythmic snare of a drill motor, whirring on and then off in no relation to the notes Seth sings. Still, it’s beautiful, in all it’s cacophony. It sounds like an honest prayer. As Jonathan crosses through the Russian olives, Seth’s head becomes visible above the brush, glinting gold like sunlight breaking through clouds.

*I need Thy presence every passing hour.*

Jonathan doesn’t realize he’s singing too until Seth looks up with that familiar grin. “Jonathan?” He drops his drill to the ground.

The grin is familiar, but not the face. It’s older. Leaner. Windworn like the sandstone cliffs that dot this countryside.
So much of *his* Seth has faded away.

Jonathan tries to answer, but his throat is stopped up.

“Jonathan?” Seth’s voice is fraught now, unsure.

“Yes,” Jonathan squeaks out. “It’s me.”

Jonathan’s not sure how he ended up here, his back against the wall of a half-built duck pen, his shirt half-unbuttoned, a stranger’s hands on his chest. Just a moment ago, it wasn’t a stranger. It was Seth, his left cheek twitching in nervous joy, his *I love you* familiar in Jonathan’s ear. But the scratchy growth against his chin and upper lip are rougher, abrading Jonathan’s skin. And the kiss and touch don’t match Jonathan’s memories of Seth’s clumsy exuberance. There’s experience in them.

Jonathan pushes the stranger away. “Stop.”

The stranger looks at Jonathan, a wounded look in his eyes. He becomes Seth again. Jonathan is all too familiar with Seth’s sadness. “Did I do something wrong?”

“You’ve been with someone else, haven’t you?” Jonathan realizes how ridiculous the words sound. Of course Seth has been with someone else. He’s a married man, for goodness’ sake. But that’s not what Jonathan means. The way Seth was touching him wouldn’t have been learned from a good Mennonite girl.

“And you haven’t?”

The words stab. But they’re not fair. Jonathan was the one left behind. He never would have looked for anyone else if Seth had stayed with him. Jonathan had believed what the church with all his heart: your first is your only. Once two bodies have united, nothing can come between them except death.

Seth broke everything.

What was Jonathan supposed to do? Spend his life pining away?

*Oh. But that’s exactly what I’ve been doing.*

“I was faithful to you, Seth. You’re the one who cheated on me with Martha.”

“It’s not … No.” Seth steps back, almost tripping on his tool crate. His cheek twitches faster. “It’s not the same thing. What you and I had wasn’t a marriage.”

“It was a *covenant*, Seth. Like Jonathan and King David. I promised you always. I gave everything to you. And you left me.” Jonathan’s voice shakes his lungs. He might be shouting. Loud enough to hear at the top of the hill? He almost doesn’t care. *Love does not parade itself.* He takes a deep breath. Whatever his reason was for coming here, it wasn’t to humiliate Martha.

“I know that story, Jonathan. I knew it before you wrote me about it. I knew it when I still lived in Rosedale. And you know what? King David and Jonathan might have been in love, and maybe God was fine with it. But that didn’t stop King David from having to do his duty to the church. Jonathan didn’t get in the way when King David had to get married. When David had to leave the country, Jonathan didn’t stop him. He helped him go.”

Jonathan stares at Seth. He’s right of course. Let go. Give up. Don’t resist. That’s what the Bible is all about, isn’t it? *Love suffers long.*
Jonathan’s tired of suffering.

He sinks his back to the pen wall, slides to the ground. “You’ll never leave her, will you?”

“You know I can’t. If I divorced her, she would never be allowed to remarry. I’ll have ruined her life. Besides, she’ll be a good mother.” Seth kneels down in front of Jonathan and reaches for his hand. Jonathan let him take it. Seth’s hand feels different than it used to. The calluses are rougher, and there are more of them. “That doesn’t mean I don’t love you. If you moved here, we could—”


Seth flinches as if he’s just been punched in the face. But he doesn’t deny it.

“You still don’t think it’s sex, do you? If you keep your clothes on, you still think it doesn’t count.”

Seth looks down at the ground. “It can’t, Jonathan. I can’t be an adulterer. God would never forgive me.” He looks so helpless and broken, Jonathan can’t help but feel tender toward him.

Jonathan pulls Seth close. He kisses his sweaty, sandy hair the way his mother used to kiss him when he was sick with a fever. “God can forgive you, Seth. It’s the church that won’t.”

* 

They eat the scones in silence. Jonathan helps Seth with the duck pen. It’s the least he can do, having come this far.

“Are you happy, Seth?” Jonathan says when the last panel is in.

“With the way the duck pen turned out? I think so. The real test will be when I put the ducks in it.”

Jonathan can’t help but smile. He forgot how literal-minded Seth could be sometimes. “I meant with your life.”

Seth picks up his trill and sets it inside his tool box. “I don’t think about it much. But I suppose so. I’m happier than I was in Rosedale.”

Jonathan feels a twinge in his gut. Resentment that Seth could be happier without him than with him. Jonathan pushes it away. Love is not self-seeking.


Seth shrugs. “The rules are stricter. There’s guidance for everything, even what color shoelaces we’re allowed to wear. I don’t have to worry that I’m doing things wrong by accident.”

Jonathan bites his tongue about Seth fooling around with other guys. He’s certain this community’s Rules & Discipline have strictures on “any activity outside of marriage which involves sexual manipulation of or by another person,” just like Rosedale’s do. If Seth needs to believe what he’s doing falls within those strictures, it’s not Jonathan’s job to disabuse him.

“So I guess,” Seth says, “even when things are difficult, they’re easier. Does that make sense?”

“I think so.” Jonathan remembers how dizzying it was when he first really started to explore outside of Rosedale. He was overwhelmed by the cacophony of choices. Even now, he sometimes thinks he should just revert to wearing two colors of shirts so he doesn’t have to think about what to wear in the morning.
“I know you don’t want to hear it, Jonathan, but this is the only life I know and the only life I want. I can’t have it with you. Not the way you want it.”

“Then why did you ever kiss me in the first place?”

“Because I wanted that too. But I shouldn’t have, because I can’t have both. And I want this more.”

The words are a blade in Jonathan’s gut. He reminds himself that blades aren’t only for killing, but for surgery, too. Maybe these are the words Jonathan needs to excise the tumor of longing that’s been eating away at him for too long. “Do you regret the things we did?”

“I’ve repented of some of them.”

“That wasn’t what I asked.”

“No. I don’t.”

*

Dave is sound asleep when Jonathan gets back to the hotel. His breathing is soft and regular, slow like a creek after a dry spell. Jonathan gets ready for bed and doesn’t try very hard to be quiet. He needs Dave right now. He feels raw and topsy-turvy. He’s a milkweed pod turned inside-out, its insides drifting on the wind. Jonathan’s not much of a talker, but he needs to talk now. He’s not the same person he was yesterday. He needs Dave to help him figure out what that means.

He stares at his reflection in the mirror. He’s in red boxer-briefs and a white undershirt. His toothbrush is sticking out of his mouth, the paste foaming around his lips. He has déjà vu and realizes that he’s remembering his reflection from the bathroom in Carlene’s apartment as he got ready for bed last night. No, he thinks. I’m exactly the person I was yesterday.

But he’s not the same person he was two years ago when he fell in love with Seth; or twenty months ago, when Seth left Rosedale; or a year ago, when Seth broke his heart all over again. It took today to realize it.

Dave is still deep in sleep, making soft snores that are nothing like the strangling hippo noises his brother Mark sometimes makes in his sleep. They’re sweet and gentle, like a breeze through green grass. Jonathan wants to be closer to that sound.

He stands there for a moment, trying to make out the details of Dave’s face in the dark, but the blackout curtains are too successful at their job. He can see the outline of Dave’s body, though, rolled over toward the far side of the mattress. Jonathan has his own bed, but there’s space enough beside Dave.

There’s a story in the Gospel of John about a beggar who’s been blind since birth. One day, Jesus comes across him and decides to cure him. He digs a bit of dirt from the ground and spits into it, then rubs it on the man’s eyes. Suddenly, the man sees.

Jonathan’s often wondered how shocking that must have been to the beggar. How would his brain process visual information? How would he understand anything he was looking at? If he had never before seen the sky or the ground or a tree, had never learned how to discern what was near from what was far or tell a reflection from the thing it was mirroring, wouldn’t he feel crushed under the weight of his sudden sight?

Jonathan feels something like that now, looking at Dave.
Oh God.

Jonathan lifts the blanket and slips under it. The mattress shifts under his weight. He half-wishes he were weightless, invisible, so he could slip in undetected. The other half wants nothing more than for Dave to notice. But Dave just keeps breathing, steady as a rock, like the world didn’t turn upside-down today.

“Dave?” Jonathan knows it’s selfish, but he needs this. He’s needed it for … how long has it been now since they met? Eighteen months. Jonathan’s needed this for eighteen months. He needs it now, and he’ll need it tomorrow.

You’re holding on to something in the past because you’re too afraid to deal with the present, Dave said when they first planned this trip. Jonathan finally understands when he meant.

Dave stirs slightly, smacking his lips and groaning. Jonathan’s hopeful that he’ll turn over, but he doesn’t. His breathing evens out again.

“Dave?” Jonathan puts a hand on his shoulder this time, shakes him the way he used to shake Mark when he overslept.

“Jonathan?” Dave turns around, reaching out blindly. His fingers bump against Jonathan’s face. Dave pulls them back. “What’s going on?”

I’ve grown up. I’ve seen the light. It doesn’t hurt anymore. Or, well, it hurts. But not the way it did before. It’s like I’ve used a muscle I never knew I had. Now, it’s growing stronger. Instead, Jonathan leans forward and does the thing he’s dreamt of doing since that first Christmas at Scandals with the orange.

Not being able to see Dave’s face, he misses. His lips press against the side of Dave’s nose, not his mouth. Still, it’s close enough. Dave tilts his head. His breath is overwarm from sleep. Jonathan doesn’t care, especially not with the relieved little grunt Dave makes when Jonathan finds his mouth. Dave’s jaw relaxes, and Jonathan kisses into him harder until sweeter flavors float up: mint and saliva and flesh. He wraps one hand around the back of Dave’s head, the other around Dave’s waist, and pulls him as close as he can get him. Jonathan needs this, to get so close to someone that the boundaries blur, that every pleasure one of them feels becomes the pleasure of the other. Dave seems to want it, too. He licks into Jonathan’s mouth with soft moans and clutches at his chest. He kisses with a hunger Jonathan’s never felt before—not from Sebastian, not from Seth. Dave is a starving man and Jonathan is the feast.

Dave breaks away. “Wait.”

Jonathan can hear Dave’s breath, feel it on his face. He’s panting. So is Jonathan.

“What happened?”

Everything. Nothing. You. “It’s over. It’s been over. It took me today to realize it.”

“Oh,” Dave says. But instead of pulling Jonathan back to him, he scoots further away. “I’m not going to be your rebound.”

“You’re not.” Jonathan chases Dave’s hand across the sheets. He’s relieved when Dave lets him take it. "I’ve been stupid. I didn’t see—"

“I’m pretty sure trying to have sex with someone right after you have a life-altering conversation with your ex is the classic definition of rebound.”
Crap. Jonathan can’t argue with that. Dave’s right. Jonathan grunts in frustration, then wishes he hadn’t. He sounded like a cow about to give birth.

“Um, that was an interesting sound,” Dave says. His smile is audible.

“Yeah,” Jonathan says. “I never told you I’m half bovine?”

It’s not even a funny joke, but they laugh about it for five minutes. By the end of it, Jonathan’s cheek is on Dave’s shoulder, Dave’s arms wrapped around his waist. It’s good. It’s just what Jonathan needs.

“Dave?”

“Yeah?”

“I really do care about you.”

Dave doesn’t say anything for a bit, but his breathing is steady and he doesn’t let Jonathan go. “I care about you, too. Tomorrow we split off in Minnesota and don’t see each other for fourteen weeks. I don’t want to have a hook up with you. I’m not looking for casual anymore. I want something that lasts.”

Those words make Jonathan want to throw himself on Dave even more. He satisfies himself with leaning into Dave’s shoulder. Dave lifts his fingers to Jonathan’s hair, combs gentle strokes from his temple and over his ears. “Jonathan, you’ve been on the rebound since I first met you, haven’t you?”

The truth stings. “Yes. But it ended today.”
Jonathan used to know so many things with certainty. The sky was blue. Men fell in love with women. Beautiful things were worldly. And worldly was wrong.

Now, the only thing Jonathan knows for sure is that love rarely goes according to plan.

The morning after Jonathan let go of Seth, he woke up in a hotel room in the Wisconsin Dells, next to the man who had become his best friend. He should have felt squished; it was only a double bed, and neither Jonathan nor Dave were small. But everything was just right: the feel of Dave’s legs tangled with his in the bedsheets; the scent of Dave’s skin, both familiar and uncharted; Dave’s breath warm against his ear. They fit together.

Jonathan ignored Dave’s morning wood and his own. Jonathan hadn’t managed to seduce Dave the night before, but somehow he still felt like he’d gotten everything he wanted. He kissed Dave’s forehead, cracked the curtains open, started the coffee, and sang to himself without meaning to:

Great is Thy faithfulness,
Great is Thy faithfulness,
Morning by morning new mercies I see.
All I have needed Thy hand hath provided.
Great is Thy faithfulness,
Lord, unto me!

Jonathan heard Dave stir. Jonathan realized he was singing and turned to apologize. But his words caught in his throat when he saw Dave’s face, his smile blossoming like the first flower of spring.

“This,” Dave said, “is the perfect way to wake up.”

Jonathan’s heart unfurled. “I think so, too.”
Jonathan knew without a doubt that, at the end of the summer when he returned to Ohio, it would be to Dave.

That half of the equation turned out to be true. It was the other half that didn’t work out.

“I need to talk to you about something,” Dave said on the phone in late July. It had been nine weeks since they’d last seen each other. Five more weeks to go.

“That’s what I’m here for,” Jonathan said with a smile. He was on the back deck of the cabin near Lake Bemidji he shared with a couple other interns, hoping for a little privacy while the others finished a late dinner. The sun was low in the sky, turning the lake almost orange. Jonathan wished he could show it to Dave. He’d sent a few pictures, but it wasn’t the same.

“It’s … kind of awkward.” The tone of Dave’s voice made it clear he meant “awkward uncomfortable” and not “awkward hilarious.”

Jonathan sat down. “Shoot.”

“I told you I started hanging out with Blaine.”

Of course. Blaine and Kurt broke up again, because first love is screwy. Blaine moved back to Lima. They ran into each other at Scandals. They spent an entire evening talking about nothing but their fucked up relationships with Kurt.

When Jonathan gets nervous, his mind goes either a mile a minute or stops completely. It came to a screeching halt. Because if he’d let it keep going, it would have jumped to an impossible, ridiculous, panicked conclusion. “Yeah. He’s nice, isn’t he?”
“Yeah,” Dave said. “More than I remembered. And …” Here, Dave inserted a long pause that made Jonathan feel as if he was dangling by his fingernails from the edge of a cliff. “It’s, um … it’s getting kind of serious.”

It was Jonathan’s turn to leave Dave hanging from the edge of a cliff. He let Dave dangle for a while, and was in no hurry to rescue him. But then his heart did the disgusting, squishy thing it tended to do whenever Dave was in possible peril, and Jonathan felt compelled to speak. “Isn’t he … on the rebound?”

Jonathan could hear Dave take a deep breath on the other end of the line. “It’s been four months.”

I was on the rebound for more than a year you stupid asshole fuckwad! The interns Jonathan lived with cursed like sailors. The language now permeated everything, even Jonathan’s dreams. This was the mildest combination of expletives they would have approved of, given the situation. “Dave, I don’t want you to get hurt.”

“I don’t either. But … I think I’ve been making all my decisions about guys out of a fear of getting hurt. I can’t do that forever. I need to … grow a pair.”

Later, after Jonathan got off the phone, his roommates taught him a bunch of salient phrases about what exactly Dave could do with that pair. It felt good to say them.

But it doesn’t feel good now, sitting across the table from Dave and Blaine at Scandals while they make moony eyes at each other.

At least Sebastian is here to quietly make retching noises in Jonathan’s ear whenever Dave and Blaine aren’t paying attention, and sometimes when they are. It’s Labor Day weekend, and Sebastian flies back to Princeton on Monday.

“C’mon, kid. Let’s dance,” Sebastian says to Jonathan when Dave and Blaine start tonsil-tussling for the umpteenth time. OK, it’s probably just the second, but Jonathan’s seen enough. Sebastian doesn’t wait for an answer, just takes Jonathan’s hand and pulls him to the dance floor.

“I shouldn’t be jealous,” Jonathan says once he’s danced enough to get the words in his brain to form some kind of cohesive mass. “It’s not like he hasn’t dated other people before. It’s not like …” Jonathan thinks back to all the times he and Sebastian hooked up last summer. It’s not like they made a secret of it. They had their own tonsil-tussling sessions in the middle of the bar, too. It’s not really fair of him to get so out of sorts about it. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you and all that. Dave was patient while Jonathan figured things out. Dave drove with him to Wisconsin to give Jonathan one last go at being a complete idiot. The least Jonathan can do is give a little of that patience back.

“It’s not like what?” Sebastian says.

“It’s not like I haven’t been stupid before.”

“You? Never.” Sebastian bends Jonathan into a low dip. “Except for trusting me as a dance lead. I could totally drop you on the floor.”

“You? Never!” Jonathan parrots back, and laughs for the first time since he arrived back in Ohio.
Jonathan doesn’t let himself get stuck in the mire of disappointment. He goes to class and work and hangs out with classmates when he has time. He goes line dancing at Scandals and he even goes to Stitch ’n’ Bitch sometimes, because Blaine’s not evil, really. He’s just a little fucked up, like Jonathan used to be.

Jonathan and Dave still get together to study at least once a week, even after Dave and Blaine move in together. Okay, so he did bite the inside of his cheek when he walked into their apartment and confirmed that it indeed had only one bedroom and, more importantly, just one bed.

Sometimes, Jonathan feels like his heart’s going to break. But all he has to do is look at his backpack full of textbooks to remember how strong he is and how far he’s come. He got out of Rosedale. And he can get through this, too. Somewhere in his future, there’s a man who’ll want to build a life with him. Maybe it’ll be Dave. Maybe God has someone else in store for him.

(But to be completely transparent, he’s totally petitioning God for Dave.)

When Blaine and Dave break up less than three months after they got together, Jonathan’s not surprised. Nor is he surprised when Dave reacts by hooking up with some random-ass dude named Craig from intramural football. He’s glad the rebound is some random-ass dude and not him.

He lets Dave cry on his shoulder, but that’s mostly metaphorical, because Dave’s not very good at actually crying. His eyes get all glisteny and wet, but few tears fall out. Dave gives himself a lot of headaches with his almost-but-not-quite crying. Jonathan discovers that the best way to help Dave
get rid of those headaches is not giving Tylenol, but to rub his head and make him laugh.

He makes Dave go outside for long walks and enjoy the fall colors. He takes Dave to Sunday dinner at his parents. It’s a little awkward, but they like him. After dinner, Jonathan insists on helping with the dishes despite his mother’s protests. He’s proud he can clean up after himself now, and that kind of pride isn’t something to be ashamed of. And maybe, by doing this, he can be a good role model for Mark—even if it’s not exactly in the way that his parents envisioned that he would be.

His dad and Mark wander off to give Dave a tour of the barn. Hope and Joy complain there are too many hands in the kitchen and follow them. Marilou stays inside to load the leftovers into storage containers. She likes making up care packages to send home with Jonathan.

“Dave’s nice.” Jonathan’s mother stands on the left side of the split kitchen sink. Jonathan’s on the right. She washes the dishes that are too big to go into the dishwasher, and he rinses and dries them.

“I think so.”

“Jonathan,” she says with a casual tone that suggests she’s getting ready to discuss the weather, “you’re not going to get baptized, are you?”

It’s the kind of question that would have sent him into a panic a year ago. But all he feels now is peace. “I don’t know. Not in Rosedale, though. No.”

She nods and passes him a soapy dish. “You won’t be getting married, either, will you?” Her voice is quiet, subdued. Marilou has looked up from where she’s consolidating the leftovers, but their mom doesn’t tell her to mind her own business. She can’t have forgotten that Marilou is there. She looks up from the dishwater and into his eyes. “I’m sorry. That’s not what I meant. What I mean to say is, you won’t be getting a wife.”

“No.” Jonathan’s become so used to the weight he carried on his shoulders that he almost forgot it was there. But he notices it now, as it slips off and dissipates into nothingness. “No. I won’t.”

“Well,” she says. It’s almost a sigh, but a relieved one. She’s smiling. “You’re always welcome to break bread with us.”

* 

Just before Christmas, Jonathan’s putting away his laundry when he notices the cashbox high on the closet shelf. He’s not sure he’s even opened it since he moved out of his parents house. Living here with Carlene and her family, he’s never had to hide anything.

He takes it down and brings it over to his bed. The key is sitting in the lock. That’s how unworried he’s been about somebody looking inside. The condoms he once hid in here are long gone; he remembers that much. He gave the radio to Mark and some of the photos of Alvin to his parents. Jonathan’s mom went to visit Alvin this past summer, and Alvin’s coming to visit this Christmas. Alvin’s still on the long road to Amish baptism, but at least the family he’s staying with now has a phone out by their neighbor’s barn so he can call home every once in a while.

Jonathan lifts the lid of the cash box to find out what’s left. His heart clenches automatically when he sees the old Christmas card from Seth: The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness cannot overwhelm it. He doesn’t miss Seth anymore, but he remembers missing him, and that’s what makes him feel wistful as he reads the words. He tucks it into the corner of his bulletin board
and reminds himself to send Seth and Martha a card this year. This time, when he addresses the card to both of them, he’ll actually mean it.

The rest of the box is filled mostly with letters and photos as Jonathan expected. He dumps them all onto the bed to sort through; he should put the photos in an album, or maybe even frame a few.

A sliver of blue catches Jonathan’s eyes among the pile of papers, like a slice of twilit sky. He reaches through the clutter and pulls it out. It’s the macramé friendship bracelet Jonathan started at Stitch ’n’ Bitch two springs ago for Dave, right before Martha got pregnant that first time and Jonathan went totally bonkers. Why didn’t he ever finish it? Oh yeah. Because he’s an idiot.

He knows what to get Dave for Christmas now.

*  

“You got me a Christmas present?” Dave looks down at the tiny box Jonathan just handed him like it’s a million dollars or the world’s cutest puppy. Maybe both. “But you don’t do Christmas presents.”

They’re in Dave’s old bedroom. He moved back home after the whole Blaine debacle, though he has a lease starting up with a couple friends from his program in January. His old trophies still line his dresser, and he’s got just as many American flags in random places around his room. The war planes are gone, though. “I looked at them one day and couldn’t stop seeing that their main purpose was to kill people,” Dave said when Jonathan first noticed they were gone. “I don’t think what my great-grandfather did was wrong, but if I want to commemorate the lives he saved, I’d rather do it some other way.”

Jonathan feels comfortable here now. These things are part of who Dave is, but they’re not the sum total.

Also, the bedding smells like Dave’s aftershave. Not that Jonathan’s ever gotten a chance to roll around in it, but if he sits sort of slouched with his elbows against the pillows, he can totally get a good whiff.

That’s not the position Jonathan’s in right now. Dave’s sitting in the easy chair next to his bed, and Jonathan’s on the ottoman, knee-to-knee with Dave. “I’ve always done Christmas presents with my family,” Jonathan says. “And you’re part of my family.”

“Jonathan,” Dave says with enough feeling for a whole sentence. He’s looking at Jonathan the way that makes Jonathan want to fall to his knees and say everything he’s wanted to say for months.

“Go ahead. Open it.”

The box is so small that Jonathan was able to wrap it up in a piece of origami paper. Dave is careful not to rip it. It takes so long Jonathan begins to regret wrapping it. He doesn’t know why he’s so nervous about this present. It’s just a silly friendship bracelet, and a long overdue one at that.

“Did you make this?” Dave pulls the bracelet out of the box and holds it with as much care as if it was crafted out of eggshells and diamonds.

“Yeah. I— actually, I started one a while ago to thank you for helping me with all the college stuff and … and then I put it in a box and forgot about it forever, but … when I tried to finish it a few weeks ago, I messed up and did the macramé right to left instead of left to right the way I was supposed to, and it got all twisted up so I had to throw that one away and start a new one—” Ugh.
This isn’t coming out right. “What I mean is, I wanted to make it perfect, because—” Deep breath. “It’s a friendship bracelet. And you’re my friend.”

Jonathan suddenly realizes he’s been looking at Dave’s knees this whole time, and not his face. He should probably look at Dave’s face.

Dave has that look he gets when he needs to cry but can’t quite get there. His eyes are all shiny and his nostrils quiver and his lips—Oh. It’s that thousand-watt smile than makes Jonathan’s heart do somersaults.

“Jonathan?” A heartbeat.

“Yeah?” Another heartbeat.

“I’m so in love with you. And I’m ready. Please tell me you’re ready.”

“Yeah, I’m—” Jonathan doesn’t finish his sentence. He doesn’t want to. Because Dave’s mouth is on his, and Dave’s hands are cradling his jaw like he’s some kind of miracle. And maybe he is. This life, this love. It all feels pretty miraculous to him.

—THE END—
works-in-progress-bang. That post also has links to the full-size graphics on livejournal.

And I love comments, too! I have tons of notes for this project, so if you have any questions, ask away, below or on my tumblr.

This story is also rebloggable on tumblr.

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