WHO ARE YOU?

by AlasPoorAndy

Summary

April 2017- Pete Townshend and his friends are in a down-on-their-luck rock band with one song that they play at weddings, corporate events, and the occasional Bar Mitzvah.

While getting ready for one of the most important gigs of their career so far, everyone's favourite scrawny guitarist tries to navigate school, work, boys, girls, friendship, love, politics, art, music, family, parents, sex, drugs, rock and roll, and fame, all while trying to figure out the world's most maddening question: who the fuck are you?

Notes

the inevitable modern day teen AU: where the 50's bled into the 60's, and the 80's started early. all the rock stars from the 60's and 70's were born in our generation, and everything happens exactly the same. sorta.

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	hank you so much for your patience and support while i wrote this! i hope you all enjoy it as much as i enjoyed writing it.
i'll upload around 7 chapters every saturday until all 30 are posted. be sure to subscribe if you
want posting notifications!
and as we go on this amazing journey together, let me know what you think in the comments.
questions and feedback can ALSO be direction to my blog, http://my-g-g-g-generation.tumblr.com/ ! i look forward to hearing how you all liked it. have fun!
The epic, glorious moment of my finale. I wield my six stringed weapon in my hand. I am a giant, I am invincible, washed in white light by my feet, feeling the surreal sensation of floating skyward and anchored down only by the demanding love from my audience’s cheers. I have electrified them, changed them, with one note, pure and easy. We are all now bound together because of my song.

In this moment, though, it is just a distant and hopeful dream at the end of a long, long tunnel. My own musical finale was the fading wail of my guitar from my cheap amp in the basement of the house I rented with my friends. The lone bulb in the middle of the half-finished basement lit us dimly. At my feet was not a screaming audience, but an old pizza box with a hardened, half eaten piece of pepperoni pizza that no one bothered to throw out. I floated down from that hazy daydream along with the rest of the band, back to our dingy reality.

“Right, well then,” our frontman Roger Daltrey broke the peaceful post-song silence. “What did you all think?”

“I can do these songs in my sleep,” our bassist John Entwistle chimed in from the other side of the room, rolling his eyes.

Keith Moon, our drummer, tossed his sticks into the cardboard box with all his other equipment and papers stuffed in it. “Are we done for the night?”

“I think we have the songs down perfectly,” I told my friends. “But we sound bored. Our energy is too low.”

Roger sighed, looking pained. It was already near midnight and he was running on next to no sleep. “Yeah, you’re right. I could have done better. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologize, it was all of us,” I reassured him gently, already an expert at handling his fragile self-esteem. “I think it’s just late.”

John put his bass back on the stand. “How’re those new songs coming along, by the way, Pete?”

I put my guitar back into its case, shifting uneasily. My fingers were killing me as I played because I’ve been chewing down at my nails too much. “I have some ideas but nothing’s really cohesive right now.”

Keith climbed over the back of our worn couch, installing himself in his favourite end spot. “I can’t wait to try something new.”

Roger sat on the opposite end of the couch so he could lean on the arm rest. He let out a big yawn. “Yeah, totally. Let us know if you need any help, Pete.”

John sat next to Roger, turning the telly back on to his paused game. He grabbed his N64 controller and resumed his game of Dr. Mario, his latest coping mechanism. I sat next to him and Keith stretched his legs into my lap, plugging in his headphones and listening to music on his beaten up phone, air drumming along to his favourite songs. I scribbled into my Moleskine notebook, frustrated with my all-encompassing artist’s block just as Roger started to softly snore beside us, exhausted from the never-ending grind of his work day.
We needed a new song, but I was at a loss of direction. My own personal life, as well as the life of our new band, had come to a standstill. I convinced myself that if I could produce one solid piece of work, the gears would start grinding again and my life would progress in the way I wanted it to. But nothing was coming to me. Once there had been an insatiable roar of ideas in my head, but my mind has now turned vacant and hollow. I felt blue all the time and had nothing important to say.

In my notebook, I write the same old song with a few new lines. My head is spinning as I scrawl with my pen as if I were pouring vodka into my soul. I looked over at my friends again, hopefully for inspiration. John’s eyes were glued to the same spot on the screen, and his fingers were moving faster than lightning to hit the buttons as he won yet another round. My friends were tired. We seem to always be hungover from something, but we’ve always survived it.

I struggled to find a reason why I was so uninspired lately. Whenever I turn on the radio, love is proclaimed, again and again and again. I could just coast by on writing the same old song with a few new lines, and everyone will want to cheer it. I wrote loads of nothing in looping cursive on the fresh notebook paper. We run on endless time to reach a higher cloud but we never ever seem to get near it.

All we do nowadays is sing the same old song.

“Nothing really changes, my friend,” Keith sang along with the roar of music leaking out from his headphones, and much to my frustration, he was right.
Sunday, April 2nd
27 days until the concert

Some days, I can hardly get out of bed. Doing so would be walking into my own resignation, admitting that the world was too overwhelming for me and I could go another precious day without accomplishing anything with my life.

Unfortunately for me, my growling stomach drove me out of my room and downstairs to the kitchen. I boiled the kettle, giving Roger his space as he washed a week’s worth of our dishes for us. I felt bad that he had to clean up after us, so I dried and put the dishes away for him. At the table, Keith loudly ate his buttered toast and watched YouTube videos on his old and battered laptop, laughing intermittently.

I poured two paper sachets of cheap instant oatmeal into a bowl and stirred in the hot water. I decided to make a second bowl for John because he probably wouldn’t eat today otherwise. I brought our breakfasts upstairs and knocked on John’s door, letting myself in. In the dark, he lay bundled up with blankets. I left the bowl on his nightstand and threw away some old food containers and beer cans for him.

“I brought you breakfast, John. Make sure you eat it before it gets cold,” I murmured to the depressed lump under the covers.

John mumbled something in reply, and I reached over to pat where I thought his shoulder would be. Every morning was a lottery draw as to whether John would have the will to get out of bed or not. He could go a whole week without coming out of his room, wrestling with his new depressive episode.

I let myself out, leaving him to mourn in peace. In the privacy of my own bedroom with the door locked, I sat in bed and ate alone as well, scrolling aimlessly through websites of all shades of blue on my phone. Everywhere I went, I tried to make a profile of myself to share with the world, but with no success. I had a blog for my photography and my writing that I became bored with, and I had an account where I could share my views of politics and art that disinterested me as well. I even had a profile to share all the fancy foods I’ve eaten and fancy places I’ve been so I can brag to family members and old friends, but I still felt like I couldn’t reach out to anyone. I felt taunted by the cheery demands. What’s on your mind? Who are you? Share something about yourself.

Well, fuck. I don’t have a single clue who I am anymore, Twitter.

I am caught somewhere between a boy and a man. Too old to call myself a carefree teenager, too young to call myself an autonomous adult.

I tried to be an artist, but I barely knew what that meant anymore. I painted and drew and sketched and sculpted, but I never felt like I was good enough to be like the people I idolized. I tried to write but everything felt overdone and borrowed. I could play the guitar and piano and even sing a bit, but nothing I made was special enough to garner any recognition in the world. Half the time, I didn’t think I was special enough to deserve any attention at all.

I tried to be funny, I tried to be an intellectual, I tried to be mysterious. I wanted to be masculine but I came out girly instead. I wanted to be taken seriously but I acted childish instead. I wanted to be sexy but no one gave me the time of day. I wanted to be someone special, someone who made a mark on
the world, but I stayed in my room all day wishing for things to be better, expecting the planets to rearrange themselves for my own benefit.

I had decided to focus on being a musician. It was easier than ever to grab some friends and make your own music, then simply record and upload your work online for a worldwide audience in real time. I desperately tried to craft myself into a mashup of all my idols. I figured if I followed their footsteps precisely, I could cheat the system and become famous by running through the roads they already paved for me.

I looked around my room, which was a small universe in itself that revolved around me. Clothes littered my floor, all things I had bought because I had seen other fashionable boys wear them around my college or at bars or concerts. I bought countless pairs of dark skinny jeans and t-shirts branding logos of the coolest bands at the moment. I bought big vintage looking sweaters from thrift stores that made me look effortlessly thrown together like a messy artist. I wore shoes other people said were cool to wear.

I had abandoned drawings scattered over my desk, and my own paintings tacked to the wall at eye level. I had dozens of notebooks filled with sketches, maps, diagrams, my own musical arrangements and lyrics, original poetry, prose, and short stories, rarely completed. The rest of my white walls were neatly decorated with posters and prints of people I love. I had a giant Nirvana poster by my headboard, where Kurt is caught mid song, lost in his own personal sea of emotion. Although he was long gone even before I was born, he was still the patron saint of lost, confused teenagers. I didn’t have many musicians who understood the way I felt, but I tried to collect them all to make some sense of what I was feeling.

I ordered a print of a picture of The Kinks from their website, and put the small poster near my bed where I could see it all the time. Ray Davies looked so damn good in that particular photo, I couldn’t resist. He was cool and commanding without being arrogant. He was always devoted to the music. Although we were contemporaries, both in emerging rock bands, I secretly worshipped him.

There aren’t an extraordinary amount of ground breaking rock bands to choose from, but I still admired the work of Jack White, Dave Grohl, Eddie Vedder, even the oldies like Blur and Oasis. In the centre of it all was a gorgeous vintage looking glamour shot of Debbie Harry, the dreamy goddess of the 80’s. Like any other boy, I was hopelessly in love with her. I also collected movie posters so I seemed artsy—Fargo, Vertigo, A Clockwork Orange. I could only hope that in the rare occasion I had someone in my room, they could take one look at my walls and see what I like and think I was cool for liking all these carefully curated mementos of fine art.

Later, I tried to find inspiration to write, so I decided to look at the website for the festival we were playing at the end of the month. Rain or shine, they advertised, you’ll see the best indie and alternative rock bands England has to offer at our first ever outdoor festival. London’s finest! Sponsored by Corona.

Our band was listed near the bottom of the ad: THE DETOURS. I felt a mix of guilt and excitement seeing our band listed among the rest of the other lineups. The other bands were genuinely talented and already established independent artists, most of whom I admired and listened to regularly. Our little band just managed to squeeze in there, playing with the big dogs when it felt like we had faked our way in there.

Thousands of bands from all around the country auditioned for the festival panel to earn a slot in the show. Everyone from school kids and their garage bands to bigshots with songs on the radio came to audition, all vying for the spot of the big headlining act. Our group had practiced for months, but the day of our audition went so poorly, I thought the universe was genuinely trying to hold us back from
trying.

It was a horrible, slushy February day, narrated by the pelting of freezing rain. There was a terrible accident on the main road closest to our street and we had trouble even leaving our neighbourhood. We had hurriedly packed all our equipment in Roger’s car the night before. Roger and I were to meet Keith and John at the venue.

Keith missed his bus and was late already, and John had overslept his alarm and hurried over from Alison’s house, groggy and unprepared. When we got there, we had to sign in without Keith, praying for him to get there in time. John had discovered that we had forgotten one of his amp cables, and we begged the other bands waiting to audition to borrow theirs. We looked messy and unprofessional.

When the time crunched down and the band ahead of us went to audition, Roger crumbled under the pressure. All morning he had been snappy and rather bitchy, and he hadn’t eaten anything before we left. We had huddled in to motivate ourselves, but I took one glance at our singer and saw his blue eyes blown wide open in panic. He tried to fight his own anxiety which ultimately knocked him right out. He wound himself up so much he started shaking, then fled to the bathroom, on the verge of retching. I remember sitting with him on the dirty bathroom floor and holding him still, struggling to get him to slow his breathing as I watched our opportunity for a big break rush past us like a giant freight train. I hated reliving of the memory of when I had to pull out my phone to text John to say don’t bother. We couldn’t do it without Roger.

By the time Roger’s anxiety attack crawled to a finish and he was left wounded and battered, he clammed up and started his downward spiral of guilt and self-hatred. The two of us emerged silently from the bathroom just as John finished lying to the judges, explaining that Roger just found out his grandma died or whatever and we would have to forfeit our audition. It seemed we could never take the step up to being any kind of professional band.

John drove us all back home. Roger was humiliated and stared quietly out the window, stewing in his own frustration. The weight of disappointment crushed my chest and I didn’t feel like being optimistic. Keith suggested we go out for junk food to comfort us, but John quietly reminded everyone that we didn’t even have any money to spare. We were forced to confront the fact that we were running out of steam, and our ambitious venture to be a revolutionary rock band was slowly sinking in front of our own eyes.

We had spent a week explaining to all our hopeful friends and family that we hadn’t gone through with the audition due to ‘unforeseen circumstances’, and left the conversation to drop awkwardly. Keith’s parents tried to convince him to give up the band entirely to focus on school. Roger had been sleepless and angry, and his poor behaviour got his shifts cut down at work, choking our only steady income. I had gotten my midterm marks back from uni and discovered I wasn’t doing as well as I thought I was, since I was distracted by practicing for the audition. Even worse, John’s longtime girlfriend Alison had dumped him out of the blue shortly after that, hammering the final nail in John’s coffin and plunging him back into a depressive period. I hadn’t seen him this bad since our days as schoolboys. Without the promise of opportunity and success dangling in front of us, none of us knew what to do with ourselves. Without our music, we were nothing.

The only reason we bothered continuing with the band after this was because of yet another intervention from the universe, only this time it offered forgiveness. We received an email from the festival co-ordinator announcing that we had won the wildcard spot—a short slot in the show reserved for a band who didn’t make the cut but was drawn from a raffle for a last chance to play anyways. We had cheated, the four of us entering the band’s name seven times each. Additionally, the news about Roger’s fake trauma might have gained us some extra sympathy. No one caught us,
and we reassured ourselves that cheating the institution was truly a rock and roll thing to do. But in our defence we also submitted an audition tape of sorts to further prove how great we could be.

We accepted our surprise drop of fate and picked up our instruments to keep working, the band holding on by a string of blind faith, thinking that maybe we could actually pull it off. At the end of April, we were promised the potential of fame, and that was enough to get the four of us going again.

I wanted to use this chance to really prove myself to the world. I had to screw my head back on and find my direction to walk in. I needed to find my muse so I could write songs people could relate to. I wanted to unite my audience with one special song.

I pulled out my notebook and started to write again. The tone of my stream of consciousness fit perfectly with the contemplative nature of a short story I had been writing on and off. I hunched over, writing in the book resting on my thigh. It was the story of a boy, not unlike myself, who was blind to the world around him. The vibration of one special song was the only thing that connected him to his loved ones in the outside world.

Sometimes, opportunity taunted me, even bullied me. I felt overwhelmed by my responsibility to rise to the occasion and produce. I was scared to open myself up for the whole world to see and judge, everyone profiting from every emotion I’ve ever suffered. The ever-devouring, greedy audience wanted to consume me and keep demanding more. I was excited but terrified by the prospect of this opportunity. Some days, it was so overwhelming that I couldn’t even get out of bed.
Monday, April 3rd
26 days until the concert

On Mondays, I made my way down to Ealing Art College for a lecture on Renaissance art theory. My college was just a bus ride away, and when I wasn’t home rehearsing with the band, I was over there working my ass off. I was now in my second year, nearly halfway done my degree. I was too old to be a bright eyed freshman who people pitied whenever I made a mistake, but I wasn’t old enough to gain respect in campus art shows or clubs. At 19, I could already drink but I never knew where the parties were. I could drive but I didn’t have a car. I could share my voice with my art community but I had nothing to say.

I had made some friends in first year, but I didn’t have a group I could really belong to. I even felt like I couldn’t relate to the guys in the band most times. I didn’t have a best friend who mirrored me, and I didn’t have a girlfriend to complete me. I spent a lot of time on campus alone, working in common areas in clothes I thought everyone would like, showing off my expensive Macbook and my iPhone, looking mysterious as I write in my notebook and listen to bands you’ve never heard of. But everyone around me was the exact same way. We tried to look better than we actually were, hoping someone divine would fall from the sky and ask to be our friend or beg to have sex with us.

I found the art crowd very competitive. It was a race to see who could make themselves look the most effortless, who worked hardest to make art that was supposed to look like a natural extension of themselves.

There were artists who shopped exclusively at thrift stores, dressing vintage-grunge, drinking too much and were angry at everything. There were the preppy, political, overly analytical artists who used art as a weapon, only to protest politics. There were the sex loving, drug addicted hippies who started coming about recently, distinguishable by the flowers in they always wore in their hair. There were the rich overachievers. The lost herd of queers. Hipsters who were in love with the modern scene. Hipsters who were in love with everything old school. The people who were destined to fail. I wasn’t eager to find out which category I belonged to.

Everywhere I looked, there was someone who was a better writer than me, or who painted better, or who had more money, who were more manly than me, who were more seductive and alluring than me, who had achieved more with their 19 years of life than me, or who had better direction and more purpose than me. Every person I passed in the hallways seemed to be flaunting themselves. Simply by existing, my peers set the bar too high for me to reach. I felt pitiful.
chapter 4

Tuesday, April 4th
25 days until the concert

Like most of the other hundred students waiting inside the lecture hall for Fundamentals in Artistic Practices II, I was catching up on the course readings five minutes before the prof arrived. I searched through the links that were posted, covering our final artist in focus this semester named Gustav Metzger. While the prof came in and set up the PowerPoint for today’s lecture, I was skimming quickly through his articles from the 1960’s, which seemed to be a lifetime ago. It may as well have been from prehistoric times, because when it came to art theory, I wanted to know what was ground breaking right now. I wanted to join in the frontier of some colossal artistic reformation and have my name in the history books for being an artist of this period. But alas, we were stuck studying things that were decades old already.

“Auto-destructive art,” my balding professor preached from his podium, “is public art. It was created at the inception of the industrial society we know of today.” I downloaded the lecture slides and tore through them quicker than the prof could teach.

“It was initially described in Metzger’s manifesto as a commentary against the rapid and literal disintegration of manufactured beauty.”

I dug around my bag madly for my notebook and pen, and started writing down my own ideas in a long, messy list.

“By combining science and engineering, as well as machine production and factory assembly, the artist can create a piece of work with a lifespan that allows a critical narrative to emerge and speak for itself,” the professor meandered around the stage, then changed the slide to a picture of some sort of fabric with gaping holes through it. “Metzger had been a Marxist his whole life, and this fundamentally contributed to the driving force behind the creation of his movement. He believed that Western society was failing under industrialism, and this thesis is most famously exemplified in his ‘paintings’, dubbed simply: Acid on Nylon. He poured hydrochloric acid over stretched nylon, which burned giant holes in the fabric. This turned physical art into performance art as the piece destroyed itself before it could be discarded or dismantled. This also gave him a platform to protest nuclear weaponry…”

I was absolutely enthralled with the rest of the lecture and hadn’t noticed that the two hours had gone by in a split second. I found the whole concept of an art piece collapsing in on itself to be absolutely beautiful. After we all cleared out of the lecture hall, I sat in a stairwell that was rarely used, and pulled out my notebook again.

I had an hour to kill until my next class, and my head was spinning with ideas about auto-destructive art that I used pages and pages to illustrate and compose. Beside me, I let a YouTube playlist of music videos cycle through for background noise, and in the midst of futuristic thinking and backwards thinking, I noticed that the music put out today wasn’t about the music, really. The instruments were never the focus, and no one tried to master their craft and put out anything experimental. The focus was making music people could relate to. There wasn’t anything fundamentally wrong with that, right? But it seemed the rest of the band was left in the background when the lead singer acted in front of the camera. The music videos themselves were incredibly stylized and had an impressive production value, and were focused on telling a story. The song itself, when lacking the visual component, was left to create a mood or the feeling of an aesthetic. Had it always been this way? Why couldn’t we have music with organic vocals and instrumentals stripped
down to its raw power? If I wanted someone to really understand me, I would need to become vulnerable and totally natural first.

I hadn’t been watching the time, and I had to sprint across campus with two minutes left until my next class started. I typed with one thumb as I ran.

In my three hour long sculpture class, my mind was whirring with new ideas, although I tried to focus on my project. Nearing the end of the semester, we were all experts on working intricately with clay, but I couldn’t wait until the third year course where we were allowed to work with metal and wood. I was working on the detailing of my clay sculpture—it was of a young man, much like myself I suppose, sitting on a rock contemplatively in the middle of the ocean. He had four heads and
Piscasso-esque faces, each representing a different identity. I was so wrapped up in my own head that I hadn’t noticed the girl sharing the work table with me trying to get my attention.

I put down the little aluminum knife and pulled out my earphones. “I’m so sorry, I didn’t hear you.”

“It’s alright,” she laughed. More of a girlish giggle, really. “I was just going to ask what you were listening to.”

“Was it playing too loud? Uh, sorry,” I looked around us quickly. The rest of the room was filled with the buzz of chatter as everyone talked and laughed as they worked. The girl must have felt left out. “I’m just, uh, listening to a band called The Kinks, you’ve probably never heard of them…”

“Who hasn’t heard of The Kinks?” She giggled again. “I can’t resist. Ray Davies is such a babe.”

“Right?” I couldn’t help but exclaim, and I felt stupid when she laughed even harder at that. I composed myself again, trying not to give her the wrong idea about me. “That’s cool, a lot of people don’t really know their earlier work. You know, the stuff that doesn’t play on the radio. They’re easily one of my favourite bands at the moment.”

“I prefer the early stuff they recorded in their basement,” the girl combed her auburn fringe out of her eyes. “Their first studio album was a bit of a wreck, but you know with a better producer they could really go places.”

“Are you kidding me? Shel Tamy is on the ball right now,” I defended their current producer as I carefully molded a nose onto the third face of my little tragic hero. “I’d love to work with him.”

“Well, tell him to stay the hell away from writing, it’s abominable,” she smiled as she rolled out more clay. She sure did a lot of smiling. It showed her straight line of small teeth. “Bands should make their own sound and write their own lyrics. It should all be very organic and safe from big suits meddling with the art.”

I suddenly had the perfect chance. I leaned my hip against the wooden work table with a casual sigh, looking nonchalant. “Yeah, that’s what I always tell my band. I write all of our songs for that same reason.”

“Oh?” she caught on, raising her thin eyebrow, her green eyes twinkling with interest. “You’re in a band, eh?”

“Yeah, we’re reviving rock and roll at the moment,” I improvised, rolling a little ball of clay for an eyeball. “We’re called The Detours.”

“And you’re the lead singer?” she prompted.

“God, no. I’m not nearly handsome enough. I play the lead guitar, and they keep me and my giant nose in the back so I don’t distract everyone,” I joked.

The girl laughed sweetly. “Well, I sure think you’re cute enough to be the frontman.”

I blushed like a damn idiot at the compliment, making her giggle even more. Cute—I always got called cute, it seemed with each passing fling that I would never be sexy, but just cute enough to trust for a one night stand if you were drunk enough at a party. I was about to go on my usual humorously self-deprecating route and tell her that Roger was infinitely more gorgeous than I ever would be, but I mean, she was quite pretty too, and she knew a lot about music. I figured she was worth pursuing. “We’re, uh, playing a show at the end of the month, you know, that big indie rock festival downtown? You should drop by and see us.”
“You guys got into the festival?” She looked rather impressed. “Your band must be something special. I was debating on whether or not I should go, but now I guess I definitely have a reason now.”

“Yeah, I guess we must have rocked our audition,” I couldn’t help but lie. I wanted her to like me. “I’ll hook you up with some tickets.”

“That would be great,” she dug around her knit purse for a scrap of paper and a pen. “Here’s my number, send me the details. My name’s Summer, by the way.”

After class, I practically skipped outside where Roger was waiting for me with his car. He leaned back against the old hunk of metal, smoking elegantly. He was more of a social smoker, and could never commit to a serious nicotine addiction. He did it mainly to look cool and to pass the time while he was waiting somewhere awkwardly. It sure worked, though. Roger always looked stunning without even trying. He wore his usual jacket (bought at a thrift store), torn up jeans (which, if you looked close enough, you can tell he owned for upwards of five years), and old converse (which used to be mine, but I thought they were too raggedy and I was going to throw them out anyways). His wild curly hair made him stick out even more. Just waiting by his car, a ton of passerby—men and women alike—ogled and smiled at him. He smiled warmly at each of them right back. I swear to god, he drove me insane with jealousy sometimes. He could be scooping a dead animal off the side of a road and people would still come up and flirt with him.

“You look chipper,” Roger greeted me. He was about to stub out his half-finished cigarette when I rescued it and stuck it in my mouth. Cigarettes were expensive nowadays.

We both slid into his beat up secondhand car which we all relied so desperately on. “I got a girl’s number in class today. I swear, every time they find out you’re in a band, you just seem that more attractive to them.”

“The ‘I’m in a band’ line has been passed down to us for generations,” he grinned as he pulled onto the busy road. Roger, as aggressive as he usually was, was the only person I knew who was patient enough to drive on busy London streets. “We’d be fools not to use it.”

I smiled at my phone proudly, where Summer was now a newly added contact. How long should I wait to text her without seeming desperate? “How was work?”

“Oh, you know,” he always said with a sigh. That was the vague answer he gave every single day without fail. It was the worn out response of someone who needed that job to stay alive and forced himself to like it to keep from going absolutely mad. The man looked more tired each day that passed. His face was still young but you could see the exhaustion in his eyes. I dangled my own hand with the cigarette out of the window and studied Roger’s hands on the wheel. Strong, tan, and well-worn, showing the years of hard work he’s put them through. I also noticed some paper towel wrapped around his palm and held in place with duct tape.

“Did you hurt your hand?” I asked.

“What?” he, too, was lost in his own thoughts. He pulled up to a red light and examined his hand as if he forgot about his own wound. “Oh, yeah, I accidentally burned it at work. It was my fault, I wasn’t paying attention.”

“I’ll help you clean it up when we get home, yeah?” I said. He looked over at me, quickly, and smiled.

We pulled into the car park at Sainsbury’s, struggling to find an empty space. Then we hauled our
tired asses out of the car, locked it, and entered the overly air conditioned grocery store to fork over what little money we had left. Since my last class on Tuesday ended just as Roger was done work, I could get a free ride home with him as long as I helped him with the grocery shopping.

Roger had a neatly organized list, and the fact that he wrote it out on paper made him look like an old fashioned housewife. He had all the prices carefully worked out after poring over the sale flyers we got in the mail over the weekend, figuring out what our household could and couldn’t afford. The rest of us gladly let Roger manage our rent money as well as our band money because he was good at it.

I pushed the trolley for him as he carefully compared prices on tins of soup and weighed fruits and whatnot. We had nearly made the whole round of the store when he stopped by the bread and wrote down all his calculations on the back of his list instead of using the calculator on his phone like a normal person.

“You okay?” I asked as he look particularly distressed.

He looked up at me with those tired eyes, and spoke too quickly, ashamed. “You don’t happen to have an extra tenner, do you? I’m sorry, I just can’t make it work any other way, you all need to eat properly, I can’t keep buying you rubbish to eat—”

“Don’t worry about it,” I reassured him before he worked himself into a full blown panic. I reached into my wallet and handed him a twenty instead. He smiled gratefully, and we picked up a hot meal to bring home before we waited in the interminable lines to check out.

“Thanks so much,” he said quietly, running his fingers through his hair a few times to relax himself. “We’re short on money for utilities this month again. I’m going to have to pick up more shifts.”

I frowned. “I’ll see if I can cover the extra this month, yeah?” Even though I didn’t work while I was going to school, I paid my share of rent from my savings. And plus, my family wasn’t poor. I could ring up my dad any time and ask for some extra money. As long as I had good marks in school to prove I wasn’t slacking off, he was agreeable in lending to me.

Roger rubbed at his face as we slowly crept forward in line. “We need to talk to the others too. Keeping the house and covering costs for the band is getting hard. Something needs to change. I guess I could always move my bed into the basement and we could rent out my old room, and get a fifth roommate…”

Dear god, the four of us could hardly get along as it was. We didn’t need a fifth person to make matters worse. “We don’t need to go that far. I can try and find a job on campus over the break, maybe start taking some art commissions, sell some songs, babysit, I dunno…”

Roger pulled the trolley forward and started putting our meager haul of food on the conveyer belt. “I’d hate to ask that though. You actually give a shit about school. I wouldn’t be able to live with myself if I distracted you and made your education suffer.”

I was taken aback by something in Roger’s voice— there was some guilt mixed with a tinge of regret. Thinking back, Roger never actually finished school. He was kicked out when he was 15 for a vicious brawl on school property where he nearly killed a guy in his class. He scrambled to find a job to support himself after his parents kicked him out. He lived with an older friend who made him lie about his age to get a job working at a sheet metal factory, the only place that would hire a person without a diploma. Roger’s friend got married and moved out a few years later. He still owned the house but let Roger rent it for cheap, which was the only way we could afford a three-bedroom house on the outskirts of London. Roger still regrets that mistake he made as a 15-year-old kid,
because nowadays you couldn’t get anywhere without a proper education (which we desperately tried to get Keith to understand). I always felt he envied me for being able to go to a frivolous art school, and Roger compensated for his own mistakes by making sure I was able to do well when he would never have the chance.

Roger paid for the groceries with all the cash he had left in his wallet, and we carried our bags back to the car by hand. The two of us loaded everything in the car and drove home in the rush hour traffic crunch. I pulled my legs up to draw in my notebook, using a stub of a pencil to sketch Roger’s worn and wounded hands on the steering wheel as he carefully dodged traffic to get us home safely. We listened to the top pop songs of the week as the two of us crawled through traffic back home— I, an artist whose rich musician parents paid for me to go to a fancy art school to study art theory and gallivant with other pretentious artists, and Roger, an artist who worked his ass off all week to stay alive just so he could sing in a band with his friends on the weekends. Which one of us was more dedicated?

Hey, it's Pete (from sculpture), just thought I'd take a break from writing this song for the band haha. What's up? x
Wednesday, April 5th
24 days until the concert

I had to drag my ass out to campus for a 10 am lecture on Victorian Literature, which I hated up until the point I was actually sitting down and enjoying what we were learning. When we let out, I was desperate to go back to sleep. I checked my phone while waiting in line for coffee.

Keith Moon was notoriously restless at all hours of the day—actually, scratch that; even in his sleep, he thrashed about in his sheets, tossing and turning all night in the room next to mine. When he first properly moved in with us, Keith disturbed everything in terribly amazing way, as if he turned on the amplifier on our everyday life.

Once I got the biggest coffee I could afford with my spare change, I jammed my headphones in my
ears and walked out to the bus loop. I started listening to The Hollies, who you’ve probably never heard of, and sipped elegantly at my coffee, trying hard to look nonchalant and cool like I was in a movie in case anyone was watching me and was envious.

While I waited, I tapped out a quick response to Keith with my thumb: “We’ll see”. Eventually my bus pulled up and I took a seat at the back where I could catch up on some readings for class in peace, trying to understand the drawling poetry we were assigned.

Our house was pleasantly quiet during the day. Roger was at work, and John was in bed all day nursing his broken heart, but if he was feeling up to it, he could pull himself out of bed and stare at the telly in the basement for hours. Today was not one of those days, though. Keith charged down the stairs to greet me at the front door, brimming with excitement, eager that someone had finally arrived to entertain him.

“How about baked beans?” he asked me, a mischievous grin on his face.

I scrunched my nose up. Roger bought tin after tin of baked beans because they were cheap, and something he had grown up with all his life, I suppose. I sat cross-legged on a dining room chair and kept reading. “What about a grilled cheese?”

That was something so simple Keith could hardly fuck it up. After jamming a plug into his bashed up iPod and dialling up the stereo in our living room, he began dancing around the kitchen while pulling out ingredients from the fridge. He always had some energetic rock playlist playing. Right now, it was The Black Keys, and he did a little Irish jig and sang along horribly to ‘Lonely Boy’ as he waited for the stove to heat up. Keith always had a soft spot for Americana.

I slid a piece of scrap paper as a bookmark and put my reading aside as Keith later presented me with a grilled cheese sandwich on a chipped plate, and he sat down across from me with an identical one. One whiff warned me of all the random spices he loaded on in attempt to be creative.

I ate it anyways. Living as a starving artist made me appreciate filling food more than tasty food. Although, that didn’t stop me from teasing Keith about pouring a whole lake of ketchup on his plate
to dip his sandwich into. In a joking snarl, I said, “Ketchup? You absolutely disgust me.”

“There’s nothing wrong with me,” he fake cried. “I just have a glass of ketchup here and there, I can stop any time I want.” He continued chewing with his mouth open, yet another quirk I had learned to love. He grabbed my book of poetry with greasy fingers, reading the back. “Well, aren’t you fancy?”

“It’s not too bad, just a little hard to understand at first,” I admitted. I didn’t want to be a show-off and talk about it too much. I also didn’t want to be an asshole but we were rarely on this topic of conversation so I asked gently, “How are your course readings going?”

Keith rolled his eyes into the back of his skull. “That would imply that I even bought my textbooks in the first place.”

“Keith, come on mate,” I tried not to sound preachy. “I thought your parents gave you a bunch of money to buy your books all those months ago?”

“And I spent it on other stuff,” he shrugged, which translated to how he spent it on various drugs and alcohol.

“So you’re going to just borrow the books from your classmates, right?” I encouraged.

“Yes, mum,” he grumbled.

“I just want you to go to classes and do well and stuff,” I tried to sound casual.

“Alright, alright, stop nagging,” Keith later scooped up our plates to dump in the sink.

“Hey, don’t talk to your mother like that!” I called over the music and fortunately, I saw Keith crack a grin.

School has always been a touchy subject for Keith. His parents were incredibly overbearing, and they always micromanaged everything, pushing him into a life they had already pre-planned for him. This made him angry and resentful, and because of that he had a hard time at school and struggled to make friends. Everyone he ever cared about was frightened by his violent behaviour and eventually left him. Now that meant Keith was angry, violent, and overly clingy from his newfound fear of abandonment. He managed those feelings by drinking quite a lot, which he swore always improved his mood and made him happier. He also popped party pills, which he claimed helped the constant roar in his head. He chased after girls nonstop, and wound up too heartbroken when a one night stand never grew into anything more. The poor kid was a mess, but I always believed he was strong enough to pull through it.

I remember one night last spring when I had just turned 18, and Keith and I went to a large pub near our school. I used my new adult privilege to sneak Keith beer after beer under the table, since he was still underage at 17. Keith was particularly stressed, as he was running out of time to pick a university to go to next year.

“It’s really fun, mate,” I drunkenly tried to convince him, pressing a finger onto the smiling faces on the giant school brochure package he brought along. “There’s, like, loads of girls and stuff, you’d like it.”

“I could get more girls being in a rock and roll band,” he muttered into another pint of ale. “Bein’ in school will just slow us down.”

“Just pick a program and try it out for a year to make your parents happy,” I coaxed him. “We’ll be famous rock stars by then, anyways.”
So, we decided to let destiny choose for us. I opened the book to the page with the course listings and held it against the wall. Keith stood back a few feet and tossed darts at the book, miraculously avoiding my face and hands. The only dart that wedged itself in far enough to stick in the pages had landed on ‘media journalism’. The next morning, Keith enrolled for a bachelor’s degree in media journalism and he hated it ever since.

I was secretly pleased to have someone to share the burden of education with. Sometimes the other guys just didn’t understand how stressful university could be or just how much time I needed to study in peace. Keith was always willing to testify on my behalf which was great. Unfortunately, this meant Keith only confided in me that he was struggling in classes, or how many times he skipped classes entirely. I watched his self-confidence falter and his own self-doubt grow as he was faced with something huge he couldn’t master, and I felt guilty for pushing him to be more like me.

After our lunch, we trudged downstairs and sat on the beat up couch in the basement together. I shared a blunt with Keith while he hooked up his laptop to the telly to watch Netflix. I couldn’t focus much on reading, so I tried to write in my notebook. Only a few vague love lyrics were worthy of keeping. Was there any way of truly capturing the bliss of smoking weed on a spring afternoon with a friend in song lyrics?

I ended up abandoning the lyrics to watch the X-Files with Keith, which he had been binge-watching all month. Eventually I curled up on my side and took a little nap, stretching my feet out onto Keith’s lap, which for some reason he never complained about. I woke up in a warm daze later when John came downstairs too, and sat on the ground with his back against the couch, wrapped in his comforter for emotional protection. It took me a few hazy minutes to realize he was talking on the phone.

“Rog is wondering if we’d be cool with cheese pizza for dinner tonight?” John asked, covering the mouthpiece of his phone.

“I want pepperoni,” Keith yawned, rubbing his face in his hands.

John consulted Roger on the phone, then covered it up again. “He says they have a special on, and plain cheese is cheaper. He also said that if you want pepperoni, you can get a job and bring home more money.”

I chuckled, and Keith groaned theatrically. “Fine, cheese will do.”

“Thank you, Roger,” I called out.

“Pete says thank you,” John repeated into the phone.

That phone call usually gave us a warning to scramble and clean the house before Roger came home. The man went as far as to make sure we were all well-fed every night, the least we could do was keep his house clean.

I set off to sluggishly tidy the kitchen, cursing myself for wasting a whole afternoon getting high when I could have been doing something productive or working on mastering my art. I always tried to pressure myself to work harder in my free time. But the comforting ritual of getting high was more entertaining and put me in a much better mood. Part of me just wanted to enjoy my youth and every waking moment by relaxing and having fun. That wasn’t a crime, was it?
Thursday, April 6th
23 days until the concert

On Thursdays, I had a late night photography class at 7. For an hour or two, we all met in the computer lab in the basement of one of the newest buildings where our prof would teach us about different computer programs for photo editing, or different photography or video techniques. Then, we were allowed to stay and use the equipment to work on our various projects. Our main focus now was finishing our year end assignment, which was a big photo essay. Half of it was a massive portfolio of photos that told your story, and if you failed that miserably, you could at least redeem yourself on the written portion.

After the tutorial, I went to one of the work rooms with my laptop to hang out with two friends, Sam and Max. They were the biggest queers I’ve ever met, and considering I go to a big art school in the middle of London, that’s a hefty statement. Sam was your typical punkish lesbian with her hair dyed neon pink with one side of her head shaved, and all her shirts had the sleeves viciously torn off. Her backpack and jean jacket had buttons pinned on everywhere, with aggressive political statements in cute pink writing. Max was her best friend and girlfriend, and also the first trans girl I’ve ever met. She’s incredibly trendy and can wear literally anything she wants and it still somehow looks effortlessly sexy. I really liked how the pair was aggressively peaceful. They were never obnoxious about politics unless they needed to take a stand, and they thought everything I said from my boyish point of view was genuinely funny. Even though they were such complex people, spending time with them was always relaxed and fun.

I sat with my laptop at a table to the side and puttered around on Photoshop while Sam started setting up tripods and cables and lights. For the most part, I had already finished taking my pictures for the project last month. I was struck by those rare glimpses of London you see when you’re riding past on the bus really quickly, where old London is right next to a brand new London, like seeing cranes and workmen updating an old historic neighbourhood. I’m fascinated by the way the past keeps popping up in the future, as if its life cycle is repeating itself generation by generation. A building that was once a bakery two hundred years ago is now a cute little bookshop, and maybe in another two hundred years it’ll still be another little shop.

Tonight I was editing one of my favourite photos of the shoot, where there was a brand new Starbucks being built right beside an ancient crumbling apartment, which was the birthplace of a famous English writer. It’s easy to be cynical about imminent gentrification—rightfully so—but there’s something in its fickle nature that’s almost hopeful. Starbucks, a sign of our generation, will be there decades down the road until it’s a historical artifact just like its neighbour. All the brand new things we create are already becoming history. I find the permanent-yet-impermanent nature of the world scary and exciting at the same time.

“How’re things with the band coming along, Pete?” Max asked me, her deep, scratchy voice oozing out when she said my name in her posh accent.

“It’s coming along,” I sighed, frustrated with Photoshop already. “We still have a hell of a lot of work to do. I need to finish some more songs so we can rehearse and get some more shit in our repertoire.”

“When’s the show again?” Sam asked.

“On the twenty-ninth,” I told her, wincing. “Only twenty-three more days, dear god.”
“Shit, remind me to buy tickets when I get paid next, okay?” Sam told me.

“And I’m still taking concert photos for you guys, yeah?” Max said.

“Right, we need to scrape together some money for that,” I fumbled around with my notebook and wrote myself a reminder.

Max gave me her signature tender look, those big chocolatey eyes warmly melting away any worry of mine. “No need, I want to do this one for free.”

I reassured her, a bit embarrassed. “Oh, it’s no problem really, we can find some money somewhere to pay you.”

“Pete, I insist,” she smiled and I couldn’t help but smile either. “I’m doing it as your friend.”

“I would be incredibly screwed without you two,” I buried my face in my hands, grinning like an idiot. “Seriously, thank you both. I’ll totally return the favour whenever you need it.”

“Actually,” Sam came to sit down with me, and gave Max a mischievous side glance. I instantly regretted my words. “We know exactly how you could help us.”

“And no, it doesn’t have anything to do with a turkey baster,” Max smirked, and I blushed furiously.

“We need someone to model for our project, would you be so kind as to stand in for us?” Sam batted her eyelashes.

I snorted. “You couldn’t have picked anyone uglier to model for you?”

“Oh, Pete,” Max clutched a hand to her heart, always taking my self-deprecating jokes personally.

“You love us, so you’re forced to be patient and agreeable,” Sam explained.

Max smiled, walking over to the table. “Our project theme is hardcore bondage and—“

“She’s kidding!” Sam cried, elbowing Max. “She’s totally kidding. Please don’t run away screaming, no one else would work with us.”

“Oh my god,” I laughed. “I have a feeling I’m going to regret saying yes.”

Sam clapped, delighted. “Brilliant! I’ll text you what you need to bring, we can shoot you next week. I’m doing Max today—“

Max grinned. “Hell yeah, you are.”

Sam rolled her eyes. “—and I’ll update you on everything later. But we ought to actually start working before it gets too late.”

“On one condition,” I raised my bony index finger. “When you come to the concert, you have to scream a lot and act super excited as if you’re watching the second coming of Christ or something, promise?”

Max and Sam nodded solemnly. “We promise.”

“Cool,” I grinned at my friends. The two sprang up from the table, eager to start working on their own assignment. Max pulled a stool in front of Sam’s camera and they started adjusting the lighting. I jammed some headphones in my ears and played some ambient music from an artist you’ve
definitely never heard of, and went back to work.

At around 11:30, I made it onto my regular bus home, yawning like crazy. I worked until Sam and Max were done packing up so I could wait with them at their bus stop and make sure they got on safely. I worried for both of them, but Sam and I worried even more for Max’s safety, especially at night. It was always the older people who harassed her, unwilling to understand her life, which was appalling behaviour from grownups. Kids our age, especially in such an urban area, didn’t usually give a fuck what her gender is, or instead they obsessively fawned over her for being trans as if it were a novelty. Both options were certainly more favourable than the typical harassment and violence, though.

I nearly fell asleep on the bus, so I scrolled through texts and photos on my phone to keep myself awake until my stop. When I got home at midnight, I heard Keith watching telly in the basement with some of his other friends who lived in the area. I got a drink from the fridge and went upstairs quietly so I wouldn’t wake Roger in his room on the main floor, who was working longer shifts than usual and needed his sleep. I dumped my stuff in my room on the top floor, and then went across the hallway.

John’s door was closed as usual, and I could hear Sinead O’Connor crooning inside. When John broke out the Sinead O’Connor greatest hits album, you knew he was having a tough night. I knocked twice and then let myself in, shutting the door again behind me.

“Hey,” John rubbed at his eyes quickly and turned the volume down on ‘Nothing Compares 2 U’.

“Hey,” I tossed his empty carton of ice cream in the rubbish bin, and crawled under the covers beside John. He quickly closed the Facebook tab where he was less than subtly going through old pictures of him and Alison together. “One of those nights?”

“Yeah, can you tell?” he half-heartedly smirked. He moved his laptop so half rested on his leg and the other half rested on mine, and we aimlessly scrolled through endless blue websites together to distract ourselves. Heartbroken or not, nighttime was always a hard time to suffer through alone. Between the songs on shuffle, his occasional sniffle was the only thing that broke the silence. Even when we were kids together at school, he never spoke openly of his emotions or his problems. He told me once that his parent’s horrendously messy divorce made him feel like his childish problems were never bad enough and thus not worth discussing. And if something was really bothering him, there was too much adult drama going on for anyone to take him seriously. So, he taught himself to bottle it all up, even around me.

Eventually we were back at Alison’s page. I gently encouraged John to keep looking at the photos, hopefully to remind him of all the good times and not the bad ending. He lingered on one of my favourites, an old one that John had set as his profile picture for the longest time, and everyone we knew had commented about how much they loved it. John and Alison were our school’s ultimate power couple. In the picture, the three of us were graduating sixth form on the most beautiful summer’s day. Alison’s mother had called to get her attention, so the photo captured her turning to look over her shoulder and smiling, her long curled hair fanning out behind her elegantly. John was standing beside her with an arm around her waist, candidly captured looking at Alison in awe and adoration as if she were more astounding than all the planets and stars in the universe combined.

Even I felt sad looking at it. I had made the wrong choice in letting him look through the photos, and I quickly closed the tab and shut John’s laptop. The room went completely dark. We both sat very quietly for a few moments.

“This sucks,” was all John could muster.
“It does, John. It really does.” How could a love, one woven together tightly over years, one that ran so deep, just shatter like that? To this day the exact details of why they broke up were never spoken of. From what I gathered, it was just as surprising to him as it was to us, and it had been Alison’s long-meditated decision and not the catastrophic result of a fight.

“You know what else sucks?”

“What?” I asked gently.

“I had been saving all my money since I got this stupid steady job, so I could buy her a stupid ring and propose when she finished college next year like we planned, and maybe even start a family in a few years. Now I have all this money sitting there and taunting me and no wife to spend it on.” John’s voice had gone all tight and pinched.

I bit my lip. I didn’t want to convince John that they were finished for good, because like him, we were all secretly praying for a speedy recovery. John and Alison had one of the steadiest, long lasting relationships any of us had ever seen, even more wholesome and plentiful than our own parent’s marriages. If I told him to spend the money on something stupid, he would drown his sorrows in too much alcohol because that meant even I gave up on hope for their relationship. If I told him to save the money, I’d be getting his hopes up. “How about you give me all that money to hang on to?”

John’s laugh was a weary huff from his nose, which reassured me he still had his humour. With a sigh, he rolled onto his side, facing me in the dark. “At least it happened now.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, at least she wasn’t going to fake it until we were married and had a kid already and then cheat on me or something and ruin the poor kid’s life.”

“I guess that’s one way to look at it,” I stretched my arms behind my head, staring up at the ceiling.

“She said she still loved me, but it wasn’t...” he cut himself off quickly.

“It’s okay,” I murmured.

“It can’t believe we ended up like my parents,” John’s voice went muffled, and I realized he was lying face down on his pillow. I reached over and pushed his shoulder until he rolled back over and could breathe properly again, because I couldn’t be sure he wouldn’t actually try and smother himself.

“You didn’t end up like your parents John, and you never will,” I coaxed him gently. “Dude, you just turned twenty. You have a huge chunk of your life left to live. There’s no time limit to find someone and settle down.”

“I already figured my life out and she is supposed to be in it,” he grumbled. “As long as I had her and the band, I would be happy. I only wanted two things from life and she ruined it all. She betrayed me. She screwed up my life, too. She’s such a...” he stopped short.

“Say it, John. Say something mean.”

“I don’t want to. I love her.”

“Call her something awful, I dare you.”

“She’s a...” John sighed. “She’s a not-nice person. She made me not happy.”
“There we go,” I smiled. “Not all hope is lost. Now you can devote your life to the band.”

“How pathetic,” John didn’t see this opportunity like I did. He buried his face in his hands. “I’m pathetic. I’m a fucking joke. I had the most perfect girl in the world and I fucked it up. I can’t handle a girlfriend, I can’t even handle a desk job because I’m wallowing in self-pity all day, I don’t remember the last time I showered, I’m in a band that isn’t going anywhere, and I play the fucking bass guitar. Not even a proper guitar like you, though. I chose to be pretentious and dedicate my life to mastering an instrument that literally no one gives a shit about for a reason, and I think I’m clinically depressed and I sort of really want to die all the time.”

My throat felt tight. I reached over in the dark, resting my hand on his arm. “John, come on.”

“I’m serious, the thought of throwing myself into a river and drowning sounds like heaven compared to all the shit piling up in my head,” his voice went very low. “I’ve never been this bad before, Pete.”

“Don’t say that,” I started to get really worried. I had pushed him too far.

“Maybe I’ll walk into traffic and get flattened by a gigantic lorry.”

“John, stop.”

“Or maybe I’ll take a knife and cut all the way down my stomach and let all my organs spill out and get this horrible feeling out of me—“

“John, please, you’re scaring me,” I whispered, and thankfully John stopped. He went dangerously quiet again, and I got really worried that he thought I was blocking him off from sharing his feelings. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to aggravate you like that.”

“It’s okay,” he lied.

“Oh, good,” I lied too.

John reached for his laptop again, opening it up. The bright white blinded both of us, and he started playing more sad music.

“Do you want me to go?” I asked softly.

“Can you stay?” he asked me bluntly instead. I answered by laying down on my side, and he lay down again too, and we looked at each other just like all those times we shared a bed together as kids. He stayed quiet, his eyebrows furrowed deeply in focus, like all those nights he came over to escape his parents’ arguing and tried to stay straight-faced and stoic through it all.

I waited until John’s eyes slowly slid shut before closing mine too. As I drifted off to sleep, each thought chased after the tail of the previous one, leaving a hurricane of unanswerable questions. Why were happy relationships like Sam and Max’s so seemingly unachievable? Why do things never work out, no matter how hard you believe in them? Why can’t you ever love someone hard enough to save them? Why were we all so goddamn sad all the time? Why does our generation never want to be like our parents until we grow up to be exactly like them?
john
@johnnybgoode

sinead o'connor is the only one who understands me

3:13 AM · 7 April 17

keef
@moontheloon

@johnnybgoode look dude all we need is a guy's night out, maybe a few strippers, and you'll get right over your heartbreak

3:15 AM · 07 April 17
chapter 7

Friday, April 7th
22 days until the concert.

Thankfully, I didn’t have any classes on Friday. Keith did, but I don’t think he attended it one day of his life. We rehearsed all afternoon when Roger came home from work, and usually ended early to go out and have fun like normal people.

I didn’t have anything close to a song to show them yet. I had just been fucking around with lyrics this week. The closest we got to composing was me playing a chord progression I had floating in the back of my head and Roger trying to come up with lyrics on the spot. Truth be told, lyricism wasn’t Roger’s strong suit. We tried to be patient with him to avoid shattering his ego, but it was getting painful to endure every variation of a phrase about falling in love with someone. When Roger sensed our boredom, he wound up very frustrated with himself very quickly.

Roger started fidgeting nervously. “Pete, this is embarrassing. You’re the smart one, you should just keep writing all the lyrics. I’m no good.”

I scratched the back of my head, looking to John and Keith for some sort of backup, but they weren’t even paying attention. Keith was showing John something on his phone. “John? Keith? What do you think?”

They pulled back into focus, resuming their usual positions behind their instruments. John idly plucked a few strings to keep himself occupied. “Yeah, Pete should stick to lyrics. Can’t you just scribble something down really quick so we have something new to practice with?”

I shifted uncomfortably. Roger was looking down at his feet awkwardly, and I felt bad that I had forced him through such a humiliating process, but I didn’t say anything. Hopefully he’d understand. “I don’t know, what kind of songs do you guys want to hear?”

“Well, all girls are good for is sex,” Keith stretched over his kit to high-five John.

I knew they were joking but I was really out of my domain now. In my head, I scrambled to weave together some story about a girl and sex, both two ridiculously foreign concepts to me.

Beside me, Roger checked his watch instead of his phone like a regular person. “Do you guys want to take a quick break or something? We haven’t really made much progress tonight but we could use a refresher…”

I put my guitar aside and searched the basement to find my notebook. John and Keith looked at each other again, still scheming. John informed Roger, “Actually, Keith and I were going to go out tonight, so we’re gonna leave out soon.”

Roger’s face scrunched up in frustration. “You can’t go out, we need to rehearse.”

“How can we rehearse if we only have one song?” John put his bass on the stand too. “We can’t keep practicing covers of songs we like, that’s actually detrimental to our progress, don’t you think?”

I sat on the couch with my notebook, feeling guilt weigh down on me once again. I had no one to
blame except for my own brain for not fucking working like it should. I stayed silent, jotting a few ideas down on the bleached pages, watching as Roger’s fists balled up. He always wanted to be the leader, so he could have his chance now.

“This is a team effort, you can always chip in and help, you know.” Roger told him.

“To be fair, Pete writes everything and you just tell us what to do,” Keith came out from behind his drum kit. “You never need us until the end of the whole process to keep you in rhythm.” John nodded in agreement.

Roger looked back at me for support, but they weren’t wrong. I saw Roger try and hold himself a bit taller. “You don’t leave unless I say you can leave.”

An icy rift floated between us all now. I felt like we were all on a giant iceberg threatening to break into four pieces.

John spoke very calmly. “You can come with us if you want, Rog. You too, Pete.”

“We’re seeing the new Bond movie,” Keith chimed in.

Roger looked between the two of them. “No, I’m going to stay behind and work on songwriting and our expenses for the show and other marketing stuff, and you two should be here to help.”

John looked at me. “Pete? Are you gonna come with us?”

All eyes were on me now. I closed my notebook, holding my place with my thumb. I had originally said I was going to go with them, but it was a fleeting decision before I realized how much work I had to do. Of course I wanted to go out with my friends like a normal person on a Friday night and shake off the stresses of the week, but John and Keith kept guilt tripping me every night we rehearsed and I didn’t have a new song for them. If I walked out on Roger, I would lose some of my power as the unofficial creative director of the band, which I held on it desperately because I wanted to drive our art in the direction I envisioned (whatever that was). I looked between all my friends.

“I’ll pass on this one actually, I need to catch up on writing,” I tried not to sound disappointed. “Tell Daniel Craig I say hi.”

Roger relaxed now that at least I was on his side. We were now cut in half with one clean slice. John and Keith exchanged yet another look where they conspired with each other telepathically and left the rest of us out of it. Keith shrugged like the stakes weren’t high at all, which made me angry because it felt as though we were overreacting for nothing.

“Alright, see you later then,” John told us so nonchalantly I saw Roger tense up again. He and Keith crossed the basement and went back upstairs, already back to joking between themselves again like it was nothing. Once they were gone, Roger stalked around the room angrily, silently fuming. I kept my nose in my book and tried to stay neutral.
john
@johnnybgoode

I feel like with a better screenwriter, it could have been a really good movie, but most scenes were drawn out too long and the plot wavered

10:47 PM · 07 April 17

2 RETWEETS 2 FAVOURITES

keef
@moontheloon

I'm losing my damn shit! I love James Bond so much the movie was so good and explosions and the girls I almost died it was so good

10:47 PM · 07 April 17

5 FAVOURITES
Saturday, April 8th
21 days until the concert

I walked down to the small shops down the street to buy us more milk, and enjoy the fresh spring air for once before it started raining in London’s usual biblical proportions. I had recently downloaded a whole bunch of new Pearl Jam albums and listened to them on my walk, and I felt perfectly moody and angsty the whole time, thinking of a young man’s struggles in the world today.

When I got back to the house, our neighbour and her sister were out on her front porch, enjoying the mild weather like I was. They both smiled and waved at me. “Hello, Peter!”

“Hi, Maureen. Quite the lovely day, isn’t it?” I left the shopping bag on our front step and walked over the lawn to talk. Maureen was a funny old lady, who told us she vowed to be a bachelorette until the day she died. She only had her female friends over. She was equally firm and prude, as well as sweet and caring. She’s saved our asses more times than I could count whenever we needed help pleading with our landlord, fixing broken pipes, or hearing yet another story about growing up during WWII.

“Absolutely beautiful out today,” she chuffed, patting down the small curlers in her white hair. “I was telling Doris that this time last spring wasn’t nearly as nice. Usually April is so horrid in the city. Oh, you remember my sister Doris, don’t you, Peter?”

“I do,” I smiled gently. Doris came by every week and she always said the same thing. “Hello Doris, how have you been?”

Maureen shifted her chair over so I could sit on the front step with them. Doris looked perpetually pissed off. She always spoke slowly and precisely, trying to make her Glaswegian accent sound more posh. “Well, I finally got my tablets all sorted out for my blood pressure before I found out it conflicted with my antibiotics, but we have to be careful because I can’t possibly stop taking either of them, and I’m hoping and praying it doesn’t affect our plans for the upcoming surgery next month because Lord knows I can’t wait any longer to have my knees fixed…”

I did my best sympathetic nodding, even though I felt sick to my stomach. If that’s what being old was like, I definitely didn’t want to make it that far.

Maureen grabbed my arm, giving me her worried frowning face. “Peter, are they even feeding you next door? I swear, you’re skinnier every time I see you.”

I blushed. Everyone always said I was so damn skinny nowadays. It wasn’t even because I was a trendy chain smoking artist, I was just doomed with the body of a twelve-year-old. “Yes, Maureen. Roger feeds me well, don’t worry.”

Maureen and Doris exchanged a look that I didn’t quite understand. Maureen let go of my arm yet continued prodding. “Enough fruits? Enough vegetables? Are you going to the dentist? You know, when we were growing up after the war, we didn’t have fruits or vegetables or dentists. Everyone was just depressed all the time.”

I couldn’t help but laugh, because some things she said just didn’t make any sense. “Yes, I’m eating
fruits and vegetables and I’ve been to the dentist already this year. I understand that though, everyone my age is depressed all the time too, we can’t help it.”

Doris wrinkled her nose. “You kids don’t have anything to be depressed about. Your lives are so easy.”

I was about to respectfully disagree and tell her that the pressure to live was too damn overwhelming, but thankfully Maureen knew to intervene. “How are the other boys, then?”

“Uh, Roger and Jackie are good, Keith is his own version of good, and John’s still nursing his broken heart,” I went through the regular checklist.

“Poor John,” Maureen frowned. “I noticed he hasn’t been out in a while. I should invite him over for tea sometime.”

“I think he’d appreciate that,” I said, honestly. John would never admit it, but he thrived when women took care of him.

“And what about school?” Maureen turned to Doris with all the pride of a mother. “Doris, did you know Peter got in to the big art school? He learns art theory and studies literature, did you know that Doris?”

“I do know,” Doris told her. “You tell me all the time.”

“Peter said he’d paint a big portrait of me, in oil and in a fancy frame like the Queen,” Maureen bragged.

“I’m working on it,” I grinned, which was our little joke. I swore I would actually do it one day, though. Maureen loved us like we were her own kids, she definitely deserved it.

“I was downtown near your school the other day,” Doris wrinkled her nose yet again. “The way you kids dress these days is quite...shocking, to say kindly. Have you noticed that, Maureen?”

“Oh, absolutely,” Maureen agreed. “Peter, I always meant to ask why they do that. The girls I see are wearing skirts so short now, it’s like they have no respect for themselves. We would have never done that when we were younger.”

Doris nudged Maureen. “Don’t be silly, of course Pete isn’t going to complain about girls wearing short skirts, he loves that sort of thing.”

I laughed uncomfortably, a bit taken aback by such a bold assumption on my behalf.

Maureen rolled her eyes. “Okay, then why do the boys wear jeans so tight? Or dress in old mangy clothes from secondhand stores?”

“It’s fashionable now,” I shrugged, trying to defend my fellow teenagers.

Doris kept prodding. “And all the metal they have in their faces? I mean, it’s one thing to pierce your ears. Every woman should have her ears pierced, but now boys are doing it too.”

Maureen agreed. “Now they’re sticking metal bits in their noses and eyebrows and lips… I think it looks horrid.”

I winced inwardly, but didn’t bother trying to correct them. Adults hated being told that they were wrong.
“And how are things with the band, love?” Maureen asked. “Doris, the boys have a band together, isn’t that so cute?”

“Yes, you’ve told me,” Doris said.

“We’re just getting ready for the concert at the end of the month,” I told them both. “We’re actually going to have a rehearsal this afternoon.”

“Oh, then don’t let me keep blabbering on like this,” Maureen waved me away. “Go on and have fun with your friends.”

I smiled, standing up. “It was nice talking to you both.”

“Don’t be a stranger, you boys are welcome over any time you want,” Maureen kissed my cheek and gave it a little pinch. I promised her we would come over soon, and I awkwardly waved goodbye to Doris before picking up the shopping bag and heading back inside.

The four of us met in the basement shortly after and started setting up our instruments. Things were a bit awkward after all the tension last night. We ran through one of our regular set lists of favourite covers to warm up. John and Roger were on a huge binge for The Police lately. Roger sang the songs really well, and I liked the 80’s new wave feel. The guitar parts were always unique and Keith thought the drum arrangement was fun. Plus, there were always harmonies for John and I to sing.

We had to stop playing ‘Roxanne’ because Keith ruined the song for us. Whenever we were all hanging out and there was a silence, Keith would randomly shout “Roxanne!” in the ugliest voice he could muster from the back of his throat, mocking Sting’s hopeless cry. Without fail, the rest of us would laugh hysterically.

We also performed ‘Every Breath You Take’ a lot, and it was a weirdly common request when we played at wedding receptions. Roger sang at a different octave than usual, and he sang smooth and cool, usually in the general direction of whatever bridesmaid he planned on taking home later that night. I always watched every straight woman and queer man in the room sigh when Roger sang so longingly, “How my poor heart aches, with every step you take…”. I guess everyone wished to be special enough that Roger would stalk them obsessively like the guy in the song.

This afternoon, however, we ran through ‘I Can’t Stand Losing You’, which I thought was especially fun. I tried to move around our makeshift stage, bobbing back and forth on the beat. Roger was really stiff and I didn’t think he realized he was gluing himself to the mic stand. John and I crouched in to sing back up on our only spare mic. ”You can call it lack of confidence, but to carry on living doesn’t make no sense…”

Roger was tentative on singing the part about suicide, because he wasn’t sure if it was offensive or not. I personally liked how bold the song was in addressing it. Keith was too focused on his own drumming. I watched John cycle through anger because he hated every love song now, although he seemed to be pleased with singing, “You’ll be sorry when I’m dead, and all this guilt will be on your head.”

When we finished the song, the energy in the room dropped immediately. Roger looked at me expectantly, waiting to be delivered his next instructions.

John looked frustrated. “Pete, are we ever going to, you know, play our own songs? I didn’t work this hard to join a cover band.”

I frowned. I was still slacking, trying to juggle school and writer’s block at the same time. “I’m working on it, okay?”
Roger looked uneasy. “Do we sound good at least? Am I doing alright?”

“Yeah, we’re fine, just a little uninspired,” I was feeling frustrated too, mostly at myself, and I didn’t feel like indulging Roger and his self-esteem issues right now. John rolled his eyes and took his bass off to put it aside, dejected already.

“Cover bands are super popular though,” Keith, bless him, tried to lighten the mood. “I think we should actually rebrand into a Pussycat Dolls cover band.” He jumped out from behind his drum kit and attempted to sing ‘Don’t Cha’.

John flopped backwards onto the couch, laughing at Keith. “Don’t hurt me like that, I’m still not over the group’s breakup.”

I ignored both of them, and put my guitar aside too. We all huddled together on the couch.

“What do we even want to make songs about?” I asked. “What does our band represent? Who are we? What are we even doing with our damn lives?”

Keith sat on the couch next to me and stretched his feet out on my lap. “We’re The Detours, and we chose that name wisely cause all we do is bypass big problems and take a long time to figure shit out.”

John looked smug. Roger looked wounded, because it was his band, and I felt bad too because I was investing so much in this and I felt like it was on the verge of falling apart all over again. Plus, John was pissing me off. I wanted to keep him quiet in the back so he wouldn’t complain about the unavoidable fact that we were slowly sinking.

“Well, we can’t do any love songs or else John will start crying in the middle of the set,” A petty jab, I know. “And anything about the woes of being a student is out of the question for you guys.”

I meant to get back at Keith, but I realized too late that I had hurt Roger too.

“What the fuck is your problem?” John demanded rather viciously.

Roger, caught in between us, intervened. “Pete, don’t be an ass.”

Keith looked over at the others, pouting mockingly. “No, he has a point. It would be just as unfair as us writing songs about sex. Poor Pete wouldn’t understand what it’s like.”

“Oh yes,” John agreed. “Just like how the rest of us understand what it’s like to work hard and earn your own money. Pete just has his rich daddy give him everything he wants.” Roger averted his eyes, saying nothing.

The low blows nearly winded me. I watched John crack a shit eating smile as I grappled for words. “You don’t know a goddamned thing about me.” I shoved Keith’s legs off of my lap and stood up. I didn’t know what I stood up to do, but I was suddenly so angry I wanted to smash something. I felt humiliated and insecure about those things already, but now the things that weren’t my fault were being used against me. I loathed my friends for throwing me under the bus like that, although hypocritically.

“Oh alright, enough of this. You’re all being childish. Everyone go cool off.” Roger stood up too. “I’m going to go for a jog, and when I come back, you better be prepared to work again. We have 21 days left to figure things out, for fuck’s sakes.”

I stalked back to my room angrily, avoiding my own friends out of humiliation, and leaving Keith
and John to inevitably plot behind my back. I shut and locked my bedroom door, then flopped onto my bed. Why did I always lash out like that? I hated how I kept hurting my friends just because they made me angry. An actual adult would just express their frustration and work it out humanely. I guess I wasn’t even mature enough for that.

I scribbled some of my feelings down in my notebook, hoping to at least capitalize off of my own fuck ups in the name of art. A few lyrics seemed worthy of keeping for something, so I highlighted the ones I liked best. Then, I listened to some sad music to calm myself down a little. At least if I was sad, I wouldn’t have the energy to be angry.

I found myself thinking back to how we all started this band not long ago, because I desperately needed to remember why we were doing this all in the first place.

Things moved so quickly and favourably for us that it was hard to believe it actually happened. In a year, everything came together by pure luck. Roger had met John by chance. They were both looking for a flatmate and a band, separately. Roger remembered going to school with us even though me and John were a year below him, but that meant Roger already favoured John. John got into the band easily and recommended me for lead guitarist, something I will be indebted to him for the rest of my life. I used this as an excuse to move out of my parents’ house, and worked with the band and at school with all the burning confidence of a freshman on his own for the first time. There were still some other older guys playing with us who we swapped out all the time with new people. Either they fought with Roger too much, or they didn’t have the same direction as us. It never occurred to me that I could be kicked out just as quickly.

We played gigs at pubs without actually knowing what we were doing, but making easy money off of Roger’s looks and charm. I distinctly remember playing at a greasy old pub where Roger sat on a tall stool and sang old R&B songs, and the way he crooned Jimmy Reed made me fucking weak. I hadn’t felt that feeling again until Keith auditioned and we all jammed together for the first time, and I realized we had created something really damn good. John and I loved Keith instantly and convinced Roger to let him join. He was still a kid but bounced between our house and his parents’ house, even though he unofficially lived with us and slept on our couch practically every night. When he graduated school, Keith took Roger’s old bedroom so Roger could move into the old office on the main floor for more privacy with his girlfriend Jackie, and we started working seriously.

I finally felt the bubbling of guilt that I needed. We were a good group together, and I loved these guys dearly. I needed to shape up so I could keep them around. They were my only ticket to becoming the successful musician I’ve always wanted to be.

Eventually I heard Roger come back from his run, so I crept out of my room. I caught him just as he was going to his room on the main floor to change, and he smiled at me. He was one of those people who looked radiant and full of life after exercising. What a bastard.

I went back downstairs where Keith and John were half watching telly, half surfing the net on their phones. I stood at the bottom of the stairs, trying not to look like a sullen child with his fists balled up. I cleared my throat, and they both looked up at me. “I’m sorry for being a big bag of dicks and taking my frustration out on you.”

Keith laughed, and my wise choice of wording worked. He always thought the measurement of ‘a bag of dicks’ was hilarious. John looked as though he was beyond the whole thing already. “Pete, you’re the biggest asshole I know, I don’t know why I expect anything different.”

“Sorry for not taking any of your bullshit and slandering you right back,” Keith moved and patted the spot on the couch beside him.
“I deserved it. But we really should keep personal stuff and band stuff separate before it gets messy,” I sat with my friends again, forgiven. “You both are really vicious, I’m kind of proud with your efficiency though.”

Keith and John shrugged modestly. I laughed too, but it dawned on me that I really couldn’t fuck with them. They might not be on the business side of things like Roger and I were, but without their alliance, we would crash and burn.

Roger came downstairs, having changed out of his sweaty clothes and into simple jeans and a white Nirvana shirt. Roger didn’t even listen to Nirvana but he wore the shirt so damn well, I certainly didn’t mind.

Instead of joining us on the couch, Roger stood in front of us with his arms crossed, taking a stand as unofficial leader of the band. “I’ve done some thinking,” he announced. “And considering the time crunch, it would be in the best interest of the band to buckle down and get our personal lives together so we can be better as a band. Can we all agree on that much?”

I crossed my legs, suddenly nervous. I didn’t like when Roger got all dictatorial, a bit out of envy for power as well as worry that Keith and John would rebel. All four of us were rebellious in our own way, and we made a rock band to clearly state we didn’t like when one person took control of us.

“John, do you have any plans to return to work this month?” Roger asked.

“Hell no,” John told him. “I got two weeks off cause I told them my dad died, and I have another two weeks of vacation days saved up.”

It was awful to think that the breakup had affected him so profoundly he couldn’t even get himself out of bed to work, but Keith and I laughed at the morbidity anyways. Truthfully, John and his father hadn’t spoken in at least six years and neither had any intention to break that habit, and he used the ‘dead dad’ card more often than you would think.

“Alright,” Roger said. “We know you’re going through a really hard time, and we’re all sympathetic and we care about you. That being said, you have twenty-one days to make a turn around so you can be better than ever without her when we perform. You’ll blow everyone away with your bass playing, and then all the girls will be all over you and you can actually enjoy it.”

John scratched his stubbly chin thoughtfully. I naively thought Roger was doing a good job, but none of us realized that you can’t just control your mental and emotional problems with clever scheduling and pre-planning.

“So, every day from now until the show, you’ll shower and get dressed and eat proper meals, yeah? I’ll give you some small errand to do every day so you can get out of the house, enjoy the fresh air, and stay busy,” Roger told him. Clever man. “Your head will be nice and clear so we can work in the evenings, and I’ll have more time to devote to you all as well since I won’t need to rush around town buying milk or whatever.”

So far, everyone nodded with approval.

“Next, Roger said, shifting on his feet. “Keith and Pete, you two will make sure the other is on top of your school work. Your mornings and afternoons will be dedicated to going to classes and catching up on studying.”

I looked at Keith. We both knew it would be for the best. Roger promised an organized, fruitful future for us, which inspired me to be better.
“Every evening for the rest of the month will be dedicated to practicing on your own, as a band, or writing songs, with the exception of Thursdays, because Pete has a late night class so the rest of us can have a break,” Roger turned to me, smiling sympathetically. “Pete, you gotta do what you need to do to churn out some new songs, man.”

I nodded. “Yeah, I owe it to you guys.”

“We’ll help you out with whatever you need,” John told me. “I elect that we only perform original songs.”

“How long is our set again?” Keith asked.

I ran a hand through my hair. “The wild card spot got us a twenty minute set. That’s about four short pop songs, or three super short ones and a long one, or two long ones, or…”

“What do you think will sound better,” Roger asked us. “One song that we would already be known for, and then three new ones? Or…”

John agreed, and Keith nodded. “’I Can’t Explain’ is something people would recognize from when we got those university radio stations to play it last year. We can also plaster our recording of the song everywhere to advertise our gig.”

I cringed. ‘I Can’t Explain’ was already a year old, but I was sick of it. I wrote it in two days when I was 18 and horribly infatuated with some random girl, and I used to think it was the best damn thing I’d ever done. I promised myself after that that I would write ambitiously to try and outshine my 18-year-old self.

“Good point,” Roger seemed pleased with Keith, and Keith glowed with the approval. “Keith, do you want to be in charge of our online presence?”

“Fuck yes,” Keith grinned, rubbing his hands together mischievously. John couldn’t have been more excited, he thought Keith was the funniest person in the world. Now that I thought of it, Keith would be the perfect posterboy for our teenaged audience.

I had to interject, though. “Let’s keep things professional first, then we can be funny later. We can’t risk offending anyone before we even have a solid fan base.”

“Understood,” Keith smiled. Things shifted nicely into place at that moment. If you give respect and trust, thou shalt receive respect and trust in return.

Roger sat on the arm of the couch next to me. “Pete, do you think you’ll be able to handle writing three new songs, like, as soon as fucking possible?”

It would certainly be ambitious, but getting it over with now would propel us yet another step forward as a band, close enough to have a collection of songs to potentially release as an album. And even more importantly, I needed to prove myself to be worthy to my bandmates. “I can do it.”

“Atta boy,” John grinned, and we were back to normal. “You can write as many love songs as you want, everyone loves that shit.”

“He’s probably going to write some gay shit about the meaning of life or whatever,” Keith teased me. Then, he acted all macho. “If you want to write songs about sex, you can consult me, I’m a bit of an expert.”

I narrowed my eyes. “What the fuck is a sex?”
I made my friends burst out in laughter, which I would later on learn was more rewarding than any silly personal achievement I would make in my early career.

Chapter End Notes

next seven chapters will be posted september 30th! let me know what you think so far!
Sunday, April 9th
20 days until the concert

The next morning, I came downstairs to find John and Roger huddling over John’s laptop at the table. I refilled the kettle and set it to boil again, and sat down with them. “What are you two doing?”

“I’m signing John up for a class at the community centre,” Roger told me, eyebrows furrowed in concentration as he tried to navigate the website.

“And I’m begging him not to sign me up for a class at the community centre,” John told me, mouthing HELP.

“John, please, it’ll be good for you,” Roger pleaded gently. “You’ll get one hour of physical activity one day a week, and I’ll be happy. Come on, do it for me.”

“Are you saying I’m getting fat?” John asked with a purposely large chunk of his granola bar in his mouth.

“No, god no,” Roger reassured him quickly, feeling guilty even though John was just being an ass. “I was just saying that a little exercise will do you some good, it’ll make you feel better.”

“I’m not taking a stupid dance class, though,” John rolled his eyes. I stood up to lean over Roger’s shoulder, reading the list of classes available. I covered my mouth to stop myself from laughing.

“What?” John asked, sipping on his coffee.

“John, I, uh,” Roger double checked the list. “There’s only one class left that accepts newcomers so late in the season.”

“Oh, god, what is it?” he asked.

“It sounds really great,” I struggled to say convincingly.

“Roger, tell me,” John demanded.

“Okay, I’m signing you up for this aqua jazzercise thing on Wednesday afternoons okay?” Roger said quickly, signing into the page and filling out the form.

“No,” John looked panicked. “No, for the love of god, spare me—“

“John, it’ll be so much fun,” I desperately tried to keep a straight face. “It’s like dancing, but like, in the water.”

“I literally can’t think of anything more humiliating than that,” John wailed.

“Shh,” Roger coaxed him. “You won’t get hot and sweaty, and the water gives you extra resistance so you get a full body workout without even realizing it.”

“No, I’d much rather get fat and die, actually,” John buried his face in his hands. Roger looked over at me, desperate.

I sat down next to John at the table again. “Hey Rog, isn’t that the class that all those hip suburban
mums take at night?”

Roger smiled, and played along. “Yeah, and it’s at the community centre in that really rich neighbourhood, so all the mums can afford boob jobs and stuff.”

John looked up suddenly. Score.

Roger chewed on a hangnail. “Shit, I won’t be able to drive you, though. I won’t get home in enough time. You’d have to take the tube there.”

John groaned, so I stepped in. “Wednesday night, right? I don’t usually have anything planned. I can go down there with you.”

John looked at me with pleading eyes. “Please, do the class with me, we’ll make a pact to drown each other in the pool and—”

“Fuck no,” I cut him off with a grin. “I’ll just sit in the waiting area and catch up on schoolwork. Right, Rog?”

Roger sighed, finishing the electronic application and submitting it. “Yeah, whatever works with you both.”

I ate my breakfast with John and Roger, before Roger left to run errands and then spend time with Jackie. John then went downstairs to be alone with Dr. Mario once again, the only distraction that held his focus anymore. Keith stormed about the house before deciding he was going round to one of his friends who lived within walking distance from us. I didn’t like that friend very much because he was always hooking Keith up with drugs he definitely didn’t need, but I also loved it because he was hooking Keith up with drugs he didn’t need and sometimes shared with me.

I felt proud of myself for getting organized neatly with a cup of tea and my new pens and notebook so I could start writing some more. I even tweeted about how I was busy songwriting like I was a damn pro already. I got some solid song ideas out, highlighting what would be funny or interesting concepts to sing about. I liked creating characters so I could sing about their stories. My own stories were sad and pathetic, and I didn’t think people would like hearing much about that.

I wrote some fluffy rhyming couplets, but ultimately got distracted when Summer from my sculpture class started texting me. I reassured myself that I could easily finish hammering out this song whenever I wanted to, and indulged in all that glorious attention from such a pretty girl.

I finally caught Summer when she wasn’t distracted, because we actually had a proper conversation for once. I found it really easy to talk to her, and she was playful and funny. I quickly became smitten with her.

One topic flowed into another, and eventually we got to talking about past relationships. I don’t have much of those so I focused all the questions to her instead. It turns out Summer got out of a relationship just before school started again this year. Her ex was a drummer in some band that never took off, so I know she likes musician types. She kinda kept going on and on about how he was funny and romantic and sexy and all that. I don’t know why, but I got competitive with some guy who I’ve never even met. If I could be better than him, then Summer would instantly like me and maybe she would want to be my girlfriend.

When it eventually became time for me to talk about my past, I kept things vague. I mentioned I had been with some girls in the past which wasn’t a lie, but it was also very much up to interpretation. I told her a lot about the band and my musical history. I acted more interested in the bands or movies
Summer liked than I actually was. I tried to seem funny and romantic and sexy to impress Summer. I think it sorta worked. It wasn’t like I was lying, anyways. I just phrased things differently so she’d think of me better, which was understandable, right?

I eventually gave up on writing, feeling good about having thought of two pages full of ideas. I wandered downstairs to where John had been sitting in the same position for hours playing Dr. Mario. I sat next to him on the couch and watched his fingers expertly work the controller.

“Just a sec;” he told me, cleverly working those multicoloured pills down and eliminated the last few viruses in one move. He put the controller aside, facing me. “You know, I’m feeling really good today. I want to do something fun again.”

I grinned, genuinely happy for him. “You totally deserve it! Let’s go out.”

We went back upstairs to put on our shoes and jackets without really knowing what we were doing. We walked side by side on the sidewalk, and luckily the weather was clear.

“I won’t ever admit it to him,” John smirked. “But Roger kind of inspired me to get my personal shit together.”

I laughed, understanding the choice to bypass stroking Roger’s pride. “That’s really good, man. I’m kind of glad everything happened last night. I feel a lot better.”

John dug his hands in his pockets. “We had a really good chat this morning, and I told him about all my relationship troubles and how confused and awful I’ve been feeling. No offense or anything, but Roger’s the only one of us who’s also been in a steady relationship.”

I shrugged. “None taken. But go on.”

“He basically gave me really motherly advice, telling me not to take it personally and to take care of myself and not dwell on it,” he chuckled, rubbing the side of his nose. “We got really emotional like fucking girls, it was kind of funny.”

But surely heartbreak wasn’t reserved for girls only? “I hate to admit it, but Roger’s motherly instincts save our asses all the time.”

We both laughed. Thinking back, Roger was always looking after us, but I felt a strange kind of flattery when he especially took care of me, and I secretly liked all the attention.

We made our way down to a row of shops a few streets over. The two of us loved looking through the local music shop, which was so old they still sold vinyl records. John and I leafed through their boxes full of records, bragging to each other about what bands we knew and how cool we were for knowing those old musicians. I even took some photos on my phone of the rows of musty old records, because I thought it looked like the pictures all those cool vintage blogs online posted.

“You know, Alison didn’t even like Ma Rainey. Like, she actively despised her music,” John muttered, looking at one of her records. “How fucked up is that?”

I wrinkled my nose. “You don’t need that kind of negativity in your life, man.”

“She always thought jazz and blues was background music and not worth appreciating, you know?” John shook his head. “This is coming from the same girl who thinks The Doors are the best thing to happen to modern music.”

“The Doors are actually really good though,” I said quietly. I thought Jim Morrison was really neat.
“The Doors fucking suck, man,” John eyed me. “But I mean I see why you like them. Jim Morrison’s all dramatic and poetic and shit, you probably have a crush on him or something.”

“No I don’t,” I knew John was teasing, but I clammed up anyways. I echoed what Keith usually said to me. “That’s fucking gay, man…”

We walked to the gift shop next door, where of course, The Doors were playing on the radio.

“I mean, Rog kinda made a good point,” John thought aloud. “Why am I being sad about this? It’s not going to change her mind whether I’m sad or not. I should just focus on being angry instead of sad. You can get a lot more done when you’re angry.”

“I can testify to that, yeah,” I added.

“I need to do something real nasty to get back at her. I’ve had enough of being trodden on,” John declared loudly while we were looking at cheap snowglobes with Big Ben inside of them. The shop owner looked worried. “My passive days are gonna be long gone.”

I took his arm and guided him out of the store before we disturbed the other customers. “You sure this is what you want?”

John gave me a look. “If you slap one cheek, I ain’t gonna turn the other.”

I couldn’t help but smile. His vengeful anger was kind of contagious. “Well, what are you going to do then? Throw eggs at her house or something?”

John went dangerously quiet and I knew he was considering it. “There’s nothing actually stopping us from throwing eggs at my old girlfriend’s house.”

“Except for, you know, getting caught and having the police called on you,” I reminded him. “Doesn’t the thrill of the chase make you want to do it more?” he asked me. I wasn’t much of a daredevil like he and Keith were, I was cursed with too much sensibility and worry. Still, I let John lead me to a small grocery by the nearest tube station. We went to the dairy section.

“I deserve this,” John told himself more than me as we chose the cheapest carton of eggs available.

“She didn’t even make any indication that things were going bad. I had no idea she had that many troubles. She was supposed to tell me she was unhappy, not blame me for it at the end of it all,” John growled after we got on the bus to her house.

“Do you know how much of her shit I put up with? When I said I was gonna love her forever I actually meant it. She just gave up. She’s fucking weak. I’m not.” John gripped the railing so tight his knuckles went white. I clutched the eggs. The woman next to us got up and moved seats.

“Love is dead. I hate women. I’m never going to be in another romantic relationship for the rest of my life. I’m going to be a bachelor and sleep around and do drugs and be a rock star. And at the start of every sold out show we ever play, I’m going to say, ‘Fuck you Alison Wise’,” John told me, but I encouraged him to lower his voice as we got off the bus and walked through her neighbourhood. Well, I walked. John marched angrily, taking the eggs from me and gripping them like an assault rifle.
It was already getting dark, and we made our way to Alison’s house wearing our hoods, but we should have brought sunglasses or dressed in black or something. John and I squatted behind the hydro box in front of the house Alison rented.

“I can’t believe I was going to move in with her into this house…” John muttered as we opened the carton of eggs. “The siding colour is so tacky and the garden is a mess.”

I snorted, then got three eggs out, handing a few to him. “Are you sure you want to do this?”

“I’m so fucking ready,” John smiled darkly, and he was about to stand up, but I yanked him down by the belt again just as I saw someone through the front window.

“Oh, fuck. John, don’t look,” I whispered, but John popped his head up far enough to watch Alison and another man walk out of her kitchen, and through the living room to go elsewhere. I braced myself for John’s reaction.

“Fuck!” he shouted, springing back up to his feet, his outcry startling me anyways. He was so angry he cracked the egg in his clenched fist, yet he didn’t notice the golden yolk spilling out. “Are you fucking kidding me?”

I grabbed the carton and John’s arm and we ran away before anyone heard us.

John sat at the back of the bus, his head hung sadly. I sat beside him and watched his anger drain from his body and be filled again with melancholy. I tried to wipe his hand clean with a tissue from my pocket.

“I mean, maybe it’s not what it looks like,” I told him.

“It really isn’t a big deal, right?” I told him.

“I mean, come on. Who hooks up with someone on a Sunday night?” I told him.

When we got back home, John slammed his bedroom door shut, making it clear he didn’t want me to comfort him. I went to the fridge and stacked the new egg carton on top of the old one. Amongst heaps of other problems and burdens, we were now stuck with too many damn eggs.
Monday, April 10th  
19 days until the concert

That afternoon, we all decided to help John get a date for Friday night. If we waited any longer, the poor guy might wither away from loneliness.

Like an emergency task force, we sat at the coffee table in the living room with our phones and laptops. Keith downloaded Tinder on John’s phone and whipped up a nice profile for him. I installed OkCupid on my phone and made an account for him. John lay on the couch wrapped in a comforter and glared at us.

“Okay, how does this sound?” Keith read his own writing aloud. “I like to read, swim, and watch movies. I’d love nothing more than to cook for you and spend a night in watching movies and learning all about a special girl.”

“Okay, change it to ‘my interests include’. We want him to sound smart.” I cringed. “And take out the part about it being a special girl, it’s rude to make assumptions on John’s behalf.”

“I’m not fucking gay, Pete,” John rolled his eyes. I frowned, feeling a bit silly. “And don’t make me sound like a movie buff or anything.”

“You’ve seen, like, two Stanley Kubrick films,” Keith told him. “You’re allowed to call yourself a movie buff.”

“I don’t swim either,” John added.

“You swim every Wednesday at the community centre, right?” I teased, reminding him of his impending doom in the form of a fitness class.

“Alright, alright, how does this sound?” Keith cleared his throat. “I love indie films, cooking, and reading. My friends say I’m on the quiet side but I’m just thinking about how I can spoil a special girl. See, we make him sound soft and smart and lovable. He’s a nice guy girls can trust.”

“That sounds so creepy!” John whined, lying face down on his pillow. “Stop calling these poor women ‘special girls’.”


“Fuck, why don’t we just skip right to the best part?” Keith exclaimed, erasing what he wrote and typing again. “Just looking for someone to fuck before my band goes on tour.”

“It’s not my band and it’s not like we’re even going on tour any time soon,” John groaned.

“We’re leaving our homes and travelling across the city for a big festival, that qualifies as a band tour!” Keith told him, resting his elbows on the coffee table. “Should I mention that you have a big dick or something?”

“I told you to stop spying on me,” John said completely deadpan, and I nearly snorted hot tea out of my nose.
“I can’t help it, you’re irresistible!” Keith played along, and threatened to jump on the couch and kiss him, until John was laughing so hard that he was tearing up. I smiled but I was also pissed off because they could pull shit like that and yet they still accused me of being gay all the time.

I went back to filling out his dating profile in excruciating detail. John already had loads of good qualities and morals and values, and I rarely had to lie on his behalf.

However, when it came to choosing photos, we ran into a roadblock. He usually had the same Facebook profile picture for ages, or switched between his three favourites. In two of his best photos he was with Alison, which we couldn’t use. The only good photo of him alone was too outdated, as he had cycled through three different hairstyles since then. I searched through my laptop, where there were some photos of us performing, but John was far away and his face was usually blocked by his microphone.

“John, are you positive you don’t have any other nice pictures of yourself?” I asked gently. It was horribly absurd that we lived in 2017 and the man couldn’t even take a proper picture of himself. Keith rolled off the couch and went back to his laptop, looking through his pictures too.

“I don’t, I’m too ugly and unsuccessful,” John’s voice was muffled from lying face down on his pillow again. I crawled over to the couch and rolled him over on his side so he wouldn’t smother.

“Let’s get you cleaned up and we can take a nice candid of you, yeah?” I pleaded.

“No, take the picture now,” was John’s simple answer, before hiding under his blanket. “I want girls to see the real me. This is who I am. A fucking mess.”

“Here, I have a picture we took at Harry’s party last summer,” Keith announced after going full CSI on the Facebook profiles of all our mutual friends. He sent me the photo to use over Messenger. John looked fun and sociable in the middle of the party with a red solo cup, and he had a half smile where you couldn’t see his endearingly screwed up teeth. He was wearing a tight black t-shirt that had ‘I PREFER THE BASSIST’ printed in white block letters, and he looked quite handsome. Keith was standing a few feet away and could easily be cropped out.

We adorned his profiles with the same pictures, then added some more of him playing his bass nonchalantly and looking cool. Keith and I said a prayer and then launched them both for the world to see. Keith was swiping through girls already, based on who the thought looked hottest. I read each profile carefully to see if there was a girl who would actually get along with John.

“Half of my graduating class is on here, oh god,” Keith winced, rejecting dozens of pictures. “John isn’t allowed my sloppy seconds. Fuck, I heard she has chlamydia, this one has the clap, this one gave my friend crabs, that girl’s pregnant…”

“What if Alison sees me on here? Or one of her friends sees me and tells her? I’ll look so fucking pathetic,” John fretted.

“No you won’t, John,” I reassured him. “This says that you bounced back quickly and you’re ready for tons of sleazy hookups because you’re not in love anymore.”

“But I am still in love,” John frowned.

“No, you’re not. Your true love is your freedom,” Keith told him. He passive-aggressively put ’99 Problems’ on repeat over the speakers to try and convince John.

I chewed nervously at a hangnail and scrolled through all these girls’ profiles, trying to imagine myself with them. Some of them were extraordinarily pretty, but it seemed like they were far out of
my league. I genuinely couldn’t see myself taking these girls out to dinner or brandishing them on my arm at a party, or even having sex with them. I felt like I would always be stuck admiring them from afar.

I didn’t have any of these dating apps myself, letting my ego get in my way of a chance at a human relationship. I thought about it sometimes, usually in the thick of a long and lonely night. It would be nice to find my other half, but I don’t know if I could actually find my soul mate on a phone app like this. I felt limited when it came to going through the motions in chasing girls. Going through the process for John made me feel weird and contemplative for a reason I didn’t know why. I distracted myself with texting Summer until Roger came home.

Summer kept mentioning her boyfriend now and then, or talked about things they used to do together. I guess the feelings were still fresh for her, so I didn’t worry too much about it. I kept making myself sound better than I actually was, and she seemed to really enjoy flirting with me. It all felt very natural which made me more confident. See? I wasn’t as alien to this as I thought. If I wanted a girl, I could go out and get her.

I did, however, accidentally stumble upon Summer’s Facebook profile through a mutual friend. And I accidentally went through her photos. Most of the recent ones still had her boyfriend in the shot with her. He was a really handsome guy, way better looking than I was, which made me wonder why Summer would downgrade from him to me. Her ex had a better looking face, and he was tall and skinny too, but with lean muscle, whereas I was still skin and bones. He had light eyes like me, and floppy black hair.

When I heard Roger come in through the front door, I quickly exited the tab, feeling guilty for snooping. Roger brought his girlfriend Jackie Rickman home with him, and they were all smiles and happiness, washing away our gloomy afternoon. We abandoned our things at the table and we all went downstairs to get set up for another rehearsal. Jackie, bless her, brought down water bottles and some snacks for us. She sat on the couch cross-legged, watching us with a big smile.

She was a cute little thing, always cheery and perky. She had short, dark hair, and always dressed in short skirts and over-the-knee high socks, which was in fashion for girls nowadays. We didn’t mind having her around, but she was usually quiet, just listening and laughing along to whatever we said. Roger was usually whisking her off somewhere for a date, or off for privacy in his own room, never letting her mingle with us much.

“Looks like we’re playing for an audience tonight,” John smiled kindly at her, but we all felt like she was going to distract us.

“No, I don’t want to interrupt you guys. I’ll be so quiet, you won’t even notice I’m here!” she insisted, smoothing out her kilt, as she didn’t change out of her uniform yet. I figured Roger must have picked her up from straight from school. God, she just brought the elephant in the room with her everywhere she went.

“Um, what do you guys want to play first?” Roger asked, feeling awkward now that he was being watched. We politely ignored Roger’s sixteen-year-old girlfriend sitting on the couch as we started to get in tune and warm up.

Keith gave John a mischievous look. “Actually, I have the perfect song in mind that you can sing to Jackie.”

Jackie blushed like the young schoolgirl she was. Roger nodded, giving Keith the go ahead. Keith started a drum intro that I vaguely recognized. John caught on right away and laughed, joining in on his bass two bars later. That was when I realized what Keith was trying to do, and I tried to hold
back my own nasty laughter as I joined in on guitar on my cue. Roger then recognized what we were
doing and his face flushed red with anger, but he kept in focus anyways because we needed to
rehearse, and Jackie was way too young to pick up on the reference.

“Ooh, my little pretty one, my pretty one, when are you gonna give me some time, Sharona?”

I exchanged a look with Keith, half scolding him, half applauding him.

“Ooh, you make my motor run, my motor run, got it coming off of the line, Sharona!”

John and I shouted the backup vocals to each other across the room, giggling.

Roger turned an even deeper shade of red when he walked right into Keith’s nasty trap, making him
sing the worst part of the song to his underage girlfriend. “Never gonna stop, give it up, such a dirty
mind, I always get it up from the touch of the younger kind…”

Keith, John, and I shouted at the top of our lungs, “My-my-my-aye-aye, whoa!”

“M-m-m-my Sharona,” Roger tried to keep collected, avoiding looking at any of us, or even at
Jackie who watched him with big moony eyes, thinking that the song was meant as a compliment.
“Come a little closer, huh? Will ya, huh? Close enough to look into my eyes, Sharona.”

You could hear Keith laughing from his drum kit by now, but Roger stood his ground and kept
going anyways. “Keeping it a mystery, it gets to me, running down the length of my thigh,
Sharona…”

Alright, so it was a totally nasty joke that Roger didn’t completely deserve, but we teased him about
this all the time anyways. I mean, he could get any girl that he wanted, yet for some reason he chose
to chase after a girl five years younger than him. I knew Roger wasn’t a bad man, nor a pervert. He
had good intentions but his heart was always after the wrong person. They had been at it for nearly a
year, after Roger hooked up with Jackie one night. She had snuck into a club with her other
underage friends and lied about her age to Roger, who believed her because he was drunk and she
was busty. All four of us freaked out when we found out her real age, and for some reason, Roger
kept going back to meet her. Any normal guy would just use her as a toy until he got distracted with
someone else, but Roger tried to bring romance into it. I always suspected that he convinced himself
he hadn’t done a bad thing if he was in love with her.

Their whole dynamic together was weird. Neither of them told their parents about it, and they always
snuck around together. Roger didn’t tell any of his friends aside from us. When they went out,
people legitimately thought they were brother and sister. Roger laughed at all of her childish jokes.
He had a hard time trying to relate to her without being childish, nor bossy and controlling, nor like
an older brother, nor like a father, nor like a husband. On the surface level, they tried really hard to
always be happy and cheery but it seemed like they didn’t even know how to fight with each other.
It got messier and messier, and soon enough, Roger moved his room into the old office on the main
floor so they could have somewhere more private to spend their time together. All I knew was that
Roger liked taking care of her and spoiling her, and Jackie basked in all his attention and was
infinitely more popular at school for having an older rock star boyfriend, and Roger fell hopelessly in
love with her.

The second the song ended, Roger halted everything. Jackie was clapping, insanely flattered by the
creepy love song confession. Roger scratched at the back of his neck, looking embarrassed and
humiliated and uncomfortable all at once. “Jackie, uh, why don’t you go upstairs and do your
homework?”
The rest of us cringed inwardly. This whole thing was so, so bad.

“Yeah, yeah, of course,” Jackie smiled, already pulling out her pink phone to tell her friends. “Babe, can I use your laptop?”

“Yeah, it’s in the bedroom,” he sighed.

“Thank you,” she jumped from the couch with her backpack and ran upstairs, her short skirt swishing and giving us a generous view. “Have fun rehearsing, boys!”

When she shut the basement door, Roger spun around with a scary look in his eye, talking quietly. “Keith, don’t you ever pull that shit again.”

Keith was still grinning at his own genius, but he gave Roger the puppy dog eyes anyways. “Sorry, Roger.”

The look Roger was giving Keith threatened him enough, and we all silently agreed never to talk about it again. We aimlessly rehearsed more songs that we weren’t going to perform anyways, that served only to keep us sharp and easily adaptable to whatever we needed to play. But today, everyone was lost in their own thoughts.

I guess I could see the appeal in having a pretty young thing like Roger did, only perhaps not that young. Although, I usually wanted the other person to comfort me and take care of me, but I’m always assumed into that role as the guy. I don’t think I’ve ever met a girl who wanted to be the big spoon, or have her arm around my waist when we were walking. I wanted comfort just like anyone else.

I tried to picture Summer sitting as our audience, hanging around with us while we rehearsed, waiting for the moment we were done so I could take her upstairs and ravish her. I wasn’t sure if I wanted to take her out for dinner or anything, but I certainly wouldn’t decline if she brought it up. She was petite and cute and I thought we might look nice together. She was funny and good looking, but kind of bad at responding to my texts, leaving hour long gaps where she forgot to reply or hit send. I wasn’t particularly worried because she was fun to talk to and we got along well. I guess this is what the big chase was all about, but I wondered if the other guys felt the same way. I thought it was supposed to be a lot more fun than this, not just routine.

We took a break at around 10 pm, and Roger went upstairs to fix something to eat and spend some awkward time with Jackie. Keith, John and I flopped onto the couch, staring at our phones.

“Dating apps are weird,” I pondered aloud, secretly downloading Tinder for myself, just as an experiment.

“I don’t think I’m actually ready for another relationship yet,” John sighed. “I don’t want to go through ten Jackies and still miss Alison at the end of it all.”

“Look, John, you’ve got six matches already!” Keith shoved the phone into John’s face. “I’ve been talking to two of them already, they think you’re hilarious and charming. The less hot one wants you to come to a party with her on Friday.”

John rubbed his face. “I dunno, Keith…”

“I’ll tell her you have a hot friend named Keith so she can bring a friend too. It’ll be super fun, come on!” Keith pleaded.

“Pete, do you wanna come with us?” John was kind enough to ask.
I could stay home and write. I could stay home and practice my guitar. I could write essays or novels or paint pictures or clean or cook or read or invent something. But I also needed to go out and be social and connect with people my own age, bridging the gap of me versus them. I had enough trouble making meaningful connections, maybe this would be good for me. I mean, my youth was slipping away with each passing day. I need to find a potential wife and have kids and settle down in the suburbs with a white picket fence and a minivan and a golden retriever.

And they say being a teenager isn’t stressful. “I mean, yeah, sure. I’ll come along.”
Tuesday, April 11th
18 days until the concert

In my Fundamentals in Art lecture, we talked more about Gustav Metzger, then moved on to some artists from the pop art movement. Although pop art was pretty mainstream, I loved it immensely. It ironically emphasized kitschy mass culture that took over the world after movements like Metzger’s. I chewed on my pen and half-heartedly typed my lecture notes. I really wanted to dabble in auto-destructive art because I thought it would be cool and also telling of the times, considering our generation was so angry and destructive. Even on a political or corporate level, we continuously tore things down, rebuilt in the shape of condos, and paved over nature for a bleeding parking lot. It could be as relevant and powerful now as it was back then.

I thought back to the band and how I could incorporate that art into our performance. We wouldn’t be actors necessarily, but we could get a whole lot of attention from pulling destructive stunts onstage. I wanted our band to be different than the other rock bands crawling to the surface today. I envisioned a screaming audience, amazed by us jumping around and playing louder than physically possible. I wanted huge amps and explosives and lights and smoke machines. I tuned out of my lecture and sketched my idealistic stage in my notebook, with amps stacked on amps, and me bouncing around the stage like a jumping bean.

How could I make an epic masterpiece unravel and self-destruct right in front of the audience’s eyes?

I was stuck up in my head thinking about it while I walked to my sculpture class. I could perform like a ticking time bomb, but what would happen when it reached its countdown? I, as the performer, couldn’t explode. Well, I mean I could, but that wouldn’t be ideal. I guess I could always experiment with the sounds of the band individually instead of a collective. If I really took each section apart and gave it a proper treatment, I could orchestrate a cascade of sounds rising and falling and falling out of sync and dissolving into dissonance.

I was listening to The Mamas & The Papas’ new LP *If You Can Believe Your Eyes and Ears*, which was pretty tame compared to my own artistic ideas. Everything around me was so damn tame and I was getting restless. I knew as a band we would have to start clean-cut if we wanted managers and producers to trust us to be well-behaved, but I wanted to be a true shit disturber. Shit disturbers were always the ones making history.

I hummed along to ‘California Dreaming’ because it was so damn catchy while I got my tools and the sculpture of my tragic hero. One of his noses fell off and I laughed in spite of myself. And once again, I totally missed Summer trying to get my attention because I was too distracted by my own overly-ambitious thoughts.

I paused my music and pulled my headphones out of my ears, looking apologetic. “I’m not trying to ignore you, I swear.”

She laughed. When I thought about it, her laugh was very pretty. She was pretty too, in a quiet way. I preferred brown hair but I suppose her auburn hair was close enough. “I sure hope not.”

“Hey, um,” I started talking before I could process what I was saying. “I have a question.”

“And I have an answer,” she cocked an eyebrow.
“Um, there’s a party. On Friday.” I shifted from foot to foot awkwardly.

“Is that so?”

“Yeah, and you should come with me,” I looked down at my sculpting tools, fiddling and trying and keep myself occupied. “I mean, if you want. If parties are your thing. Or whatever. It’s cool. You don’t have to.” Oh god. This is why you don’t have a girlfriend, Pete.

Summer giggled again. “Very smooth.”

“Wait till you hear my writing,” I let a self-deprecating joke slip, and then I looked up at her. Her eyes were big and bright.

“Where’s the party?” she asked casually, unwrapping a half-used block of clay.

“Okay, I know this sounds sketchy, but I don’t actually know where,” Nice one Pete, so smooth. “Like, my friend got a date and she invited him, and then he’s like, inviting me along, and I’m inviting you, and we’re having this conversation, and yeah.”

Surprisingly, Summer bobbed her head, looking interested. “Sounds cool. I think it’d be fun.”

“Oh my god,” I shouldn’t have said that out loud. “I mean, yeah, great. I’ll text you the address later, we can figure out rides and stuff soon too.”

“Cool,” she smiled at me, and I smiled at her, and I didn’t know what to do, so I started working on my sculpture again. Every once and awhile we looked at each other and smiled some more, and then my face went red and she smiled even wider. She sometimes made the occasional comment or I made a joke. When class was over, I had relaxed enough so I didn’t feel like as much of a twat, so I even offered to walk her to the bus loop.

“So you listen to The Kinks, who else?” she asked me as we walked across campus together.

“I mean, there’s a hefty list,” I scratched the back of my head. “I try and stay up to date on all the newest rock bands. Everyone puts all their music online anyways so it’s easy to find. And, uh, I like 90’s grunge. And 80’s new wave. And I try and listen to every genre to get inspiration. Oh god, I just really like music. I’m sorry for rambling.”

She laughed and put her hand on my shoulder briefly, and I almost died. “You’ll have to show me some of your favourite artists sometime.”

I nodded really enthusiastically. “I’d love to, I’ll make you a playlist or something.”

“Cool,” she smiled, and I smiled back. This was nearly too good to be true.
Roger was already waiting for me in the car park across from the bus loop. I didn’t know if I could hug Summer goodbye or not so I just waved awkwardly. “Uh, that’s my ride. I’ll text you with the details later, yeah?”

“Sounds good,” she smiled yet again at me. I noticed she did a double take when she saw Roger waving at me across the car park, and I felt my confidence waver. I hoped she wasn’t considering ditching me for him.

We parted ways and I crossed the car park to get in the car with Roger.

“Was that the girl you were telling me about?” Roger asked as he started the car.

I buckled my seat belt. “Yeah, and she agreed to go with me to that party, although I’m not entirely sure if I dreamt that or not.”

“She’s a catch,” Roger remarked as we pulled onto the busy road. “I hope you get some action.”

I shifted in my seat. I suppose that was the goal, wasn’t it? Do whatever I can to get a leg over? The other guys would never get off my back if I took her to a party and didn’t do anything with her. “Thanks, I, uh, hope so too. How was work?”

Roger sighed, and I could tell he was mulling over something. “Oh, you know…”

The store wasn’t as busy this week. Roger went through his regular grocery list, but he was distracted and we had to keep going back to different aisles because he kept forgetting things. I waited for him as Roger rounded up the total costs in the frozen foods section, using the freezer door as a surface to write on.

“Fuck,” he grumbled, checking his calculations again. “We need more fucking money.”

“Are we short again?” I looked through his list in disbelief. We were already cutting corners as it was.

“Yes,” Roger looked angry. He rifled through our cart and sacrificed some items, and ditched them on a nearby shelf. I quietly followed him with the cart so I wouldn’t provoke him any further. Now we only had the bare basics, some cans of soup and crackers, and some vegetables. I prayed the other guys wouldn’t make a big fuss because I know Roger’s pride was being hurt by this.

“Hey, don’t forget, Maureen invited us next door for dinner any time we want. She loves to take care of us in that grandmotherly way, you know?” I offered, but Roger was not comforted in the slightest
by finding ways to a free meal like beggars.

Roger was quiet on the way home, so we listened to the radio. As we were slowed down by traffic, I watched him reach over to turn up the volume on a regular pre-packaged, stale but catchy pop song I knew he liked. I mean, I liked it too, because it was manufactured for me to like. The sound pleased me and I could vaguely relate to the lyrics, and I liked it. I didn’t love it, nor did I hate it. There wasn’t enough depth for me to feel strongly towards the song or have it profoundly affect my life anymore than simply making me happy in this moment. As an audience, are we to be satisfied with whatever is presented to us, as long as it makes us one shade of happy? Or are we selfish for demanding more from art, and demanding to be emotionally moved in more ways than one and truly mean something profound? Most importantly, how do I make my music do the latter?

When we got home, I mulled over it as I was stacking soup cans into our bare cupboards. We wouldn’t survive, literally, unless we kept making generic happy songs. People wanted music to bob their heads to and absentmindedly enjoy. That’s the music that sells and that’s the music that makes money, and artists are more than comfortable putting in half the effort to make twice the money. Our band, in its early infancy, would have to do that just to get our foot in the door. My biggest fear was that if we weren’t careful, we would get lazy too. I wanted my music to speak louder than we could play it, but how could I make the impact I wanted if I would be forever stuck writing pop songs like ‘I Can’t Explain’?

Roger’s growing frustration cut my thoughts dead in their tracks. “Where the fuck are John and Keith?”

I closed the cupboard. “I dunno, have you tried texting them?”

Roger took his phone out of his pocket, and moments later I got his pings from the group chat. “They know we were supposed to rehearse now.”

I didn’t remember our rehearsal either. “Give them some more time, they probably just got caught up in something.”

I sat on the kitchen counter and ate the last banana, already overly brown and bruised, and watched Roger pace around the kitchen and texting them angrily. My phone kept going off from all his messages but I didn’t bother checking. I really hoped we wouldn’t have another fight tonight.

However he threatened them, Roger eventually got the answer from them that he wanted so we went downstairs. I wasted time by checking the tuning on my guitar over and over until finally John and Keith came back home. They came downstairs right away, still in their jackets and coats, and I felt trouble brewing already. John had his cocky look on which meant Keith would imitate it too, which only angered Roger more.

“Are you finally ready?” Roger asked coolly as Keith assumed his spot behind the drums and John strung his guitar strap around his neck.

“Yeah, I’m good,” John smiled widely as if nothing was the matter, and Keith did the same. There was no point in Roger interrogating them for why they were late, because there was just going to be the inevitable snarky response. Yet Roger couldn’t let it go.

“When I schedule a rehearsal, you need to show up on time, this should be your priority right now,” Roger scolded them a little too harshly, all his frustrations boiling over at once.

“Of course,” John told him. He looked over at Keith and they exchanged their usual scheming looks.
John quietly plucked the famous Devo bassline. When Roger turned away from them, Keith mimed cracking a whip. I pretended not to notice.

We did a quick warm up, jamming out and practicing our improvisation. I tried out some new riffs but they didn’t sound like I wanted them to, but I wrote down the chords in my notebook just in case. After a while, John piped up from the other side of the room. “Any new songs today, Pete?”

Once more I kicked myself for being too lazy and moody to write anything decent or worth sharing. I didn’t want to put myself through the embarrassment of workshopping all my half-written songs that I was already starting to hate. The bassist and the drummer stared at me expectantly, and only Roger was sympathetic. I couldn’t let this moment tank. Roger was already losing his grip on the others as it was. God, we were doing so well after our fight the other day…

“Actually, I had some thoughts about potential directions our music could take,” I fiddled with my guitar, feeling self-conscious already. I didn’t want them to reject any of my ideas. When I looked up, everyone was waiting for me to continue. “Um. I mean, I was thinking about music and the trend it’s going in today. It’s all pre-packaged and generic, you know? And I want to do, the, um, opposite. If that makes sense.”

“Oh, yeah, right. Pop music like The Beatles is trash and classic stuff like Nirvana or whatever is the only real music?” Keith prompted me. I guess when you twisted my words like that, I came off as a narrow minded music snob.

“No—well, I mean, yes, but I won’t admit it,” I cracked a grin to show I wasn’t going to pick a fight. I saw Keith’s expression soften. “See, my conflict is that I want to make our music larger than life. I want to make songs that make you feel aware of your vulnerabilities, music about people with real faults and insecurities. Music that’s lost and confused, just like everyone is deep down. But upbeat pop songs and dance music is the only thing that sells, and we need music that sells so we can get money to broaden our horizons. I just don’t want to have to sell out just to get our foot in the door.”

John tilted his head, and I felt relieved knowing he was considering it. “But why can’t we just make the music we want to make anyways, and let the right audience come to us? Why is selling out even an option?”

“We don’t have a lot of time to waste being experimental,” Roger added, clarifying my thoughts to others better than I could explain to them. “We don’t even have enough money for groceries anymore. We need to sell songs that people will like. We need to appeal to our audience on the surface level.”

“That way,” I picked up on his thought, “We can sucker them in as we gradually grow and change into the band we want to be.”

“But why do we have to ‘sell out’ to do that?” Keith leaned forward on his drum stool “I don’t get it. Isn’t there a middle ground where we can make pop music but with the message we want?”

I shifted from foot to foot. I hadn’t considered that option before.

“That’s a really good point, Keith,” Roger skillfully gave Keith the praise he needed, diffusing the tension between us all.

“ Seriously, it is,” Thoughts and ideas were already unfolding in my head. “We exploit that fun pop tune everyone loves, with simple lyrics, but ones that have so many different meanings that critique problems without people even realizing it.”
I had everyone’s interest again. I made sure we capitalized on this mutual spark of inspiration between the four of us. I directed another experimental session where we navigated through the sounds of pop music today. We used Keith’s laptop to play songs by The Kinks and Herman’s Hermits who were already producing professionally. Their producers gave them similar instruction, and we tried to recreate the sound ourselves. Most distinct was the crash of the high hat cymbal or tambourine on the off-beat, punctuating the upswing with that loud and chipper noise. The bass was loud and carried the song with a jazzy, swing style of playing. The lead guitar’s sound bounced, and used a lot of plucking, but I thought they sounded restrained when they just played the tune. The singers were laid back and cool, and there was lots of harmonies.

We used ‘I Can’t Explain’ to experiment with since we were all familiar with the song inside and out. It felt like a performance in a bad way—we already had our distinct sound and I feared that if we changed it around too much, we would never get back to the original way we all played together that I fell in love with. Still, we worked at it until we were sounding more and more like the bands on the radio. I made sure to take notes so we wouldn’t forget anything we discovered. Now I just had to write some safe lyrics. Ages ago, I promised myself I wouldn’t go back to simple love songs like ‘I Can’t Explain’, but perhaps I needed to take a step backwards so I could take two forwards. I could take my own shitty pop song and build it into something bigger and better.

I was so wrapped up in the music and our own genius collaboration that I completely forgot to text Summer back.

Roger Daltrey
@rogerdaltrey0104

Okay I swear I’m going to start using this thing more

6:21 PM · 11 April 17
chapter 12

Wednesday, April 12th
17 days until the concert

I came home from school at around 1 pm, which gave me enough time to work on an essay due at the end of the month. From my laptop I watched as John trudged around the house, eating a bagel and reluctantly getting ready to go swimming. He went upstairs, then came back downstairs, then went back upstairs again. He called down to me from the top of the stairs a few minutes later. “Pete, I want to die.”

I turned down the volume on the radio and called back to him. “Any particular reason, or the same old?”

“The same old, but also like,” he paused. “My old bathing suit doesn’t fit because I’m fat and everyone hates me and I’m going to die alone.”

“John, you’ve had the same bathing suit for like, six years. It’s okay that it’s too small,” I tried to reassure him. “You know what they say about guys with big swim trunks…”

“Shut up,” he groaned, coming down the stairs to sit with me on the couch. Then, his face lit up. “I guess I can’t go since I have nothing to wear, oh well, so sad. Tell Roger thanks anyways.”

“Come on, can’t you just borrow a pair?” I pleaded. I didn’t want to remind him that Keith and I were even smaller than he was, so we ventured into Roger’s bedroom. We turned on the light, revealing his relatively tidy room. I was actually uncomfortable at how bare his walls were. He could never pick a favourite band or movie to advertise all over his room like I did.

John and I started rifling through Roger’s dresser drawers. We weren’t snooping exactly, just being thorough. The first drawer was filled with neatly organized socks, boxers, and t-shirts. The next one had his trousers and pyjamas. The bottom drawer was crammed with papers and other trinkets to hide more personal things. We fished through his boxes of condoms and porn magazines, which wasn’t unusual, but John found a rather interesting sex toy at the very back of the drawer. He gingerly held it between his thumb and index finger, and we inspected it, both horrified.

“Do you think he uses it on Jackie?” John asked.

“Or does Jackie use it on him?” I pondered. John snorted and tossed it back in the drawer. “I can honestly say I wasn’t expecting to find that.”

John pulled out his phone and I sat on the end of Roger’s bed. I felt self-conscious once more. Roger was already doing unconventional stuff with his pretty girlfriend when I was still drowning in my virginity. Roger’s toy was so startling I felt dumb for blushing. It shouldn’t have been that surprising to someone of my age.
It took a lot of convincing and pleading, but I finally got John to leave the house. We took the bus to the tube station, and on the tube we shared headphones and listened to John’s 80’s pop playlist on his phone. 80’s pop was his guilty pleasure, and I secretly didn’t mind the upbeat songs. We had time to listen to one song by The Talking Heads, one by Prince, and one by Soft Cell before we got off at our stop.

The recreation centre was clearing out as all the parents took their kids home for dinner. John gave me a deathly glare as I pushed him up to the service desk.

“Hi, uh,” John cleared his throat. “I’m here for the class. The one that’s happening right now.”

The older lady behind the desk squinted at her computer. “The Jazzercise class?”

John flinched, hoping no one around us would hear. “Yes, that’s the one.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, I’m sure.”

She gave him that usual condescending look adults always gave us. “Cause you know, that’s usually for women.”

I stepped in. “On your website, it didn’t say anything about women only. Anyone is welcome to join that class.”

The woman gave me a nasty look.

“Plus, it’s 2017, gender is basically obsolete,” I trailed off, quieting down when I realized no one was paying attention to me anymore. John was bartering with her over the computer.

“Look, my name is registered. I’m John Entwistle,” he started looking embarrassed.

The woman couldn’t deny that his name was on the list. John paid the five pounds for cover, and the woman opened the sliding door to the changerooms for us with more attitude than necessary.

In the hallway, I turned to John. “Just try and have fun, yeah? You won’t know anyone there, just do your best. It’s only 45 minutes.”
John sighed, dejected. “Alright, alright. I’ll see you on the other side.”

I gave him a pat on the back as we parted ways. He went off to the changeroom and I went to the pool, installing myself on the bleachers. I didn’t feel like working on my essay any more, but I had lugged my laptop all the way here in my backpack so I pulled it out anyways. I started to type out lyrics for a song idea I thought of the other day, just playing around with some words in my head.

I watched as less than a dozen women eventually filed out from the changeroom, all talking and laughing loudly. I tried not to snicker, realizing that they were much, much older than the hot suburban moms we promised John. The gaggle of women must have been about 60 or 70, which was fucking ancient to kids like us. They already started dyeing their gray hair, but still wore makeup to the pool and fashionable one piece bathing suits that I saw girls my age wearing all the time. Then, John awkwardly emerged from the men’s changeroom, awkwardly trying to fold his arms over his bare chest and tried to hide his stomach. Roger’s bathing suit was small on him, clingy tightly to his skin. He locked eyes with me, making a gun with his fingers and holding it up to his forehead. I smiled and gave him a thumbs up, trying to encourage him.

The women noticed me first, the lone gangly boy on the bleachers. Some gave me judgemental looks as though I were a peeping tom, but they clued in when they noticed John at the back of the crowd. I thought they would have isolated him and went back to their old lady clique, but instead they swarmed him.

“He’s so cute!”

“Aw, come on love, what’s your name?”

“We don’t bite!”

The youngest woman approached John, laughing. “What brings you here?”

John, dumbfounded, just pointed to me on the bleachers. “He made me.”

Everyone turned to me. I waved sheepishly.

“Oh, your friend made you, eh?” she asked, raising an eyebrow. “He wants to make sure you’re proper fit, then?”

“He’s not my, uh,” John stammered. I buried my nose in a book, embarrassed. “My other friends suggested it. We’re, um, in a band. And I love to work out and stuff. Fitness is my passion.”

“He’s got a lot of girls to chase, he needs to stay in shape,” one woman added in, and everyone nodded in agreement.

The class instructor, decked in high end athletic clothing, came out to the pool, powerwalking. “Come on, ladies, get in the pool, why are we all chatting?”

I watched as everyone slipped into the water, the older women gingerly taking the stairs. I completely forgot about my songwriting as I watched the whole class unfold in front of me. The instructor was an overly energetic French woman, no older than 55. She danced on the pool deck for the ladies to follow in the water, her neon pink trainers bouncing around distracted me. I was even more surprised by the songs they exercised to that played through the overhead speakers. They were all songs that sounded vaguely like pop songs that were popular years ago, maybe stealing the beat and recording with an artist that imitated other pop artists, then were made to sound like they were remixed to make them more upbeat and energetic. It was a fucking mess, but pretty funny in hindsight. I debated if I would be flattered if someone wanted to use my song to remix for their
jazzercise class at the local community centre.

I tried not to watch poor John, feeling an overwhelming secondhand embarrassment for him. The whole thing was so cheesy, but all the women were having a ball. They enthusiastically did all the arm waves and leg kicks in the water, laughing and singing along to the songs they were all familiar with. It was the weirdest phenomenon I had ever witnessed.

Before I went back to working, I sent a text to our groupchat so John would feel better about himself when he checked his phone later.
John

roger i need to borrow your bathing suit, i'll wash it later don't worry  6:37 p.m.

Roger

Ok- third drawer I think  6:40 p.m.

John looks TOTALLY hot rn and all these ladies are all over him and everything 👌🏻👌🏻  7:48 p.m.

Roger

Lol  7:50 p.m.

Keith

wtf i wanna go to this old lady class  7:55 p.m.
I bounced between writing some prose, writing my essay, and editing my photos for my photography class. I was proud of myself for actually getting some solid work done, even while a horrendous family-friendly rap played and the older women did moves that were meant to make them feel sexy. John turned around to make uncomfortable eye contact with me while he did all the embarrassing moves with a deadpan face, and I covered my mouth to keep from laughing too loud.

After the class was done, everyone was all full bubbly and full of energy. They were allowed to sit in the hot tub for ten minutes or so until the next group came in. I stayed on the bleachers and finished writing my weak introduction paragraph to my paper, eavesdropping the hot tub gossip.

John sat in the middle with his arms stretched out, and all the other women sat around him, absolutely fascinated by him.

“So you’re in a band?”

“Why are kids your age so obsessed with your phones? My niece has it glued to her hand all the time and I just don’t understand.”

“Can you fix my computer? My email isn’t working and Bethany is waiting for me to reply to her letter. I can’t figure the damned thing out.”

John sat up straighter, and spoke as if he were addressing a press conference. “Yes, my friends and I are in a rock band and we have a concert on the twenty-ninth, so tell all your grandchildren and nieces and nephews to come. I fix phones and computers for £20 an hour, make sure I get your number after if you want help,” he gave them all a sly grin. “And to answer your question, all your entertainment, all your knowledge and information, and all your communication happens on one device. That’s all.”

One of the oldest ladies wrinkled her nose. “I don’t get it. It’s just a telephone.”

“Oh yes, but now it connects to the internet, so you can play games or watch videos or Google stuff, you know?” John explained gently. Murmurs of ‘what’s a Google?’ floated meekly through the crowd of his disciples, and John realized he had his work cut out for him.

They were all booted out of the hot tub when the seniors’ water aerobics class came in. The women filed back to the changeroom, and I followed John back to the otherwise deserted men’s locker room. I sat on the bench while he changed.

“So, guess who’s going to make a ton of cash this week?” he grinned cheekily, slipping on his shirt.

“This worked out rather well for you,” I laughed.

He hopped around the tiled changeroom floor, trying to tug on his jeans over his damp skin. “I mean, I’ve already built my own computer, the next logical step is teaching senior citizens how to set up their email and get money off of them for it.” John always loved bragging about how he built his own computer. This was a treat for him.

I gave him the beanie that I had sitting at the bottom of my backpack to cover his fluffy mess of half-dried hair because he forgot a comb. After he was finished getting dressed we remerged back out to the lobby, where all the women were waiting for him. I took down their names and phone numbers in my notebook so John could make his rounds this week. We were practically in a fit of laughter over the absurdity of the whole situation.

The youngest woman, the artificial blonde of about 40-something years old who was trying to stay fit and relive her youth, hung around to talk to us. She had a deep, smoky voice and didn’t take her eyes
off of John the whole time.

“It’s getting late,” I added casually after casually checking the time on my phone casually because they were talking for what felt like hours.

“Where are you two headed?” she asked.

John tried to brush it off and say the tube ride wasn’t very long. But she waved a dismissive hand. “I pass your street on my way home anyways. I’ll drop you off.”

“Yeah, of course,” John said quickly, all moony-eyed, without even consulting me. Oh well. At least if she murdered one of us, the other would have enough time to call the cops. Hopefully.

So we walked out to her impressive sports car, and John warmed up to her even more because that meant she definitely had money. He sat in the front with her and they talked nonstop the whole time, and I was cramped in the backseat because John didn’t hear me when I asked him to move his seat up for me. I drew the scene in my notebook to pass the time in my lonely end of the car.

John told her our house address, which was convenient for us and also convenient for her if she were a murderer, but alas. She placed a hand on John’s arm which lingered much longer than necessary.

“See you next week,” she smiled at him.

“Thanks for the ride, Carol,” John smiled back at her.

“Yeah, thanks Carol,” I added on as we both slid out of her car, John waving goodbye as she pulled out of our driveway. He was grinning ear to ear as I unlocked the side door for us.

Roger and Keith were hanging out in the kitchen when we got inside. John practically floated in, with hearts in his eyes and everything.

“How did it go?” Roger asked as he put a plate of leftovers in the microwave.

John tried to speak solemnly, but his dreamy smile gave him away completely. “It was alright, I guess.” It only took one exchanged look between Keith and I before we cracked up.
chapter 13

Thursday, April 13th
16 days until the concert

After a short photography tutorial at school that night, Sam, Max, and I signed out a camera and some other equipment from the class storage room and crammed as much into our backpacks as we could manage. Sam and Max figured we’d be better off taking photos for their joint project back at their flat, so we left class early.

We took a long bus ride back to their neighbourhood, sharing a large coffee between the three of us because we were all poor as hell. I brought some clothes like they asked, but I was still nervous about what they would have me do in front of the camera. Sam and Max were two people who had no regard for social norms or taboos.

“Pete, you don’t have to look so nervous,” Max could tell what I was thinking, as always. “It’ll be like a fun girls night. We’ll play music and have snacks and take racy photos of you.”

“They’re not going to be racy!” Sam cried, patting my shoulder. “Ignore her, Pete, she’s being silly. It’s just going to be a little unconventional.”

“That doesn’t reassure me at all!” I wailed.

“Just tell him what we’re doing before he jumps out of the moving bus,” Max pulled out her phone and started typing.

“Alright, so,” Sam turned to me, getting comfy on the hard plastic bus seats. “Basically, the title of the whole thing is ‘The Clothes Make The Man’, right? So it doesn’t really matter who you are when you’re all naked and stuff, ‘cause you can wear any combination of clothes and look like a brand new person. You can go from some sleazy chav in a track suit to Margaret Thatcher in a power suit and be completely transformed into a new person. We’re trying to prove that even though you’re the same person underneath, depending on the way you dress, people will respond to you differently or whatever.”

“People will respond to you differently or whatever’ is our thesis statement, actually,” Max chimed in, and Sam elbowed her.

“So essentially you want me to dress like Margaret Thatcher?” I asked. “Is this one of Max’s weird sex things?”

“Yes, it is,” Max grinned.

“No, it’s not,” Sam clarified. “We just need you to act as a mannequin. We want to prove that humans are essentially just empty vessels that we give a personality to based on its outwards appearance.”

“Spooky,” Max teased, wrapping an arm around her girlfriend’s shoulders.

At the end of the long bus ride, we went up to Sam and Max’s flat near the top floor of rather old block of apartments. Their space was cramped and they complained that there was never enough room, but I thought it was incredibly cozy. There was evidence of the three women living there scattered in every nook and cranny—fashion magazines, hair ties, thirty different pairs of shoes each, cardigans and sweaters taken off and draped on chairs to be forgotten, makeup and lip glosses that
had been misplaced in the common space and also forgotten about. I always secretly found their ultra-feminine space to be a comfort to me for reasons I could never figure out why.

Their other roommate, Liz, came out of her room to investigate all the noise while we were in the kitchen getting drinks. “Wait, I know I’ve met you before,” Liz said to me. She snapped her fingers a few times, trying to trigger her memory.

“Liz, he’s literally the only boy we’ve ever had in our flat,” Sam teased her.

“His name is Dennis,” Max told Liz.

“No it’s not!” Sam tried to flick Max in the ear, but Max grabbed her wrist and they lovingly wrestled in the small kitchen.

“Um, my first name’s Pete actually,” I extended a hand as I introduced myself to her a second time.

She was incredibly pretty even after staying in her pyjamas studying all day without makeup or brushing her hair, a quality I envied in people.

“Pete! Yes, you were in the band and stuff, I remember. I’m so sorry,” Liz laughed and shook my hand.

“To be fair, the first time you met me you were drunk,” I joked. She made an appearance the last time we all went out to a bar together, arriving late and already smashed from another party. I watched her tighten the messy blonde bun on the top of her head, casually dodging the chaotic lesbians behind her. Finally, Max managed to lock Sam in a type of headlock, plant a kiss on her lips, and then set her free.

“Anyways, back to business,” Sam returned to normal and patted down her hair. “Max, pop some popcorn. Pete, we need to paint your nails for some of the photos, so let’s get it done now so it has time to dry.”

“Can I help?” Liz asked, leaning back against the counter. “I’d literally rather be doing anything else than this chem lab right now.”

“Actually, yeah,” Sam decided. “Can we use your black nail polish?”

“Sure, just a sec,” Liz went back to her room to fetch it for us.

Max stuck the bag of popcorn in the microwave, then eyed Liz in her pyjama shorts and t-shirt. “I’m going to change out of this damn dress into something comfier. Pete, watch the popcorn.”

Max left to change, and Sam started setting up the tripod and lights in their bedroom. Liz came back, shaking the bottle of nail polish and wiggling her eyebrows at me. We sat on the couch in the living room while Liz started painting my toes, and I stuffed popcorn into my mouth.

“Stop fidgeting,” Liz teased me.

“I can’t help it, you’re tickling me,” I protested with a giggle while she struggled to hold my foot still. I watched her expertly swipe the small brush against my tiny toenails, painting them ink black. Absurdly, I thought they made my feet look long elegant, and not veiny like they usually were.

Sam came back out again, saw us, and then started laughing. “Liz, you dummy. You didn’t need to paint his toenails, they’re not even going to be in the picture!”

Liz took one look at me, and we both dissolved into laughter too. Liz buried her face in her hands.
“Oh god, I’m so sorry Pete. I’ve gone absolutely loopy from being inside all day.”

“The poor kid is suffering enough already, now you put him through this!” Sam teased.

“It’s alright, I’ll get the nail polish remover,” Liz started to get up, but I stopped her.

“No, no—” I reassured her. “I mean, you already spent so much time on them, it would be a shame to take it all off.”

No one thought it was weird, which was an immense relief. Both girls just shrugged, and Liz started painting my other foot and then my fingernails. Sam sat on the couch with us, talking and sharing popcorn. Liz even had a tiny fan that made the paint dry faster. I felt quite elegant like this, and I couldn’t stop staring at my hands and thinking how nice they looked. Liz even joked that she could add stickers to them after.

Once my nails were dry, Liz went back to her assignment and I joined Sam and Max in the bedroom they shared. For the project, they had a white curtain pinned up against the wall, and bright lights set up around the camera, and a stool for me to sit on. I loved the décor of the rest of their room more than anything. Max had scarves draped over all their lamps, which made the room glow red, making everything feel cozy and intimate. They had fairy lights strung, as well as clippings from magazines they liked, and prints of Max’s photography all over the walls. I was amazed at how the two kept everything so neat and organized all the time.

“Put on some Marina,” Max asked Sam as she typed on her phone.

“I’m going to put on ‘Electra Heart’,” Sam went through her iPod before plugging it into her dock. “The only album of hers that matters.”

“I’m going to pretend I didn’t just hear you say that,” Max muttered. She then went through her closet to start pulling out clothes for me.

‘How to be a Heartbreaker’ started blaring from the small speakers, and Max expertly danced and sang every word as she worked. I even caught Sam bobbing her head along to the fun pop song. Max then dumped a pile of clothes on the bed for me. I felt self-conscious changing in front of them, but I didn’t have time to keep running off to the bathroom just to take my shirt off.

“Pete, I don’t know if you’ve forgotten,” Sam teased me as she adjusting the settings on her camera. “But we’re gay. We don’t care if you change in front of us.”

So I changed in the room with them, but I made them look away. We weren’t shooting in any particular order, nor did they have an exact idea of what they wanted. To start, they had me in my dress shirt and tie to look like a posh business man, then a football jersey, then a black turtleneck, then a big red flannel shirt and square glasses. They had me sitting in front of the white curtain, and with the bright lights, it looked like I was having portraits taken in a photobooth. Sam and Max refused to let me see the pictures which was for the best, because I would have panicked when I would inevitably be reminded how damn ugly I was.

After that, Max dressed me in a leather jacket and sunglasses, then a disgusting wifebeater, then a bright shirt and shorts that made me look like I spent all my days at the beach on the California coast. I didn’t know where she kept pulling all these clothes from, but also knowing Max, I always suspected her closet was endless.

‘Primadonna Girl’ came on, and while I changed, we all sang along in goofy falsettos, pretending to be all elegant and fancy like Marina Diamandis did in the music video. I wouldn’t admit how often I watched that music video, which was also how I knew all the words. I was also starting to feel more
at ease now in front of the camera, and all the posing and primping made me feel like a movie star on a big photo shoot.

“Beauty queen on a silver screen, living life like I'm in a dream,” we sang. Then, we shouted our favourite line, “I know I've got a big ego, but I really don't know why it's such a big deal, though!”

“Ooh!” Sam and I sang backup while Max dramatically sang in a ridiculous Welsh accent. “And I'm sad to the core, core, core.”

“Yeah!”

“Every day is a chore, chore, chore.”

“Wow!”

“When you give, I want more, more, more.”

I belted along with Marina at the top of my lungs, “I wanna be adored!”

The three of us starting dancing like goofs. We couldn’t help that the song was so damn catchy.

When ‘Homewrecker’ came on, Max sat me down on the bed, and before I could protest, she starting putting some makeup on me. Sam offered me a water bottle to distract me.

“And I don’t belong to anyone…”

“Keep your eyes open,” Max struggled to hold my face still in her large hands as she painted on eyeliner, and swiped the mascara wand across my lashes. Then, red lipstick.

“So, how much do you hate this?” Sam asked, sitting with us on the bed.

I was actually having fun. I liked feeling all dolled up. The whole experience was weirdly comforting, but I couldn’t figure out why. I looked at Sam and shrugged, trying not to seem so hopelessly in love with this concept. “It’s cool.”

Sam and Max exchanged a look. Then, Sam reached into a shop bag and tossed me a bundle of red fabric. “Please don’t hate us!”

Max stood back up to put the makeup away, and I stood up too to unravel the bundle. It was a long red dress. I blushed deep enough to match.

The others politely looked away while I took off my shirt, then my jeans. Alright, no problem, it was just a dress. No big deal. I slipped it over my head.

“Remember, our prof will be the only other person who’ll see these pictures,” Sam reassured me.

The dress fell down, clinging tightly to me. It fit perfectly. I wiggled around and tried to smooth it out, but you could see the bulginess of my boxers I was wearing underneath. “Guys, you can totally see my dick in this.”

“We’ll get you from the waist up,” Max laughed. “Can we turn around now?”

“Not yet,” I said quietly. I could just turn to look in the full length mirror behind me, and indulge in that annoying curiosity always buzzing in the back of my head. Something in me also knew that if I looked now, I would never get the picture out of my head.
I avoided the mirror and sat in front of the camera again.

“Pete, you look gorgeous!” Sam cheered for me, and I smiled. She snapped a photo.

“I would kill for your figure,” Max chewed on a pen. She was already skinny like me, but I felt proud anyways.

“Do I look all Eddie Redmayne in ‘The Danish Girl’?” I asked.

‘Bubblegum Bitch’ came up on shuffle, and I slipped into a character. I was the girl you’d die for, I was the heartbreaker like in the song. I don’t know where my burst of confidence came from but I felt powerful. Then, I turned composed and elegant. Even Sam and Max looked impressed at my silly posing and all the faces I pulled.

Sam got enough photos, and I reluctantly left the chair again. Max took off the red lipstick and put pink on instead, and they gave me a school girl’s blouse and kilt. It looked like I was dressed for some weird porno, but I couldn’t help admiring how nice my legs looked in the skirt.

I went in front of the camera again. Max re-combed my hair while Sam adjusted the lighting.

“This is fun, isn’t it?” Max asked me, judging my reaction. She stepped out of the shot and let Sam start working.

I titled my head to the side, resting my chin on my hand. “It is fun. It’s like I’m an actor getting in a costume. I mean, at the end of the day, it’s just clothes, right?

“Yeah, that’s what I said at first,” Max smirked. My jaw dropped. Sam snapped a photo.

Finally, Max slingshot a bra at me. It wasn’t the kind with cups, instead it was just lacy fabric. I took the schoolgirl uniform off, put my jeans back on, and the struggled to slip the bra on over my head.

“I’m, uh, a little stuck,” I mumbled, my arms stuck in the air while I was being smothered by the lace over my head.

Sam came to my rescue, and I felt like an idiot when she simply unclasped it at the back, freeing me once more. I put it on properly and she clasped it up again for me. It felt like my ribs were being constricted. I looked down, quite liking how the black lace stretched tightly over my chest like that. I thought it looked nice against my horribly pale skin.

I sat in front of the camera again, and Max cleaned the corner of my eye with a cotton swab where I had smudged my eyeliner. If I were a proper girl, being photographed in a bra like that would certainly be racy. Yet when I did it now, I guess it was just some edgy art thing, or comedy depending on what you used the photo for. Sam instructed me on how to do a few poses so I wouldn’t look so awkward. I would cross my arms one way, or look off into the distance, or rest a painted nail against my lip.

That was the last round of photos we took, as it was almost nearing 11. I found myself disappointed when it was all over and I realized I had to change back into my jeans and my Blondie t-shirt. I scooped up my street clothes and scurried off to their bathroom, still in the bra.

I locked the door behind me and turned on the light, allowing myself to look in the mirror for the first time. I was certainly surprised. All the makeup made my face look softer, more elegant. I thought I looked rather pretty, even if the changes were subtle. My eyelashes were long and full and I loved how it looked. Even the lacy bra thing looked good on me, despite my masculinity giving itself away with the trail of dark hair trailing from my navel downwards. I couldn’t stop staring at my reflection.
I didn’t want to raise any suspicion by staying in the bathroom forever, so I decided to pull out my phone and take a few pictures of myself in the mirror. I would never show them to anyone, but I would later go back to these photos all the time and admire them in awe and curiosity. I reluctantly washed off the eye makeup and lipstick with wads of damp toilet paper, struggled to unclasp the bra myself, and get dressed again. I would at least keep the black nail polish on, because it made me look artsy. I couldn’t explain how, but it was jarring looking back at my regular face and my regular boy clothes. I shoved those feelings back down and went outside again.

The three of us, all suddenly exhausted, flopped down on the couch in the living room together in a loving puddle. Sam leaned against me and looked through the pictures on her laptop, and Max rested her head on my shoulder while she flipped through channels on the telly. I realized then how comfortable I felt with them like this.

“That was really fun,” I said kinda quietly, but they were pleased to hear it.

“We can do this shit any time you want,” Max grinned. “You’re such an agreeable model. Not like the last girl we worked with for that mock magazine cover assignment, remember Sam?”

“Oh god, she was such a bitch,” Sam muttered. “Hey Pete? There’s this one photo I won’t end up using, I’m going to send it to you. You should put it on Instagram or something, you look totally hot.”

“Oh my god, thank you,” I couldn’t help but smile. “I can never take good photos of myself.”

“No problem,” Sam winked at me. “Us girls have to look out for each other, right?”

Max settled on the last half of some reality game tv show. An overly-made up contestant sat in front of the confessional camera. She smiled from ear to ear. “At first I thought everyone hated me because I won the first catwalk challenge, but ever since the wedding dress competition, I feel really close to my team. I finally feel like one of the girls.”

There was a huge difference in hanging out with girls versus hanging out with guys. I loved the guys and all the fun we had at home, but sometimes it felt like a competition to be the funniest or the best at whatever we happened to be doing. With Sam and Max and their friends, things were often quieter, softer, and gentler. I loved how they always complimented and validated one another, offered to share their food, or kept the contents of an entire bathroom cabinet in their purses. They loved taking pictures and documenting a fun night out. Plus, girls were always more affectionate with each other which was something I was completely unfamiliar with seeing between friends like that. With the guys, there was a weird void of any affection with each other, and they called me gay for half the things I said to them or if you accidentally brushed arms or something. At the same time, the girls clammed up and went icy silent if you offended them, and refused to talk to you for days until you apologized. Every minor problem became a huge week long event. If you pissed off Roger, he would just punch you and get it over with. Plus, with the guys, you were free to be disgustingly messy and eat as much as you want and just be lazy. Even though I often felt like an outsider in both groups, I think I liked having a balance of both anyways.

At around midnight, I was yawning like crazy.

“God, I gotta get home,” I slowly sat up, regretfully leaving my warm and comfy spot where I was being cuddled by my friends. I packed my clothes back into my backpack and got my shoes and jacket. Max and Sam walked me back to the elevator, both of them hugging me warmly. I loved how they always wanted me to stay as late as possible, it was nice to feel so wanted.

“See ya, kid,” Sam smiled at me. “Thanks for all your help!”
“Come hang out again soon,” Max tucked a lock of my overgrown hair behind my ear. “And get home safely.”

“I’ll try not to get murdered,” I grinned at them, just as the lift made its way to the top of the building for me. “Thanks for everything, and good luck editing the photos!”

They waved me goodbye as I got in the elevator and went back downstairs. I felt warm and happy. After, I waited at the bus stop by their building, my mood turning meditative in the dark calm of the night. I felt like listening to more eccentric female artists so I put my headphones in my ears and listened to St. Vincent’s recent self-titled album. The songs were perky enough to keep me awake, but deep enough to make me think.

I had a lot of weird feelings after tonight that I desperately wanted to sift through and make sense of. When I got on the bus, I stretched my legs out over the seat beside me and got comfy for the long journey home. I looked out the window to admire my favourite city as it rushed by, and let my thoughts roam. I mean, it was just clothes, after all. It didn’t mean anything. I wasn’t any less of a man for dabbling in some things that were particularly feminine, right? Everything I did was inherently feminine, which surely meant something I could figure out another day when I wasn’t so tired. Every time I thought about this sort of thing, though, I got weirdly angry at all the set expectations of what I was supposed to do as a boy, and all these rules about what I wasn’t allowed to do. Traditionally masculine things never interested me, and I felt really good in those rare moments I could freely express my feminine side. I tormented myself for never being able to be as manly as Roger or John and fit in with them, yet it’s not like I fit in with the girls either. But at what point did rejecting society’s expectations end, and becoming someone like Max begin?

The moodiness of the night and St. Vincent’s haunting songs weren’t helping my mood. I started to feel funny and vulnerable inside, and ‘Prince Johnny’ wasn’t helping whatsoever. I silenced her right in the middle of the song and listened to something else, then focused on reading my book instead to preserve the good mood I had when I left Sam and Max’s flat. I had bottled up these feelings for my whole life, what’s one more day?

I got home at around 1 am, which didn’t worry me much because I didn’t have any classes the next day. I let myself inside quietly so I wouldn’t wake Roger on the main floor, I went upstairs in the dark, back to the safety of my own room. I had just dumped the contents of my backpack on my floor when someone knocked at my door.

“Come in,” I said quietly. John slipped in, carrying his laptop, and shut the door again quietly so we wouldn’t wake Keith.

John stood by the end of my bed, looking uneasy. “Pete? I just checked the band email, and I got some news earlier that you might not like.”

I wave of worry washed through me, a million worst-case scenarios running through my mind. I took the laptop from John and sat on the edge of my bed to read it, and John sat beside me, rereading it over my shoulder.

“Johnny Hobbs? Who the fuck is that?” I asked, furrowing my eyebrows and reading the message out loud. It was sent right to our business email, the one we listed on all our social media. “‘To whom it may concern, my name is Johnny Hobbs, but I perform with my band under the name Johnny Devlin and the Detours. We are located in West Sussex and it has recently come to my attention that there is another band named The Detours, and you’re playing the festival this month under our name.’ What the hell is he on about?”

“Keep reading, it gets worse,” John pointed at the screen.
I kept reading. “’We ask that your band and your online presence changes your name from anything relating to Johnny Devlin and the Detours in two days’ time or we will have to take legal action.’” I handed the laptop back to John and buried my face in my hands. “Oh god. What are we gonna do?”

“There’s no point fighting back. They had a website with the name three years ago already, there’s physical proof they thought of the name first,” John scratched the side of his nose. “We gotta rename ourselves.”

I flopped backwards on my bed, feeling a gloomy despair rise from my stomach up to my chest. I felt like I was in deep trouble. “We’ve spent so much time trying to get everyone to remember our name, now we’re going to change it and lose all the progress we’ve made…”

“It might be for the best. A fresh start could give us the boost we need,” John told me. I can see why he was being optimistic. None of us were really keen on the way things in the band were going lately.

I didn’t know what to do, and frankly, we didn’t want to bear this burden alone. We went downstairs to Roger’s room and knocked on the door, but he was sound asleep. We knew Jackie wasn’t over tonight so we let ourselves in, turned on his lamp, sat on the edge of his bed and gently shook him awake.

“Hey, Rog, wake up,” I whispered. Roger slowly rubbed at his eyes, squinting to see who was talking to him. When he saw our faces, and then the clock on his bed stand, he sat up quickly. His blanket fell away and I noticed he wasn’t wearing a shirt.

“What’s going on? Are you okay? Where’s Keith?” he started to instantly panic.

John placed a steadying hand on his shoulder, always one step ahead of everyone. “Everyone is safe and healthy, and Keith is still asleep. We have a bit of a time sensitive problem about the band.”

Roger flopped back onto his pillow and groaned. “Oh god. How bad is it?”

“Not bad, just really serious,” I told him. “John, go wake up Keith. I’ll make coffee, let’s meet in my room in a few minutes.”

John went back upstairs as instructed. I stood up too, and Roger slipped out of his bed. He was only wearing black boxers, and I forced myself to look away as he dug through his drawers for pyjama trousers and a t-shirt. While he got dressed I awkwardly left to go make coffee for everyone as an apology for waking them up.

A few minutes later, we all groggily sat on my bed. John and I sat side by side, and he read the email for everyone. Roger stretched out across my bed in his pyjamas, his golden curls falling against my leg. No one was watching Keith and he got away with drinking three cups of coffee really quickly.

“Pete, why are your nails painted?” Keith teased me, always a bit too vicious. “You look—”

“Fucking gay, yeah, I know,” I rolled my eyes. The email was stressing me out and I couldn’t be bothered to humour Keith.

“So, he sent that today but I didn’t see it until now, so effectively we have until tomorrow night to rebrand or else we’re getting our asses sued into the ground,” John scratched his stubbly chin.

“No offense, but this guy sounds like a bit of a douche,” Keith piped up from the foot of the bed. We all nodded quietly in agreement so no one would have a verbal record just in case we did get sued.
“So, we just need to come up with a new name, right? We shouldn’t overthink it. We’re due for a big update anyways,” Roger yawned. He declined any coffee because he had to be up in six hours to go to work anyways. I felt bad for every extra minute we kept him awake.

We were all too tired to make a huge fuss, everyone wanting a quick solution. It seemed everyone was optimistic about the change, so there was no need for a crisis. Well, I tried to convince myself that. “Don’t forget, that also means updating every social media account we’ve ever used, making a new email, making a new logo, making new merch, making awkward public notices of our random name change…”

We all remembered the box of unsold Detours merchandise I kept under my bed. We didn’t have enough fans who were willing to pay shipping and handling for a dumb Detours t-shirt, nor did we have any real albums to sell. We definitely couldn’t sell merchandise at shows when we played weddings half the time.

Roger yawned again, curling up on his side and closing his eyes. “Keith, tomorrow after class you’re in charge of social media.”

Keith winced at the implication that he’d have to go to class. Roger continued. “Pete, start designing a cool new logo, one that everyone will associate with us even without seeing our name along with it.”

“Like Prince?” John said.

“Yeah, like Prince. But better.” Roger struggled to open his eyes again, propping his head on his hand to face John. “Now listen, John, you handle all correspondence with these guys delicately. Don’t be afraid to mention we have lawyers too.”

“But we don’t have lawyers,” I said. “We don’t even have a single lawyer. Or do we?”

“I once got a blowjob from a girl whose parents were lawyers, I think I still have her number,” Keith chimed in. John reached across the bed and confiscated Keith’s fourth cup of coffee.

“Alright, this is all good and settled Roger, except you’re forgetting something kind of important,” I said, getting everyone’s attention once more. “We still need to think of a name.”

Roger willed himself to sit up and stay awake. John put his laptop aside. Keith started playing Iggy Pop from his phone to pump our energy up.

“It’s gotta be something symbolic, kind of like how The Detours ended up being a self-fulfilling prophecy,” John tapped a finger to his lip, thinking.

“I want something short and punchy,” Roger said. “Witty and iconic.”

“I want it to be kind of ironic,” I suggested. “Like, ‘coming up next, The Band!’ Or ‘The Group With No Name’.”

“How about ‘The John Entwistle Band’? It cuts right to the chase, no?” John smirked.

“‘Roger and the Hair’,” I laughed.

“‘Keith Moon and the Sluts’?” Keith offered before John threw a pillow at his head.

“‘Pete Townshend and the Heartbreakers?’ I added. Soon, we were all giggling and throwing out the first names that came to our delirious minds, our ideas overlapping one another.
"'Free Beer'?

"'No One'?

"'The Group'?

"'The Freudian Slips'?

"'Lead Singer and the Nouns'.'

"'Adjective plus plural proper nouns'.'

"The 'who the fuck are you?' band."

"The 'who the fuck are we?' band."

"The 'who the fuck are any of us, really? What is the meaning of life?' band."

"'Roger Daltrey and the Meaning of Life'."

"'Roger Daltrey and the Holy Grail'."

"'Roger Daltrey and the Life of Brian'."

"'And now for Roger Daltrey and Something Completely Different'."

Roger was laughing so hard he had to wipe tears away from his eyes, while the rest of us went rapid fire.

"The 'we all disappointed our parents' band.'

"The 'we all had daddy issues at one point in our lives' band.'

"The 'John Entwistle has the worst daddy issues out of all of us' band."

"The 'John Entwistle’s dad is symbolically dead’ band."

"The ‘Fuck You Alison Wise’ band."

"The 'I could have been a lawyer but look where I am now’ band."

"The 'Life is meaningless, enjoy some rock and roll’ band."

Now Keith was laughing so hard he almost rolled off the mattress.

Roger stretched his back. “This is too funny. But I think we’re getting side-tracked.”

“Honestly, at this point, I think it would be hilarious if we were ‘Who the fuck are you’,” I yawned too. “Like, hey, want to go to this concert tonight? ‘Who’s playing?’ Who the fuck are you, of course.”

“We probably shouldn’t say fuck though, we’re not good enough to be edgy like that,” John scratched his head.

“So, just ‘Who are you’?” I asked.

Keith shrugged. “Ladies and gentlemen, the band you’ve all been waiting for: ‘The Who Are You’!
Or should it be ‘The Who are Yous’?”

Roger yawned too, then lay back down on my bed again. “Why not just ‘Who’? That’s the sort of name that makes you think about it.”

“Yeah, but imagine trying to Google that? No one would ever find us,” John frowned.

“Okay, how about ‘The Who’?” Roger offered, and I could hear his patience running out and his exhaustion taking over.

“‘The Who’ has a punch to it. Three letters each, that’s satisfying as fuck,” I thought aloud.

“What are the odds that some asshole will try and tell us it should be ‘The Whom’?” John asked.

“I think that’s good. We can be controversial without being offensive. It’ll get quite the buzz,” Roger said. I thought it was kind of lame.

“I still vote for ‘Keith Moon and the Sluts’,” Keith yawned, and he curled up on his side at the foot of my bed too. “Or we can just be ‘The Sluts’ if you want. I’m flexible.”

“I like ‘The Hair’ still, it’s kind of funny,” I said. “Plus, long shaggy hair is making a comeback, just in time. We’ll look like savants.”

John bit his bottom lip. “I’m team Who, actually.”

“Pete, hand me a marker,” Roger mumbled, struggling to stay awake.

John handed me my pencil case on the nightstand, and I gave Roger a Sharpie. On the back of his hand, he wrote The Sluts, The Hair, and The Who, then handed the marker back.

“Alright,” Roger blew the ink on his hand dry. “I’m going to sleep for a few more hours. When I wake up and go to work, I’ll keep looking at my hand. If there’s one name I don’t get tired of looking at by the end of the day, that’s what I’ll pick.”

All of us nodded in agreement. It sounded like a reasonable plan.

“Good work today, lads. I think this will be something good for us,” Roger yawned again. He lay back, and within moments he had fallen asleep again. Keith reached over to flick the light switch by my door, sending my bedroom into complete darkness, and I was suddenly aware of how tired I was. For no reason in particular, we all rearranged ourselves on my small bed—John and I sharing the pillow, Roger up against the wall but further down next to my legs, and Keith at the food of the bed — and fell asleep together above the covers, maintaining that organic comfort we had created. It was the first time in a long time that I actually felt like all of us belonged together.
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pete.townshend one track mind, one track head
Friday, April 14th
15 days until the concert

I slept in late, making up for the lack of sleep I got last night. I slept so solidly I didn’t even notice Roger’s alarm on his phone going off so he could get ready for work, or John and Keith eventually waking up to go eat. It felt strange knowing that we were currently in a band with no name, as if we were suspended mid-air in the leap from one destination for another. It felt like a bit of a vacation too, especially since we could go out to party tonight.

I showered and shaved in case anything did happen at the party. Summer was cute, and we would be drunk and having a good time. I tried to hype myself up in case she did make a move, so I would be ready. I went through my whole day with the idea that something would happen, which of course made me want it more. I convinced myself it would be good, it would be fun, and it was something I could actually do. Maybe neither of us would chicken out for once, and I could get this whole virginity thing over with.

I wore my old Red Hot Chilli Peppers shirt and sweatpants for now. I would get dressed up nicer later when it was time to leave. I fixed a quick sandwich for lunch and hung out with Keith in the basement, where he was watching some weird true crime show, sitting upside down on the couch.

“Wanna smoke?” Keith asked, nudging me with his socked foot.

I shrugged. I only had one blunt left and I didn’t have enough money this week to buy more weed. “I dunno, I want to try and write some more today.”

Keith pouted, but kept watching telly anyways. I left my plate on the floor by the couch and tucked my knees up so I could write in my notebook. Keith sat right-side-up again and scooched closer to me, even though he had the whole couch to spread out on. He peered over my shoulder to read what I was writing. It irritated me to no end when people did that, but I know Keith didn’t mean to be annoying so I didn’t say anything.

“That sounds good,” he pointed at a few sentences I had written but couldn’t connect to anything else.

_I was born with a plastic spoon in my mouth / the north side of my town faced east, and the east was facing south / those crocodile tears are what you cry…_

“Thanks,” I told him. “It’s supposed to be about a guy who lies about everything, trying to make himself seem better than he actually is, you know?”

“What’s he lying for?” Keith drummed his fingers on his lap in the same pattern we had rehearsed yesterday. “Is he just insecure or is he trying to impress a girl or something?”

I hadn’t thought of that yet. “Maybe a bit of both? I mean, on the surface it’s because he’s insecure and he’s trying to prove himself to someone. But maybe if you look at it another way, he’s trying to prove that he’s not who everyone wants him to be.”

Keith bobbed his head. “That’s pretty clever.”

I smiled at him, thankful that he had given me even more ideas. I kept scribbling out his backstory until I heard John come home and downstairs.
“My life is shitty, but also really good. Like a good kind of shitty,” he announced at the bottom of the stairs. “I spent all morning visiting those ladies from the swim class, right? I went house to house and they paid me cash just to connect them to their Wi-Fi and help them log in to their emails. One lady didn’t understand that her battery on her cellphone ran out and she just hard to charge it instead of buying a new one. And another lady asked me to install Windows 10 and she gave me twenty quid just for pressing a few buttons.”

“You’re a hero!” Keith cried dramatically.

“I love exploiting the elderly!” John cheered. “Now I have a ton of cash to buy booze for tonight so I can get super drunk if the blind date goes badly.”

We all cheered for him, and that meant we were going to take a field trip to the liquor store. Keith and I got our shoes and coats on, and the three of us took the bus out to our favourite store. Keith was finally of age but it was his fault he kept forgetting his ID at home, so we sent him to the grocery store nearby to buy juice to chase with. John bought his favourite whisky, already a fan of finer drinks. He even liked fancy wines and stuff. I had just enough cash to get vodka which I like to mix with cranberry juice to take away the bite.

We reunited with Keith and made our way home on the bus again, feeling very self-satisfied. Back at home, we had a few more hours to waste, so the three of us watched Kill Bill—Keith insisting we watch Volume II because it was the best—and eating the last bag of crisps. We ran out of popcorn weeks ago and could never find the money for it on Roger’s grocery budget. Keith was glued to my side doing impressions of the characters and reciting the lines, and John was spouting trivia, and I sat in the middle couldn’t help but laugh. My mood just kept getting better and better.

Since the three of us were going out tonight, Roger would finally have the house to himself so he brought Jackie home with him after work. They sat with us for the last quarter of the movie, watching politely even though they didn’t understand what was going on. I noticed Roger still had the three potential band names written on his hand. Keith made us sit through the entire credits to praise every single person who worked on the film, and then we went upstairs to get ready.

I always wore jeans and a band t-shirt, but if I wore anything else I felt like I’d be over dressing. A cardigan over top would make me look bookish and not sexy at all. If I wore a jacket I’d surely get overheated in the cramped party. I just stood in the middle of my room in my nicest pair of briefs and contemplated the entire meaning of life.

John came into my room to use my mirror to fix his hair. He could get away with wearing a plain white shirt and a big plaid flannel because he was actually buff and filled it out nicely. When I borrowed the same flannel, I looked like a little kid swimming in his dad’s shirt. I whined about my fashion problems to John while I pulled on my black skinny jeans and he used my hair product without asking.

“Just keep it simple so Summer can undress you quicker,” John told me. I secretly told him the whole story about Summer and all my anxieties about being intimate with her, and John just gave me sex tips and told me not to worry. It didn’t exactly help but I took what I could get.

After a lot of thinking and analyzing, I put on my favourite shirt that had Kurt Cobain and Courtney Love on it so I would look cool. I didn’t look amazing but I didn’t look terrible either. At the last minute I threw on a denim button-up over top, but left it open like John did. I laced up my black converse and I figured that I looked nice enough. I felt ambitious, so I packed a few condoms in my wallet.

Keith came in my room after that with the bottles of chasers he bought earlier. He was wearing a
vintage looking graphic t-shirt and a baseball cap backwards with a tuft of his hair stuck out of the front. He looked like the attractive but lovable older brother on some 90’s family sitcom.

I mixed my drink in a steel water bottle, and the three of us sat on my bed and drank. John showed us more pictures of the girl he matched with on Tinder that would be picking us up soon, a raven-haired girl named Audrey who worked at a kid’s toy store while she studied English literature. She was alright looking, like the kind of girl who could look gorgeous if she put in the extra effort.

“She’s okay to talk to, but I dunno,” John absentmindedly scrolled through their texts. “We don’t have much in common.”

“Don’t discourage yourself before you’ve even met her,” Keith told him. “It’ll be fun! Maybe you can even get a leg over tonight.”

John just shrugged and drank some more.

Summer was texting me, and she said she was nervous about over dressing just like I was. I felt more fondness for her the more we confided in each other about our mutual awkwardness. I felt really good about how things were going, and the alcohol was definitely giving my mood a bigger boost. I paced how much I drank so I would feel the best just as we got to the party.

Finally, finally, finally Audrey came by in her car to pick us up. I topped up the vodka in my bottle so I could share with Summer if she wanted. We said goodbye to Roger and Jackie, leaving them to play house and do whatever weird stuff they wanted in their total privacy. Audrey came out of the car to hug John as they properly met for the first time. She was confident and outgoing, and was more than happy to have us along for the party. Keith and I sat in the back seat and John sat in the front with her. She talked a lot and John listened.

I passed along the directions to Summer’s flat to Audrey, memorizing them myself too in case we decided to go back to her place after the party instead of mine. Summer was already waiting for us in the lobby of her building, and since I was the skinniest, I moved into the middle seat and Summer sat next to me.

“You look really nice,” I remarked as we started driving again, the alcohol having already warmed me and my confidence up. She was wearing jeans too, but she had a top on that made her look really busty, and more makeup on than she usually had on at school. She smelled like strawberries. Beside me, Keith politely looked at his phone while we shyly flirted.

“Thank you,” she blushed. “So do you. I love your shirt, I really dig Courtney Love.”

If things progressed between us, I’d have to make some corny declaration of love like, Will you be the Courtney Love to my Kurt Cobain except without the suicide and drugs and stuff? Before I could compliment her further, Summer leaned forward to talk to Audrey. “Thanks again for driving me. I’m Summer, by the way.”

“It’s no problem at all, love,” Audrey smiled at her in the rear view mirror. “Say, you look familiar. You don’t happen to go to Oxford, do you? There’s a girl in my cinema class who looks just like you.”

“I go to Ealing with Pete actually,” Summer explained, and I felt warm inside when she said my name. “But my older sister Carrie is a cinema major at Oxford.”

“Carrie Fredericks?” Audrey asked, and Summer nodded enthusiastically. “Oh my god! That must be her then. I’ll have to tell her we met. What a small world, eh?”
The two girls bonded over their mutual friends and John plugged the car’s AUX cord into his phone. He played The Tom Tom Club, his ultimate guilty pleasure. ‘Genius of Love’ started playing first, and Keith did a funky dance, stealing moves from all the disco music videos that were coming out lately.

“What’re you gonna do when you get out of jail?” Keith sang to John.

John turned around in his seat to face him. “I’m gonna have some fun.”

“What do you consider fun?”

“Fun, natural fun.” John broke his deadpan and laughed, and they passed his bottle of whisky back and forth. I talked to Summer over the noise and she shared my drink too, trusting me even after I made a terrible joke about how I didn’t poison it so she could trust me.

Audrey’s friend was having the party at a house near our school, and Audrey parked in the driveway in case she decided to drink so she could leave her car overnight. People were already on the porch smoking when we went inside. I made sure to hold the door open for Summer so I seemed like a gentleman.

Inside the house, it was relatively dark and cramped, and already quite stuffy. Someone was playing 90’s rap classics, and there was a loud buzz of people talking over the music. All the action around me, aided by the alcohol clouding over my thoughts, brought me to a really good mood and I felt invincible from fucking up socially. Maybe I was totally meant for this kind of party scene. Now I could finally relax and have fun. John and Audrey went right to the centre of the action, talking and socializing with the crowd. Keith spotted a cute girl, petite and with dark hair, and elbowed through the throngs of people to get to her. I took Summer’s hand and lead her to the kitchen where it was less crowded.

We sat in the hallway outside the kitchen that lead to the basement and the family room, finishing the vodka, then stealing a few beers from the fridge too. We talked and talked until both of us were drunkenly slurring and laughing.

“So, what was your childhood like?” she asked, already wrapping around me. All I could smell was cheap beer and her strawberry perfume, and both were incredibly intoxicating.

I had my arm wrapped around her waist, stroking the small of her back. Her skin was so warm under that thin shirt, I wanted to touch even more. “Mine was really nice and really fucked up simultaneously, but that’s another story for another time,” I finished the last of my beer in one bitter swig. Not the time to think of sad stuff. Think about her breasts threatening to pop out of that shirt any moment instead. “What about yours? How did you get to be who you are today?”

Summer finished the last of her beer too so we could both get rid of our bottles. She placed her newly free hand on my knee, stroking her thumb lazily over my leg. “Just like anyone else, I suppose. My parents worked too hard to make sure they could buy me everything I wanted, except I didn’t get hugged enough or whatever, so I became an over-achiever at school so I could get affection and praise from my teachers to make up for it.”

“Holy fuck, you put it into words,” I exclaimed, and her giggle turned into a laugh, and she covered her mouth with her dainty hand. God, she was so fucking cute. And she seemed to be a lot like me too. So we sat in the hallway of someone’s home, and I didn’t remember how we got here or how to get home but I didn’t quite care about that right now. We were both giggling like drunken idiots about something I already forgot, and every little thing made us laugh even harder.
Summer always went to shyly cover her mouth when she laughed, so the next time I made her laugh, I took her hands and held them. She knew exactly what I was doing and we laughed some more. I didn’t know why I was so damn giggly but being with her made me so happy. I was even happier when she let go of my hand to place it on the back of my head, pulling me in for a kiss.

So we sat in the hallway and snogged, and it was so good I didn’t even care if people might be watching. It had been an embarrassingly long time since I had last been kissed like that and Summer was quite the expert.

We then found ourselves in the bathroom, where Summer had me pushed up against the wall and her tongue down my throat, and it was so great. My hands travelled all over her and she pressed her hips against mine and I wanted this to go on forever. This is what it’s all about, isn’t it? The thrill of boy chasing girl, sneaking off for a stolen moment together, hormones raging. I was so ecstatic to finally be part of the true teenager experience, like I was doing something right for once and I truly fit in with the other people my age.

I felt myself sinking lower into drunkenness, and my head was swimming and nothing registered until a few seconds after it had happened. Someone had been pounding on the door, desperate to use the loo. Summer detached herself from me and I didn’t like it one bit, and she agreed to let someone else use the bathroom. Before I knew it, she was taking my hand and leading me upstairs.

It wasn’t until we were halfway up the staircase that I realized what was going on, and I started to panic. I thought we were going to do this after the party, somewhere else, with more time for me to prepare. I felt for my wallet in my pocket, making sure that I had the condoms with me. Did I remember how to put it on? I tried to recite everything I learned in health class in school—open the wrapper carefully, pinch an inch, roll it on, condoms prevent 99% of pregnancies and protect against sexually transmitted diseases such as hepatitis, HPV, HIV/AIDS, gonorrhea…

Now we were in someone’s bedroom, she found a sock to loop around the doorknob, and I desperately wanted to go downstairs and find Keith or John. I needed to ask them if it was okay? Did I know what I was doing? Was I ready? Better yet, would Summer notice if I rang Roger really quick for reassurance?

But there was no time to consider any of that. She left the lights off, but blue moonlight came in through the open window. I felt trapped. I wasn’t ready for this. She sat on the bed and pulled me down on top of her. We started kissing again, which was okay, I knew how to do that much. But then Summer started to speed things up.

Summer took off both of my shirts, discarding them, and traced everywhere on my skin with her feather light finger tips that made me shiver. I tried to pull her shirt off too but I must have been fumbling, because she unzipped a little decorative zipper at the back of her shirt and took it off herself. She left her bra on and went straight to unbuttoning her jeans.

They were tight around her hips so I helped her pull them off, then she climbed on my lap. I liked holding her close like that and kissing. She even ran her fingers through my hair which felt really good, even moreso now that I was drunk and everything felt really good in general. Summer kept kissing all the way down my neck as she unbuttoned my jeans too. I quickly fished my wallet out of my pocket before I lost track of it. I sat there in my underwear cold and shivering, holding her as close as I could. She grinded against my thigh, then stroked me for a bit, then slipped her own hand down her underwear while I watched in disbelief at how fast her fingers could go, working herself into moans and sighs.

The rest happened so fast, I could only hear the blood rushing in my ears. She pulled her panties off, then tugged off my boxers. She helped me put the condom on and I watched to make sure she
pinched an inch at the top just like my health teacher had taught us. It was all going so fast and my head was spinning as she lay back against the pillows on the random stranger’s bed, her legs splayed open, warm and inviting. I couldn’t turn back now.

I mean, sex was good, right? And it’s not like I wasn’t desperately wishing for it every second of the day. It would be a long time before I got any more action after this, so I didn’t want to waste the opportunity while I had it. Maybe if I did well enough, Summer would want me to be her boyfriend, and we could spend all our time together. That was motivation enough for me crawl over to her, place a hand on her thigh, and let it travel upwards.

“Are you nervous, love?” Summer was breathing heavily, all ready to go while I was miles behind. “Your hand is trembling.”

I swallowed quickly, not wanting to sound like a clueless idiot. “No it’s just, uh, a drunk thing, that’s all.”

She sat up, smiling at me pitifully. “This isn’t your first time, is it?”

“Of course not,” I lied. Prior to this I had gotten a blowjob, and that very well counted as sex, right?

“Good,” she said more seriously, and I knew the stakes were high so I couldn’t disappoint her if I wanted her to like me. She was pulling me into her arms and stroking my back, which made me feel a bit better. “You’re gorgeous, Pete. I want you so badly.”

I reached down to stroke myself some more before I went completely soft. She was right, my hands were shaking. I wished it would stop. I focused on her overflowing purple bra instead. “You look really good.”

Here was the perfect opportunity. I could finally lose my damn virginity and get it over with. I did want to do this, didn’t I? This part came naturally, where I spread her thighs open, tracing a finger along that sensitive damp skin. She had shaved neatly and everything.

I heard the dull thumping of the music from the floor below us, and reassured myself the bedroom door had been locked and no one would walk in. Summer angled her hips upwards and I guided myself in, sinking completely into her and burying my face in the strawberry scented skin of her neck.

Okay, now I understood what all the hype was about. It felt, really, really, really, really, really, really, really, really, really damn good. I started rolling my hips and moving inside of her, and it was instantly better than my own hand, or any sloppy drunken blowjob I would ever receive. I kissed along her neck, and one hand shyly crept up to touch her breast over her bra. My other hand held her hip as she rocked in time with me, moaning softly. Summer wrapped her legs around my waist, encouraging me to go faster.

I was trying to focus on six million things at once and being drunk wasn’t helping. I had lost any sense of rhythm, to which I blamed on the alcohol, so I went harder and deeper. I couldn’t control myself, as the tightness quickly coiling in me was driving me to finish faster. Summer was so small under me, and her entire body was rocking, which was really hot. She grabbed desperately at my shoulder blades, one hand tangling in my hair and pulling, making me groan.
I went even rougher as I felt close to finishing, which she seemed to like because she became quite noisy. I wasn’t expecting to finish so soon but before I could slow down and prevent it, my own orgasm racked my body, more intense than any I’ve ever had before.

I stilled inside of her, resting on top of her motionlessly as I caught my breath. She waited patiently, trailing her hand up and down my back, which had gone all sweaty. I basked in the glorious feeling, but I was raised to be a gentleman, of course. I pulled out of her, peeling the disgusting condom off and tossing it on the floor for someone else to deal with tomorrow morning. I kissed all the way down Summer’s body, travelling from her lips, to her neck, to her breasts, to her stomach, and down to her hips. I wrote a long apology letter with my tongue on her clit until she was writhing and moaning, gripping my hair with both hands. I worked valiantly until she finished too, her breath hitching and her hips stuttering as she relaxed with a long sigh. I felt pretty damn proud of myself.

I lay back down beside her, waiting to be rewarded with more kissing and affection. She combed my sweaty hair out of my face and kissed me one last time before sitting up again, reaching for her clothes, and I felt something nasty in the pit of my stomach as she got up and left me behind like that. After all the rush of hormones and heat of the moment had passed, I was left feeling cold and vulnerable once more. My pride had left just as quickly as it came. I wanted her to hold me for a bit longer, but she didn’t get the hint.

I tucked my legs up to my chest and watched her get dressed again, humming to herself, and she didn’t seem to be as drunk as I was anymore. I don’t know what I was waiting for, but I wanted something more from her. I felt unsatisfied for some reason, and empty instead of relieved. We made eye contact in the dark briefly, and I searched Summer’s face desperately to figure out what she was thinking, and I begged to know. Was I alright? Did a shadow of emotion cross her face, or was it just another trick of the light?

Summer zipped up her shirt once more, and tied her sweaty hair back out of her face. I slowly started to get dressed again too, dejectedly. She didn’t say much and neither did I. I didn’t know what to say that wouldn’t sound cheesy or desperate on my behalf.

As I buttoned up my jeans again, her face was lit up by the glow of her phone screen as she typed quickly. Then, she looked up at me again as if she were so distracted she forgot about me. “I’ve got to head out soon, my roommate’s coming to picking me up.”

“Oh,” I said simply. “Did you, uh, have fun?”

“Yeah, of course,” she said, then came over to give me another kiss, probably out of pity.

“Um, when can I see you next?” I asked quietly.

“I have work tomorrow, but I’ll definitely catch you in class,” she said nonchalantly, responding to another text.

“Um,” I stalled for time. “Text me again later if you want, we can hang out whenever. I’d like to, um, get to know you on closer terms than this.”

She was distracted with her phone again, but then looked up at me and smiled. “Yeah, of course. She’s almost here, so I’ve got to go. Tell your friends I say bye.”

“Yeah, of course,” I echoed lamely. She hugged me quickly and then excused herself, leaving the bedroom with a spring of pride in her step. I sat on the edge of the bed and put on my button-up, sitting quietly for a bit until my drunken mind processed everything. I suddenly felt very lonely, and empty when I should have felt fulfilled. When I checked my phone, I didn’t have any messages, and
it was too late to start a conversation with anyone else.

I found a wastebasket to toss the used condom in after all, then I found my wallet wedged in between the mattress and the footboard of the bed. I had everything, I guess. I wandered downstairs where there was an extraordinary amount of noise, and it was starting to give me a headache. I think I drank too much, and I was starting to feel very blue.

In the family room, someone had set up an old school karaoke machine to the telly. I popped my head in through the door, watching as Keith and John were clutching each other, their girls long abandoned. They were shouting REM into the microphone at lightning speed, even though they were both wasted beyond belief. I frowned at yet another solidarity I wasn’t a part of.


No one noticed me, so I left quietly and shut the living room door behind me as my friends started proclaiming the end of the world as we know it. The rest of the party seemed lame now, and I didn’t know anyone else here. I figured the sketchy late night buses were still running, so I went outside into the cold night and walked to the main road, and waited for a bus I knew would take me near our house. I wallowed in my shitty mood, and I tried to listen to music but I wasn’t in the mood for anything in particular. I didn’t feel like anyone felt as lonely as me.

There were some other drunken people on the bus like me, and some other unsavory characters that I avoided. I sat at the back, away from the person playing music loudly from their phone and talking to themselves. I could feel the ghost of Summer’s hands all over me, and I started to feel weird and
guilty. At the time I had enjoyed the whole thing, but now I felt like the touches had been invasive, especially now that I knew she didn’t love me and just wanted quick satisfaction at my own expense. Once more I had allowed someone to touch me in spots too private to share. I cursed myself for letting an ordinary human thing like sex make me feel so sick, but in my defence, I didn’t have the best track record when it came to positive sexual experiences.

Eventually I got close enough to our neighbourhood that I got off the bus and walked the rest of the way alone, cold and irritated. I berated myself for forgetting my key because I planned on coming home with John and Keith. I found the spare key we hid under a small rock in the garden, and let myself in quietly.

From his bedroom on the main floor, I could hear Roger fucking his underage girlfriend as loudly as he wanted, not expecting the rest of us home for another few hours. I bet Roger never felt guilty about these things. I felt very bitter with jealousy, because Roger and John and Keith could all be strong and masculine and fuck women endlessly, yet I was stuck with unexplainable guilt that I didn’t ask for, and I moped around like a bloody girl when I couldn’t be cuddled after sex. I’m so fucking pathetic.

I trudged upstairs back to the comforting solitude of my own bedroom and flopped facedown on my bed, not bothering to even take off my shoes.

Before I did doze off, however, I connected to the Wi-Fi again and got a notification from the group chat, posted a few hours ago.

11:27 PM: ROGER has changed the group conversation name to THE WHO.
Saturday, April 15th
14 days until the concert

The next morning, I woke up feeling sour and hungover. The whole night had been playing in a repeated loop in my head, at first congratulatory but then ending mockingly. I finally had proper sex and I should have felt proud, cocky even. But the sex wasn’t as great as I thought it would have been, and the dirty, guilty feeling rose again.

I reached over to my nightstand to check my phone, and there still wasn’t anything from Summer. I wanted her to contact me first this time. The more I moved, the harder my head pounded. At least I didn’t feel nauseous this time. Just incredibly confused.

I moped around in bed for a while longer, staring at the ceiling, feeling angry at the world for my own personal problems. Eventually I became too unbearably thirsty so I rolled out of bed and only now did I change into pyjamas. When I walked out of my room, I ran into an artificial redhead coming out of our bathroom, wet and wrapped in a towel. We both startled each other, and I covered my eyes so she wouldn’t feel uncomfortable.

“Um, sorry,” I mumbled as she scurried back to Keith’s room, and Keith came out of the bathroom a moment later with an identical towel around his waist. That definitely wasn’t the girl he originally pursued last night.

“Morning Petey,” Keith was all smiles and sunshine. I uncovered my eyes and tried not to look like an angry corpse.

When I got downstairs, I saw John sitting half awake at the table with a glass of orange juice and a cup of coffee, and since he was alone I guess things with Audrey didn’t work out either. At least he looked as bad as me.

“Morning,” he grumbled, scrolling through his phone.

“How’re you feeling?” I asked as I poured the rest of the coffee for myself and joined him at the table.

“Dead as usual, except now I’m dead on the outside too,” he said. He looked even worse up close, and I couldn’t imagine I looked much better. “You?”

“The same. I feel disgusting physically and emotionally,” I blew on my coffee.

“It was a great party though, eh?”

“Oh, definitely.”

We watched Keith and his lady friend come downstairs, fully dressed this time. They made a racket while we suffered through our hangovers. Keith made the girl a BLT and then politely shoved her out the door. He then collapsed onto the chair next to me, exhausted already. “Women, am I right?”

John and I nodded.

“Where’d you disappear to last night?” Keith asked me, stealing some of my coffee.
“I, uh, came home. I was tired,” I told them both.

Keith frowned. “So you didn’t score with Summer?”

I shifted in my seat. It occurred to me that I only went through with things last night just for this moment of glory where I could boast to my friends, and I wasn’t even as excited as I should be. “Actually, I did. We used someone’s bedroom upstairs.”

John gave me a look. “A blowjob doesn’t count, Pete.”

“No, we went all the way,” I told them both, searching both of their faces for the reaction I wanted. They blinked at me.

“Like, all the way?” Keith clarified as if he didn’t think I knew what I was talking about.

“Yeah, we made love, the whole thing,” I insisted.

“Like, you actually penetrated her?” Keith prodded.

“Well, yes, that’s how it works, Keith.”

“But did you both finish?” John asked.

“Yes, we both finished,” I rolled my eyes. The two looked at each other in disbelief.

John raised his orange juice glass to me. “Well, congratulations. I’m rather impressed.”

I clinked my cup against his, and Keith clinked an imaginary glass with mine. He grinned at me. “Welcome to the club. Now you’re finally a man!”

I laughed anyways, and they kept prodding for questions but I kept things vague. I thought it was a rather private affair, and I didn’t want them to know Summer rolled out of bed and left me moments later. Plus, I mulled over Keith’s comment far too long. Here I was, thrust into manhood and fame and glory just for putting my dick in a girl. That didn’t prove anything about me.

Later, I wandered around the house, letting myself indulge in my broodiness and do whatever I could to take the edge off of my hangover. After a nice hot shower, I curled back up in bed and slept some more before a text woke me up again. It wasn’t from Summer, but from a classmate asking about the homework. I decided my intangible problems were more important so I didn’t answer them out of spite. I even started to write more of the song I started yesterday with Keith’s approval.

I’m a substitute for another guy, I constantly feel disconnected from the human experience and I should probably see a therapist for some unresolved childhood traumas and I’m going to die alone but at least I’m not a virgin anymore, hey-o.

Alright, so it could use a little tweaking. Perhaps I was still bitter about the imminent truth that I had just been used for a quick fuck and then discarded. Still, I would be hopeful until Tuesday when I saw Summer again. I had been sort of lying to her about how cool I am, and I don’t know if she figured me out yet. But it lead to sex, shouldn’t I be satisfied?

I distracted myself with my acoustic guitar which I usually kept in my room. The plan had been to record demos of songs I was workshopping to my computer, using my acoustic instead of my electric and singing the way Roger was to sing it later. I even bought a microphone to pick the sound up better. Unfortunately I hadn’t been doing much recording lately because my creativity was at an all-time low. Nonetheless, I experimented with different chord progressions that might fit the tune of the
lyrics I had written thus far. I liked getting back into the groove of songwriting, even if my tune wasn’t working out. Tweaking and experimenting was most of the fun of writing.

The house fell quiet again tonight. Roger and Jackie were out on a date, spending every precious moment together on the weekends in secret. Today Roger had left the car behind for us to use, which was a rare occurrence. John went back to his mom’s house for a family birthday dinner or something, and Keith was tearing around the house, trying to find something to occupy himself with. I was so wrapped up in trying to get my song to sound just right that Keith scared the shit out of me when he burst into my room.

I put my guitar down on the bed next to me, clutching my chest. “Jesus Christ, you almost gave me a heart attack.”

“Good, it’s about time you start living,” he jumped onto the foot of my bed. “Let’s go out, man! I wanna do something”

I didn’t want to sound like a loser, but I was definitely more keen on staying inside by myself. “We went out last night already.”

He huffed. “We don’t even have to do anything big, we can just drive around and listen to music. I need to get out of this damn house and forget about things for a while.”

Keith looked desperate. He did know how to drive but he didn’t have his license—which was a good thing, because he was, unsurprisingly, a reckless driver. I felt bad that the poor kid was stuck at home all the time, really I was. It was only about 6 pm, the night was young. Hell, we were both young too.

“Come on, I even have a surprise for you if you take me out,” Keith prodded further, poking at me. Finally I was doing something productive with my free time, but now that fear-of-missing-out was looming over my head. I wouldn’t be young and free forever, I needed to make fun memories before I was too old, Roger rarely let us use his car…

The pressure to live was, in hindsight, too overwhelming sometimes when you’re young. Then again, it also seemed people my age were dangerously desperate to feel something. I felt both sides strongly. “Alright, what’s my reward, then?”

I followed Keith into his room, careful not to tread over the piles of clothes and books all over the floor. I couldn’t even tell what colour the carpet was under all his junk, yet only Keith could get away with it. His mess was, somehow, endearing.

We sat on his bed and pulled his Introduction To Media Linguistics textbook out from under a pile of clothes on his floor and opened it up. The middle of the hardcover book was hollowed out and stuffed with baggies of various drugs.

“Pick yer poison,” he grinned.

Like the idiot I am, I happily dug through his impressive collection. I should have been slightly worried for Keith, and I should have exercised more caution, but instead I chose a blue pill because the light eggshell colour was pretty, and I watched as Keith popped a few orange ones like candy.

Uppers and downers and casual party pills were making a comeback, and Keith’s sketchy friends practically ran their own pharmaceutical company out of their basements. I wasn’t much into pills but I still do them on rare occasions, such as today. They’re really common with my fellow art school students, you can buy them from practically anyone at school.
I tried not to feel regret for my unproductivity, and instead we watched YouTube videos on Keith’s laptop while we waited for things to kick in. He kept taking swigs from a flask and then offering me some, but I didn’t take any. I didn’t think much of Keith drinking a bit and taking a few pills at the time.

I remember going to my room to put jeans on before we went out when my vision went super focused, and I felt my whole body buzz happily. I suddenly wanted to do three million things at once. We scrambled around the house, Keith raiding the fridge for something to drink and me searching to find my left shoe, maybe I had left it in the kitchen cupboards?

Before I knew it, Keith was handing me the car keys and pushing me out the door. I slid behind the wheel and my dumb ass started operating a car under the influence, the opposite of every safety rule that’s ever been drilled into my head. My conscience tried to warn me of the repercussions but each thought died away as quickly as it came. I managed to convince myself the pills made me immune to any danger. I furrowed my eyebrows in concentration, turned the key in the ignition, and started driving Roger’s car.

Keith cranked up the radio, and the newest ABBA song started playing. He made a gagging noise. “I can’t believe they’re trying to make disco happen. They’re just ripping off 80’s Europop.”

I scratched the side of my nose, looping around our small neighbourhood while I decided on somewhere to drive to. “I kind of like it, actually.”
Keith groaned theatrically. “Peter, you’re killing me here.”

“Don’t kill me, but I downloaded Waterloo. Like, I actually paid money for the album,” I looked over at Keith, dropping my voice. “And you know what? I fucking loved it.”

Keith looked disgusted, before he burst into ridiculous laughter. “That’s so fucking gay, man.”

I forced a laugh.

We sang along to ‘Honey, Honey’ anyways.

Keith later fiddled with his iPod, jamming the AUX cord in and playing his own music instead. Roger upgraded the radio himself because it would be centuries before we could afford another car, and the most high-tech it could get was the introduction of the AUX.

Being Iggy Pop’s number one fan—out of a total of probably five fans—Keith obviously chose The Stooge’s newest live EP. They laid low, never advertised, and basically did whatever the fuck they wanted. They were even more obscure than obscure right now, and you only knew about them from word of mouth. The band even released most of their music for free online nowadays, more focused on sharing the music to their super small fanbase than grabbing the money. I admired the fuck out of that.

A live version of ‘Search and Destroy’ came pouring out of the cheap speakers like white hot fire, and I felt my heartbeat pick up along with the speed of the car. Keith stuck his head out of the window and yelled the lyrics at the top of his lungs into the cool April night.

“I’m a runaway son of the nuclear A-bomb!” Keith startled some elderly woman out walking her dog.

I rolled my window down too, the cool air whipping my face and adding to the sensory overload of my high. I shouted along with him, for the first time finding a bit of myself in the lyrics I otherwise thought were written all about Keith. “I am the world’s forgotten boy, the one who searches and destroys…”

I raced through yellow lights, past stop signs, and cut wide turns around the corners of sleepy neighbourhoods, filling the empty streets with our song. ”Honey, ya gotta help me please, somebody’s gotta save my soul!”

Keith clutched desperately at my arm, his fingers cold. ”Baby, detonate for me…”. He stuck his head out the window again, shouting over the music to a group of teenagers on the street, a little lost, not unlike ourselves. “I’m fucking dead inside, man!”

I wanted to go down by the river and sit by the water, so I took us deeper and deeper into the heart of the city. I rested one arm on the window ledge and felt every rough, grainy Stooges song roll in through me. There buzzing in my head was so pleasant, and I didn’t realize the implications when I saw that Keith had brought a baggie of pills in his jacket pocket and was still popping more. At the time it didn’t seem like a big deal, because Keith always knew what he was doing when it came to getting high or drunk, and his tolerance level was high already. Without thinking, I reached over to grab another pill, realizing they weren’t the light blue ones I had taken earlier, nor the orange ones Keith had taken, but a different purple kind.

Keith started tugging at my sleeve again as another song died out. “Pete, can you drive me to my parent’s house? I need to get some of my old stuff.”

Keith’s parents, who moved from Wembley closer to downtown London a few years ago for his
father’s work, didn’t live too far from where we were right now. I didn’t foresee any problems at the time so I changed my route, thinking I was helping Keith by taking him over. The river could wait.

Keith was still sort of living in between homes at the moment, because his parents still wanted a firm grip on him and figured his stint with our band would be temporary. I thought it was vicious how they assumed Keith would fail and be ostracized from his friends just to come running back home to his parents.

My mind was skipping around still from the pills, so Keith had to remind me his house number. I pulled into the driveway and admired the front of his family’s well-maintained house. The curtains were shut but I could see the flashing blue glow of the TV, where his family must have been relaxing and watching after dinner.

Keith stumbled a bit getting out of the car, and it took him two tries to shut the door hard enough. I rolled down my window and called to him. “Keith? Are you okay?”

“Yes, yeah, just a bit clumsy is all,” he reassured me, but his hands shaking slightly. He jerked his head over towards the front door. “You can come in with me if you want.”

I joined him a moment later after locking Roger’s car, and I tried my best to keep composed so no one could tell I was high either. Keith brought his house key and unlocked the front door, letting himself in. Keith’s dad, Alfred, rushed around the corner seconds later to investigate.

“Who the hell—Christ, Keith, you scared me,” Alfred softened his stern look as he turned on the hallway light and noticed I was awkwardly standing behind Keith. “Ah, Pete, nice to see you again.”

“You too,” I gave him a harmless grin just as Keith’s mum, Kit, joined us a moment later, drying her hands with a dish towel and looking concerned.

“Keith, sweetheart, you should have rang. We weren’t expecting you,” she looked over Keith’s head and gave me a polite smile. I felt really uncomfortable at all the tension that quickly formed. I bet Keith brought me in to act as his bulletproof vest.

“I just c-came back to get some stuff from my room,” Keith tried to elbow past his parents to go upstairs. Everyone was taken aback by his accidental stutter.

I awkwardly followed him, squeezing past his parents. Alfred called up the stairs to us, threatening to follow. “Keith? What’s going on?”

“I’m j-just getting over a cold is all,” Keith called back down to his parents, and I could tell he was getting frustrated quite quickly.

We passed his sisters’ rooms and went into Keith’s room, which his mother had kept neat and tidy in his absence. I shut the door behind us and watched as Keith tore through his room. I noticed his hands were still shaking and he kept blinking erratically.

“And you?” I asked gently, getting confused. I watched Keith as he looked through the same drawer three times as if he forgot he had ever looked at all.

“I’m fine, can you just shut up for once?” he snapped at me suddenly, then dropped to his knees to look under his bed. I frowned as he fished a shoebox carefully hidden under his bed. He tore through it but obviously couldn’t find what he was looking for.

“Fuck!” he angrily kicked the box out of the way, and roughly pushed past me to dig through his closet. He started muttering angrily.
I felt really uncomfortable, and got startled when Keith’s mum knocked at the door. “Keith? Darling, what’s going on?”

Keith yelled back. “Can you stop moving my damn s-stuff?” He started rubbing at his temples as if he had a migraine.

“Keith! Don’t curse at me like that!” Kit yelled back. She tried to open the door but I pressed my weight against it, keeping her out.

“It’s my room, m-my shit, don’t fucking touch it,” Keith growled. He was now tearing around his room violently, pulling everything apart to search for one thing in particular. I was getting really uneasy.

“Why are you stuttering like that?” Kit yelled even louder. “Are you high again?”

Keith was muttering under his breath like a madman as he started pulling out every piece of clothing he had in his drawers. “Fuck off, you cunt…”

“Keith, open this door right now,” Kit was pounding on the wooden door, and I kept pushing against it. She must have completely forgot I was there. I tried to get Keith’s attention without being loud enough to remind his parents I was working against them.

I heard Alfred charge up the stairs, angrily demanding to be let in too. I pushed the door closed as long as possible. Finally, Keith crawled under his desk and unpeeled something taped to the underside. He stuffed it quickly into his boxers and slowly stood up again. Both of his parents were knocking on the door and shouting at him, and Keith rubbed at his temples, then pressed his hands against his ears. “Pete, make them shut th-the fuck up.”

Keith started looking really distressed, and I saw something strange in his eyes, as if they were starting to go in and out of focus. I swallowed quickly, and called to his parents outside the door. “Um, Keith’s fine, he’s just having, uh, an anxiety attack.”

It was a bullshit excuse, I know, but it was the only thing I could think of. His parents stopped their racket momentarily. Alfred’s voice got very low and grumbly. “Pete, I think you should wait outside in the car.”

I looked over at Keith, who was shaking his head at me not to go. I sure as hell wasn’t going to get in the middle of his family problems. I waved at him to follow me, and slowly opened the door to see Keith’s parents towering over me angrily, and even I felt scared.

They let me pass through, but blocked Keith from getting by. I waited at the top of the stairs to make sure nothing too bad happened. Keith’s youngest sister Lesley poked her head out of her door to see what was going on. I gave her a hard stare and she retreated quickly.

“Keith, I swear to god, if you’re back on drugs, you’re never setting foot in this house again,” Alfred shouted. I winced, feeling bad for Keith as well as angry at him, because he brought it upon himself, didn’t he?

“Don’t you see that’s what I f-fucking want?” Keith shouted right back. God, Keith, don’t burn your bridges. You need your parent’s money.

I started backing down the stairs slowly, as Kit tried to calm everyone down. “Keith, don’t raise your voice like that. We just want to talk to you.”

“You never ‘just want to talk’, the only time you ever p-pay attention to me is when I’m all fucke
up again so you can punish me,” Keith tried to elbow past his dad, but Alfred pushed him back inside his room.

Kit started again. “You know that’s not true—“

“It is, a-and you know it,” Keith was bordering on hysterical now. “I don’t see why I have to be punished because you can’t be good parents, you fucked m-me up, and I just need help, can’t you fucking see?”

I knew it was only going to get worse from there. I rushed back downstairs and out the front door to start the car, leaving the engine running and Keith’s door open for a quick getaway. My heart was racing as I sat in genuine fear for my friend, and I sobered up quickly after all the adrenaline running through me and I had to start thinking logically.

I watched the clock as the minutes passed by agonizingly. It was 7:52, and if Keith didn’t make it out alive by 8 o’clock, I told myself I would go back in and rescue him.

The minutes dragged by, and by 7:57, I saw commotion behind the window by the front door. I heard the shouting getting louder as Keith swung open the door and ran out to the car, his father chasing him until the front porch where Kit grabbed Alfred’s arm and told him to just leave it be. Keith slid in to the seat next to me and slammed the door shut, and I reversed the car and drove away as quickly as possible.

I quickly looked over at Keith, who was rubbing at his temples again. He had paled dramatically, his skin turning sweaty and pasty.

Before I could say anything, Keith cut me off. “Don’t speak, my head is killing me right now.” He fished through his jacket pocket for the baggie of pills he brought along, and popped another in his mouth.

“What are you doing? Don’t—“ I wrestled a second purple pill out of his hand before he could swallow it, and I nearly swerved into another car parked on the street. “Keith, how many have you had?”

“They help me clear my head,” he snapped. “Can everyone just stop t-telling me what to fucking do?”

“You’re stuttering like crazy, you’ve had enough,” I realized I was shouting at him because he flinched, looking at me like I had betrayed him. I softened my voice quickly, even though I was getting really angry with him. I didn’t feel right being an accomplice to his nasty drug problems. “Don’t ever make me do stuff like that again.”

Keith had been quiet for a moment, and I looked over quickly to find that he had buried his face in his hands, and his shoulders were shaking as if he were crying. I nudged him a few times. “Keith? Keith, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to shout at you.”

“Oh god, I’ve fucked it all up, everyone hates me now,” he shuddered, and when I looked over again quickly, I saw his face become shiny with tears. My heart broke for him.

“Your parents will always love you, and you’ll all work through this together,” I reached over to try and pat his shoulder and drive at the same time. “It won’t be like this forever.”

“I’ve been such a dick lately, I know you and John secretly hate me, and Roger too, and I know you’re p-planning to kick me out of the band but you can’t—“
“Keith, I promise you we’re not planning on—“

“—you can’t kick me out, I’ll be so much better, I need this so badly, I’ll d-die if I’ll get kicked out and I have to live with my parents again—“

“We’re not going to do that—“

Keith started melting down, and I was finding it hard to focus on driving. “I’ll be so good, I’ll be the best drummer in the world, but you need to let me keep drinking because it makes me happy and funny so everyone can tolerate me, and the pills help clear my head and make all the thoughts all neatly rearranged and I can f-focus better, I don’t even take that many, and—“

“Keith, relax, okay?” I warned him as he started breathing funny. He kept rubbing at his temples.

“Pete, I feel like shit, I feel so bad,” he groaned.

“I know, Keith. I’m going to take you home so you can sleep.”

“No, Pete, I actually feel really sick,” he mumbled into his hands as he covered his face. “Pete, make it stop…“

“What the fuck?” I rolled to a stop at a red light, and took Keith’s face in my hands. His skin was cold and clammy, and his eyes were glossing over. “Jesus Christ, what’s going on?“

The car behind me honked because I missed the light changing. I tore quickly through the intersection and pulled a sharp right into a residential neighbourhood.

“Pull over,” Keith started gagging, and I pulled up to the kerb quickly. I helped Keith unbuckle his seatbelt and he tumbled out the door, falling to his knees as he started to retch violently onto the sidewalk. I turned off the car and got out quickly to help him.

“Fuck, fuck,” I knelt down next to Keith and held him up by the neck of his shirt as he started puking everywhere, more than I’ve ever seen someone puke in my life. I felt my blood run cold with anxious fear as I realized something was very, very wrong.

Keith struggled to catch his breath, and he rolled onto his back, clutching his stomach and groaning. I couldn’t think properly and it was getting dark and I was getting scared. I rolled Keith over onto his side in case he puked again, and I ran through my options quickly in my head. I could knock on someone’s door and ask for help, but it was already getting late and no one would open the door to a stranger. I could phone Keith’s parents and get them to come and take over. I could call John or Roger and ask for help.

Keith retched again but nothing came out, and I knew I had to do something. I slipped my phone out of my jeans pocket and dialed 999 and called for an ambulance, except I didn’t know what street we were on except we were near the address of his parents’ house, and they could probably track my phone anyways. The operator told me to put Keith in the recovery position and keep focused, but I started crying a lot because I didn’t want Keith to die, especially since it was all my fault, wasn’t it? I tried to hold Keith in my arms because he was shaking and shuddering so violently before he started going limp. Soon I saw flashing lights down the street and miraculously they came to save us.

Everything else happened so fast. I watched as paramedics jumped out the back of the ambulance to put Keith on a stretcher, and I saw how small and floppy his body was and I felt faint. What if they didn’t know what happened? I was the only one who saw what he took, what if they arrested me for not taking care of him like I should have?
I started shouting and trying to get the paramedic’s attention as they loaded Keith into the back of the ambulance. “He took too many pills, he took too many pills and he got sick, he took at least a handful, he drank too, why isn’t anybody listening to me?”

Finally, one of the paramedics, a woman, turned to me and tried to calm me down. “Do you know what he took?”

“Uppers, a lot of them, they were orange and purple and blue, there’s a baggie in his pocket if you need it, I’m so sorry,” Words kept tumbling out of my mouth and I couldn’t stop, and I started shuddering and crying even harder. The woman turned away briefly to shout to her partner that he had the pills in his pocket. “I got high too and I wasn’t paying attention, and his parents will kill him if they find out—“

“What’s your name, love?” she asked quickly.

“Um,” I fucking forgot my own name. I babbled like an idiot until it came to me. “Pete Townshend?”

“And who are you?”

“I’m um, his friend, he’s my roommate, I love him, I’m so sorry—“

“Pete, are you okay to drive? We need to get Keith to the hospital, can you follow us in your car?”

I started nodding really hard.

“Thank you Pete. I’ll meet you at the hospital so you can help us fill out some more forms,” she smiled gently.

“Is he gonna die?” I asked. I needed to know if I had accidentally killed him.

“You called us just in time. You’re a good friend for taking care of him,” she said, just as her partner called to her from the back of the ambulance.

“We need to start pumping his stomach, we gotta get moving,” he told her.

“We’ll see you there, Pete. Please follow directly behind the ambulance, okay?” she told me again, and I nodded. I don’t know how I managed to get behind the wheel again, but I wiped my face and my runny nose on my shirt and started the car again. I noticed some people from the houses nearby had all come out to watch the chaos, but the bastards didn’t bother to help us. Did they think we deserved it just because we were being reckless teenagers?

The ambulance turned on its sirens and pulled back onto the street, and I followed directly behind them as he rushed through the streets, every car pulling aside for us. While I drove I started praying, chanting over and over out loud, “Please, God, let him live. Please, God, let him live. Please, God, let him live. Please, God, let him live. Please, God, let him live,”

I felt steadier now that I had to focus on driving instead of the bad stuff. The paramedics were taking care of him better than anyone else could. For once, I had done the right thing. I needed to be responsible and take care of him now because I didn’t before this. I straightened my back and followed the ambulance around the side of the hospital. I parked in the emergency lot and followed the paramedic lady just like she told me, as more doctors rushed out to help take Keith’s stretcher out the back of the ambulance.

I was ushered into the waiting area, where the nice paramedic lady sat with me and calmed me
down. She said they were pumping Keith’s stomach and giving him more fluids and a bunch of other stuff I didn’t understand. The gist of it was that I had called for help early enough before any permanent and irreversible damage had set in.

I had calmed down once she had reassured me they dealt with this all the time, and it was very unlikely that something bad would happen, especially because it wasn’t heroin or something really fucked up. We filled out endless forms together since I knew all his information, and we shared the same home address. Since he was eighteen we had some more liberties with not getting his parents involved. I managed to convince the paramedic that I would call his parents myself, and she foolishly believed me.

While the paramedic talked to the receptionist, they let me have some privacy in a small waiting room with a water cooler and some plants. I started to dial Roger’s number because I felt like I had to, but backed out quickly. If the overdose didn’t kill Keith, Roger surely would when he found out. I started dialing John but never hit call either. I didn’t even consider phoning his parents. I would wait until Keith woke up and see what would be best.

I sat in the waiting room and the receptionist forgot to ask if Keith’s parents were coming or not. Another big commotion started in the hallway, and I watched as they wheeled someone all bloody through to the emergency rooms and it made me feel really sick and faint because I felt guilty about Keith again and I wanted to call someone to comfort me but I didn’t have anyone who loved me, and
one of the nurses came over to give me a glass of water and told me not to look.

I sat quietly on my own while everyone was rushing to do their own thing, emotionally numb after everything that happened, letting it all replay in my head so I could figure out where I went wrong. I stared at the speckled ceiling, then watched as the red second-hand on the clock raced by, and I could have sworn if you looked long enough, you could see time speed up or go slower.

I think sometime around midnight I fell asleep in my chair, because a nurse was patting my shoulder and waking me up. While my vision refocused I bolted upright and started to panic, because I thought she was going to tell me Keith died.

“Shh-shh-shh,” she tried to calm me down. “I just came by to tell you that he’s okay. His condition is stable and he’s just resting now.”

“Can I see him?” I croaked, my throat had gotten so dry. The lady nodded and took me over to his room, and told me not to touch anything or try to wake him.

“The emergency button is right by his bed if you notice anything strange,” she told me, before taking his clipboard and leaving.

I was scared to look at Keith, but it wasn’t like he was a dead body or anything. Already, some colour was returning to his skin, contrasted by the crisp white bedsheets. He still looked so small, and he slept with his mouth open slightly. I noticed he really needed a haircut.

I felt silly trying to talk to him because it wasn’t like he was in a coma or something. I pulled up a chair and sat beside his bed, resting against on the metal guards by his bed. I got paranoid that something would happen if I looked away, so I stared at his chest softly rising and falling so I could tell someone if it stopped. I started to get sleepy again, because it must have been one or two in the morning now. I didn’t know if I was supposed to leave him overnight or not, but no one came in to kick me out, so I stayed. I held Keith’s hand and rested two fingers on his wrist where his weak but steady pulse was so I could monitor him. It refused to quit, which comforted me, and I slowly allowed myself to fall asleep again.
Sunday, April 16th
13 days until the concert

I stirred whenever nurses periodically came in to check on Keith and putter around, changing the saline bags and whatnot. Eventually one doctor did wake me up, and I noticed the early morning sun was already pouring through the window. I rubbed the massive crick in my neck while the doctor took me into the hallway to talk to me some more while the nurses tended to Keith.

“Peter, is it?” the doctor asked, flipping through Keith’s papers.

“Uh, yeah,” I said as I started to yawn. “‘Scuse me.”

“You must have had a rough night. Are you feeling okay?” he put a tender hand on my shoulder, and I felt my cheeks burn.

“Yeah, just a little shaken up,” I admitted, and I briefly realized I wanted someone to look after me, too. I didn’t want to be strong and responsible. I was scared and I wanted the handsome doctor to comfort me.

“Well, Keith is recovering just as quick as we expected, and I really don’t think we have to worry much about his physical health at this point,” the doctor explained to me. “Since he’s just turned 18, he can legally discharge himself later this morning. I would recommend you take him straight home and make sure he rests for a few days, and make sure he eats properly. Lots of fluids, too.”

I nodded quickly, chewing on a hangnail on my thumb. My stomach growled at the mention of food.

“Although, I do have a few questions to ask you, since you’re here,” his tone of voice changed more serious, and I started to get worried again. “Pete, let’s walk around a bit and chat, okay?”

The doctor left the clipboard by the door, and rolled up his sleeves to try and seem more casual with me, since I probably looked like a very anxious child right now. I felt really out of place.

We wandered through the halls and I started to feel a bit more at ease. He was very pretty and also very kind to me, warming me up with small talk. “So, Pete, I work closely with the psych advisor here, so I’m going to ask you about Keith so we can get a sense of what we can help him with. Is that okay?” he asked.

“Yeah, I don’t mind,” I said. I figured it was legal because we were all trying to help him, right?

“Is Keith a close friend of yours?”

“Uh, yeah. We hang out all the time. He’s my roommate and we’re in a band together and stuff,” I felt silly for mentioning something childish like our rock and roll band around a professional doctor.

“Would you say he confides in you a lot about his problems? Or do you find he keeps things secret?”

“Um,” I scratched the side of my face. “I dunno. He’s an open book. He’s a bit all over the place, and he really likes to drink and take party drugs to distract himself from other shit, but all teenagers do that, right?”

The doctor frowned. “That’s why we’re worried, because substance addiction starts when you rely
too much on drugs or drinking to substitute your problems.”

A substitute, eh? “Just like that Amy Winehouse song, right? ‘Cause she doesn’t need help with her drinking, she needs help with the reasons why she’s drinking.”

“Uh, yeah, sure.” The doctor blinked at me, and I felt silly all over again. “Anyways, do you suspect Keith could be a danger to himself or anyone else because his reliance on the substances you mentioned?”

I stuffed my hands in my pockets. Obviously the answer was yes, but not in a way that could kill anybody or land him in jail, probably. He was self-destructive in a trademarked Keith Moon sort of way. “I don’t think so, honestly.”

“Are you sure?” he asked me very seriously. “Because now’s the time to get him help before it happens again and he gets worse.”

I felt a lot of pressure weighing on me. It would once again be my fault if I didn’t speak up.

“Pete, we want to know if he…” the doctor paused. “…to put it lightly, if he overdosed on purpose.”

I avoided the doctor’s eye. “It was an accident. He wouldn’t do stuff like that.”

“Is that what you want me to tell psych?” he asked me again very carefully. I looked him in the eye and nodded. My only goal was to get Keith out of here and take him back home to safety. Me and the other guys—his real family—would take care of him and get him better.

“By the way, we found a bag of Ecstasy stuffed in his boxers,” the doctor gave me a condescending look, and I hated him instantly. “It’s on his record, but we disposed of it for the better interest of our patient. Understand?”

So that’s what Keith had been so desperate to find earlier. Fuck. What was I getting myself into?

The doctor later left to talk to Keith, who had just woken up, but they wouldn’t let me in his room again. I begged one of the nurses to tell Keith I was there with him all night so he wouldn’t worry about being left alone. She said she would tell him as long as I promised I would go to the cafeteria downstairs to eat something.

I was still tired, and became dizzy from being so hungry. I had trouble navigating the hospital but eventually I found an elevator to take me down to the cafeteria. I winced when I used my debit card to buy an overpriced muffin and coffee, knowing fully well I didn’t have much money to spend. Luckily there was a station where I could charge my phone, which was dead after I had accidentally left it on all night. When it booted back up, I got a flood of texts. It was only 9 am.

Roger texted me a billion times, and called a bunch too. He got angry at me for stealing his car when he needed it the next morning, then he lectured me, then he apologized, and he got worried because I wasn’t answering and he had a gut feeling that something bad happened. John sent a text early this morning to ask if we were okay and he started to get worried when Keith and I didn’t come home. I even got a text from Keith’s sister Linda asking what had happened last night.

I had to set a story for us to stick to today. I was still incredibly anxious but I typed to make it look casual, like I was hungover as hell and not precisely choosing every word.
I sent the text and then turned my phone on airplane mode so no one would contact me. I got a free refill of coffee from the kind old cafeteria lady and waited for it to kick in so I could focus again. I just wanted to see Keith up and moving so I knew he was okay.

I retraced my steps by memory and waited in the hallway by his room and watched as staff filtered in and out of his room. They were doing last minute checks to ensure he was okay to leave, and finally everything is fine, my phone overnight, keith and i drove and slept at Barney's house couldn't drive home. We spent a few hours, don't worry.
a receptionist brought in discharge papers for Keith to sign. Because of the angle of his bed, I couldn’t see his face from the hallway, only his feet. Thankfully, I heard him talking with the nurses. His voice was small and weak, but he could still think and talk properly. I heard Keith crack a joke that made all the nurses laugh, and I found myself smiling. Everything was back to normal and we could move on.

They closed the door so Keith could get dressed again, and I waited anxiously until the door opened and they wheeled him out in a wheelchair, as hospital protocol required.

Keith put on a goofy face and started waving at people in the hallway like he was the queen of England on parade. “My dear royal subjects…”

I held all the papers for him, detailing his records and the insurance crap and how to take care of yourself properly after an accidental overdose. I even noticed a wad of pamphlets about depression and suicide counselling, which made me angry that they assumed that of Keith. The nurse pushing Keith accompanied us down the elevator and out the front door. I didn’t pay attention to Keith’s usual joking as I tried to compose myself, suddenly feeling very old and jaded. The sombre mood of the hospital wasn’t helping me either. I felt around for Roger’s car keys in my jacket pocket, and left Keith and the nurse at the front door where I went to fetch the car from the car park.

As I walked through that hospital door, I felt sewn up like a coat. I had lost my virginity to some horrid girl, then saved my idiot friend from almost dying of a drug overdose. I had done a lot of growing up in two sleepless nights. As exhausted as I was, I felt like I had tightened up and was forced into the composure that comes along with maturity. I certainly wasn’t going to tolerate anyone’s shit for a long time after this. All I wanted to do was make some music—even if it was bad, I just needed to get it out there. I needed to go where the music fits my soul.

I got a smile from the bite of the wind that came cool and refreshing after being cooped up in the hospital. I got into Roger’s car and enjoyed a brief moment of peace to myself, finally able to relax. On a whim, I ignored all of Roger’s texts and went to delete Summer’s number from my phone.

I drove around to the front of the building parked in front of the doors and watched Keith, who was more than able to stand up and walk on his own, but asked that the pretty nurse to help him into the car anyways. He was all smiles and jokes while we buckled him in. Keith and I thanked the nurse again before she left to escape the cool April wind, and I started driving us home.

“You know that nurse with the giant rack? I think she really liked me. She gave me two applesauce cups for breakfast, and when she leaned over to fix my pillow for me, her boob accidentally touched my face. It was great,” Keith tried to joke at a stoplight, but one glance told me his smile was painfully forced. I didn’t feel like saying much and Keith picked up on my mood, so he took my phone out of the cup holder to plug it in and play Henry Purcell, which he knew was my favourite composer at the moment.

We sat in contemplative silence as we journeyed all the way back across town. I knew then that my life took a turn—I felt strong and secure. I was in control for once. I was taking care of this damn band more than Roger was. Beside me, Keith had fallen silent again, which was unusual, and I just wanted things to go back to normal.

At the next stop light, I looked over at him. “Keith?”

He cleared his throat, still sounding weary. “Yeah?”

“What did you do it on purpose?”
Keith looked back out the window as I started to drive again, fiddling with his fingers. “No. It was an accident.”

We drove in more silence.

I stopped somewhere to fill up on petrol. We were horribly late and Roger was sending me more worried texts, but I figured if I spent a small fortune on filling up his car he might go a little easier on me. After I paid and got in again, I felt like Keith and I had come to silent understanding. We wouldn’t tell Roger what happened, and not even John. We needed everyone to think that Keith was still fit to work with us. Like always, I would take care of things.

The classical music was boring Keith, but I needed it to soothe my anxiety over eventually facing Roger’s wrath. Keith cleared his throat again and admitted, “I—Pete, don’t worry about me, okay? I overdid it, but I think I learned my lesson. I never want to have my stomach pumped again. It was awful.”

I nodded, and for some reason, I believed him.

We drove on.

“So, um, Pete?” Keith said again, his voice sounding small and faraway.

“Yes, Keith?”

“Uh,” he went silent again. He turned to look out the window again. “I love you.”

I swallowed quickly, trying not to make it obvious that I was getting choked up. It had been one long, awful night, and this sort of shit really brings two people together, doesn’t it? “I love you too, Keith.”

“Cool,” he sighed, then leaned his seat back to close his eyes while I drove us the rest of the way home. While he rested some more, I caught a glimpse of how tiny and vulnerable he looked. I felt a wave of affection for the guy, who was just like a brother to me, and he always would be. There was a lot I could have said, and maybe should eventually tell him, so he knew I’d always be there for him.

I think last night reminded me how much I truly do love him. God, I certainly hope nothing bad ever comes his way. He doesn’t deserve it.

Keith, I will take over your grief and disease. I’ll stay beside you and comfort your soul, when you are lonely, and broken, and even when we’re old.

Beside me, he started to snore softly. What would happen the next time when I’m not there? What will happen when one day I’m just too late? Did I really have what it takes to protect Keith for the rest of our lives? Or save John from his dark thoughts? Or save Roger whenever he breaks down from all the pressure? I felt like an idiotic soldier who kept throwing himself down on top of a bed of exploding grenades.

It wasn’t until I pulled into our driveway at noon when I realized how exhausted I was. I woke Keith up and we made our way to the front door. We both looked terrible, but that fit in with our cover story of being hungover. I unlocked the front door and let us both in, the nervousness building in my stomach.

Roger practically ran up from the basement, his composure a mixture of anxiety and anger. “Jesus fucking Christ, there you are.”
“Sorry about that. I just wanted to play it safe and stay overnight.” I smiled weakly, and handed him the car keys, playing it as nonchalant as I could. “I filled your gas tank up all the way as an apology.”

Roger took the keys, then looked between Keith and I. “Something happened. You both look guilty. What did you do to the car?”

Roger was worse than a mother sometimes. Keith took off his jacket. “I feel bad that we accidentally stole your car all night. It was my idea to go out and drink, and then I overdid it.” I nodded in agreement with him.

Roger folded his arms over his chest. “Is that all that happened? Keith, you look—“

John came bounding down the stairs to check out the excitement, eating yogurt out of a cup. “Holy fuck, Keith. You look like shit.”

Keith shrugged in that goofy way he does. “Hangovers fucking suck, man.”

“Yeah, but you look like you’ve done a round in the dryer or something,” John gave him a funny look.

Keith cracked another joke to reassure everyone he was fine, then bent down a little too gingerly to untie his sneakers. As he stretched, his long sleeves pulled back. I didn’t realize his mistake until Roger was on Keith in an instant. “Keith, what’s that?”

Roger grabbed his wrist rather roughly, pulling his sleeve back to investigate. There was no mistaking the light green hospital bracelet with all his personal information all over it. “Were you in the hospital? It says you checked in last night.”

“Keith got too drunk and accidentally smashed his head on the table,” I said very slowly so I wouldn’t fumble and make my lying any more obvious. “We took him to A&E because we thought he had a concussion but he’s okay.”

“Barney’s roommate took us,” I said quickly, even though my friend didn’t even have a roommate. John read the bracelet too, and I felt infuriated that he couldn’t be passive like he normally was. “Why would you stay overnight if they just checked you out for a concussion? Do you even need to go to the hospital for that?”

“Can you just fuck off? Not everything is your business. You control the band but you can’t control
my life,” Keith shouted at Roger, and I winced because if he exerted himself anymore, he’d surely collapse.

Roger pushed Keith’s chest, and nearly sent him stumbling backwards. He started taunting Keith in a way that reminded me of a school bully on the playground. “What was it? What did you overdo this time? Did you almost drink yourself to death? Or was it drugs this week?”

“I didn’t do any of that stuff, get the fuck out of my face,” Keith wobbled but regained himself, and tried to get up the stairs, but Roger blocked him again. All of Keith’s frustration was almost palpable by now.

“Come on, Rog, just let him go upstairs, we’re both exhausted,” I pleaded with him, but Roger didn’t even look at me. “We fucked up and we’re sorry, let’s talk about this later.”

“You’re going to fucking ruin my band, Keith Moon,” Roger was shouting by now, and I could tell this had been very premeditated. “I’m so sick of your shit around here. You’re a mess and you need to get it together or else you’re out of here.”

I saw Keith flinch, and I remembered his desperation last night, terrified that we were going to kick him out of the band and the house. I had told him he had nothing to worry about but I didn’t know I had accidentally been lying.

Keith looked over Roger’s shoulder at John, desperately pleading. “John, tell him I’m okay, tell him not to kick me out.”

But John looked a whole different kind of worried. He stepped in closer to Keith and lowered his voice. There was clearly something he knew that the rest of us didn’t “Keith, did you take what I think you took?”

Keith shook his head violently. “No, I swear I didn’t touch it, I was just holding—“

“I knew it!” Roger cried out. “You said you’d lay off but you can’t do it. You’re fucking weak.”

I felt really scared, like you do in the moment you know you’re in deep shit and there’s no turning back. God, if my body was wracked with any more anxiety today, I’d be wiped right out. “Roger, stop. Now’s not the time. Just let Keith rest.”

Even John chimed in. “Rog, just drop it for now.”

Something sparked between Keith and Roger, and suddenly Keith tried to run past Roger, but Roger knew what he was going to do right away and pushed him back. Roger bounded up the stairs two at a time and John and I ran up after both of them.

At the end of the hallway, Keith hooked an arm around Roger’s middle, trying to physically stop him from going into his room. But Keith would never be strong enough to hold him back, and Roger kicked open the door he usually kept suspiciously closed and locked. Roger ran in and tore through Keith’s things, but it didn’t take him long at all to find what he wanted.

John and I shoved into the doorway just as Roger held up his Introduction To Media Linguistics textbook, with the middle hollowed and baggies of pills spilling out. In his naïve and messy nature, Keith hadn’t even bothered to hide the book again after we used it last night.

“Roger, don’t. I’m just holding,” Keith had started to shudder again, and his voice was shaky like he might cry again. “I promise I’ve learned, after last night I won’t do it again—“
Roger collected the book and all the little bags, and turned around with a crazed look in his eyes. In his insurmountable anger, he roughly shoved Keith out of the way, sending him stumbling, and even violently elbowed past John and I at the door. Roger tore down the hallway to the bathroom, and Keith ran past us to try and intercept Roger one last time.

We all crowded around the bathroom as Roger started dumping all the pills and other assorted drugs down the toilet, the ones that Keith had easily spent hundreds of pounds on buying and selling over the years. Keith was yelling and cursing at him, and started jumping at Roger and trying to hit him. Roger used his foot to try and push the handle down and flush it all, but he clogged the toilet and it started to overflow with water.

“I fucking hate you!” Keith yelled, and hit Roger in the stomach. “You’re a stupid fucking cunt—“

In a split second, Roger grabbed the front of Keith’s shirt and punched his face so hard I felt my stomach drop. Keith fell to the floor in an instant, limp like a doll. Blood started to quickly pour out of his nose onto the linoleum tiles, and Roger dropped down on Keith to hit him again. It took both John and I to wrestle Roger off of Keith on the floor of our tiny bathroom. John managed to yank Roger up by the arm and push him backwards, nearly falling into the bathtub.

With a firm hand on his chest, I kept Roger back, trying to will him to calm down. Keith was on the floor, bloody and groaning, his body far from strong enough to even sit up at this point. John turned back to help him upright. Keith swayed on his feet, his head flopping forwards.

I knew Roger was going to stay down. I got a wad of toilet paper, and pinched Keith’s nose with it, trying to keep his head held up.

“You’re a fucking maniac, Roger,” John seethed, his voice a low growl. John could usually keep himself grounded, but he had a boiling rage that only showed itself once every few years. I couldn’t believe today was the day that anger would appear again. We had all gone too far and there was no turning back now. “That’s it. I’m through with this whole thing. I can’t do it anymore.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?” I cried. I thought that in our efforts to save Keith, him and I were bonding again.

“This whole thing is a fucking mess,” John shouted at me, and I was shocked to find he was angry at me too when I thought we were on the same side. “You two mistreat us all the time and shove us around, but now you’re physically abusing us? That’s fucked up.”

“Roger needs to sort himself out, I agree,” I promptly decided to throw Roger and our allied force under the bus in a last-ditch effort to save the other half of our band. “But you can’t leave, we need you.”

Battered and broken, Keith groaned again, resting his head on John’s shoulder and clutching him desperately before he couldn’t support himself anymore. John shook his head. “This isn’t worth it. We’ve been thinking of leaving for a long time now, but this seals the deal. Fuck you both, you sicken me.”

I was taken aback by the feeling of betrayal. I thought we were all friends, and this whole time Keith and John had been planning on quitting the band? I watched as John helped Keith walk out of the bathroom and to John's bedroom, which was closest.

Roger was on his feet in an instant. “You ungrateful bastard. You wouldn’t be in this band if it weren’t for me, and you wouldn’t even have a home either! I do all the work around here and you’re not even thankful!” He tried to follow John into his room but was met with the door slamming shut.
in his face, while John let Keith rest on his bed in safety. Roger started pounding on his door while I tried to hold him back.

“You’re pathetic,” John called from behind the door as he tended to Keith. “Both of you are hopeless. I was doing you a favour by sticking around, but now you’re not even worth that much of my time. I actually graduated. I have a real job and I earn more money than you ever will. I actually have talent, and I can go further than you without you both weighing me down. Fuck you.” Then, quieter: “It’s okay Keith, I’ve got you. Hold the tissue here...”

Roger started yelling back, but I grabbed his arm and took him downstairs. I felt drained and hollow, like I had just been punched in the gut too. The sad, sad thing is that in all our years of friendship, John never lied about these things.

In the kitchen, Roger stalked around angrily like an animal. He kept grabbing glasses and plates to smash, and I kept taking them away from him. “Pete, it’s not fucking working. I love this band more than anything and it’s not working. No one is working hard enough. No one respects me. You’re all letting me down.”

I started getting really fed up with him, too. “And you act like I never do anything? I write all the damn songs, I write all the damn lyrics, I take care of everyone’s shit, and I betray my two friends all the time just to stay loyal to you before everything explodes in your face.”

Roger cut me a nasty glare. “I have a hard time believing any of that. You act high and mighty, like you’re some wonderful god-sent artist that’s going to save us all, but you don’t fucking do anything. You wrote one song a year ago and that’s it. Your giant ego is getting in the way of our progress.”

“Yeah, maybe that’s because I’m too busy coddling your self-esteem all the time. You can’t get out of bed in the morning unless everyone is praising you and throwing roses at your feet,” I spat at him. “Or maybe it’s because you’re up all night fucking your sixteen-year-old girlfriend so you can feel some sort of power over someone?”

“That’s it, Townshend, I swear I’m going to—“ Roger lunged at me again, but the rabid, manly anger thing was getting old. I swiftly side-stepped and dodged him running into me, and headed for the door.

“They’re right, you know,” I called to Roger as I walked out of the house. Hell, I hadn’t even had the chance to take off my shoes before this. “You can’t manage a band. You can’t manage our money, you can’t manage your anger, or write a damn song to save your life. You’re holding onto this idea that you’re actually going somewhere. That really is pathetic.”

I slammed the door shut behind me before he could protest, and stuffed my hands in my jacket pockets. I walked to the bus stop and rode three buses until I got down to my favourite spot along the Thames. I didn’t even have my headphones with me, and my phone was almost dead, but that was the least of my worries right now. Keith would lose so much valuable rehearsal time by recovering. John hated us all and was probably going to move out and do his own thing like he always wanted, and Roger was going to end up in prison or something if he didn’t stop beating the shit out of people for having different opinions. And me? I finally had to admit to myself that I was losing hope. There’s no way any of this could work.

I sat on a bench by the water, alone and cold. I closed my eyes and let the sound of the rushing water relax me, as the river performed just for me, like a symphony. I still felt the sting of my friends turning on me like that, especially since John refused to see the difference between Roger and I. I wasn’t like Roger, was I?
With a sigh, I lay down on the bench and closed my eyes, exhausted and shivering.

I'm sorry. I'll tell you everything, okay?
keef
@moontheloon

yo you guys will never gi
happened to me lmao

10:21 PM · 16 April 17

2 FAVOURITES
Monday, April 17th
12 days until the concert

I didn’t get back home until super late last night, anxious about running into one of the guys in the hallway and having it be extremely awkward. Luckily, when I did make it home, everyone already self-exiled themselves in their rooms, equally avoiding any tense confrontation. I hadn’t been in the mood for reconciliation just yet, so I flopped down in bed and slept solidly. I overslept my alarm and was almost late to my Renaissance art theory class.

I stewed in my own anger the whole lecture, and got even more frustrated because I couldn’t pay any attention, I may as well not have come. The whole time, I compulsively checked John and Keith’s tweets in case they said anything nasty and passive aggressive about me and the band.

Or, what was left of the band, anyways.

At the end of the lecture, we got our latest assignment back, fully graded. I got a really shitty mark and I felt even worse about myself. No band, no friends, and I was a terrible student. I guess after all this is over, I’ll at least have more free time to study.

Later, I ran into Max in the hallways. I offered to buy her a coffee so I could have someone to talk to about how I was feeling, but she was late for a meeting with a potential client downtown. She apologized profusely and I tried to act all chill, but I felt jealousy weigh down on my chest even more. Max was already booking professional photography gigs and I was just slipping backwards, losing all my hard work over the past two years in one weekend.

On top of that, my mother rang me while I was trying to work on my essay and reminded me that I promised a month ago to babysit my little brothers tonight. I moaned about it and gave her a hard time which I felt shitty about, but afterwards, I secretly felt relieved I could go back to home and get away from everything. I could also eat some real food for the first time in forever.

I still had a few hours until I needed to be over, so I went over to the wing with all the visual art studios and found a quiet place to work. I remembered to bring my sketchbook today, so I used some of the pastels in the studio. I wasn’t making anything in particular, I just wanted to scribble some angry colours and see how they mixed together into an equally angry mess.

I made the mistake of letting my thoughts run free, and they echoed back sounding a lot like Roger last night. The more I thought about it, the worse I felt. Roger was right about everything. I acted high and mighty, and my ego probably did get in the way of everything. And I didn’t do anything for the band except for talk about what I wanted to do. I never acted on things. I never had any motivation, and I couldn’t blame it on anything except for my own pathetic self. Why could I never just get up and fucking do things? What’s really holding me back?

Even worse, I had let Roger down. I don’t know why that bothered me so much, but I felt like I had been punched in the gut every time I thought about him yelling those things at me. I didn’t want to impress him, but I did, but I didn’t, but I needed to, and I hated it. When John got angry yesterday, I felt like I had deserved it, but I know John will always forgive me eventually. I relied on our childhood friendship to excuse a lot of my shitty behaviour to him. But with Roger, I relied on him to like me and keep me in his band where I had an important role with input. If I didn’t have him, I might be stuck with a different band where no one paid attention to a thing I said.
So, just like how we regularly treated John and Keith. Damnit.

I was glad to be in the studio alone, because I suddenly got so overwhelmed with all my frustration and emotions all at once. I didn’t know what to do, and I didn’t have anyone to talk to. I didn’t even have any friends anymore, and the thought just made me feel even shittier.

I picked up my phone, and my mum’s contact information was still up from when she rang earlier, so I hit her number and called again. I felt pathetic for running back to my mother for help, but I would feel like I would annoy anyone else for ranting.

The phone rang once, two times, three times, four times until my mother picked up. In the background, I heard phones going off and people talking loudly, another grim reminder that even my musician parents had to get day jobs to stay afloat in this day and age.

“Pete? What is it? I’m at work, now’s not a good time.”

“I’m sorry, I just—“

“Is everything okay?”

“Yeah, I just, uh. How are you doing?”

“I’m fine dear. Look, I need to go. I’ll see you at home tonight, yeah?”

“Yes, of course. Love you.”

“Bye-bye, now.”

I hung up feeling inexplicably worse.

My stupid pastel drawing looked like a toddler had just discovered crayons for the first time, so I tore it into tiny pieces and threw it out by the handful. Everything I have ever created was shitty, or subpar at best. I couldn’t be a big influential artist, and I couldn’t be a sculptor, and I couldn’t write, and I couldn’t make songs. I wouldn’t get anywhere as a mediocre guitarist who could only cover other people’s music. My destiny is probably to paint the sides of houses or pick up garbage at the local park, something so horribly boring that everyone would forget about me when I died of a heart attack at 37 years old in front of my telly with a microwave meal and a can of beer resting on my fat gut.

Oh my god. If this is what adult life was all about, I certainly don’t want to be around for it.

I went to the library to find my favourite nook to work in. I tried to distract myself with that book of poetry I was supposed to read for my Victorian literature class, but to no avail. There were too many words bouncing around in my head, most of them nasty. I put the book aside and reached for my phone and opened up a note, trying to jot down exactly what I felt. It took me a few tries to get it to sound like what I wanted.

“It’s a genuine problem, you won’t try to work it out at all, you just pass it by.”

I wallowed in self-pity until I was due to catch a bus back to my parent’s house. I took a different route than usual and looked out the window while I listened to music, and when the neighbourhoods started getting more familiar, I felt a weird reverse homesickness filled with even more guilt.

My last year at home before going to uni had been the second closest thing to hell I had ever been through. The woman who I hated to associate as my grandmother Denny had moved in with us
(because she had been evicted, although I wasn’t supposed to have overheard that at the time) and I had to relive all the horrible, crippling memories of the two years I lived with her as a child. Her presence in my house at all hours of the day had taken a serious toll on me that I’m only just recuperating from now that I’ve moved across town from her.

Because of her, I made every possible excuse not to visit my family during the school year except for Christmas and birthdays. I felt so shitty for leaving behind my parents when I could finally start having a relationship with them, and I missed my brothers so fucking much, but I couldn’t stand to be around that horrible woman at all. She reminded me of every single thing I had been trying to forget my whole life.

I even hated how much my family needed her. Both my parents worked day jobs and rehearsed with their own bands in the evenings, so someone had to pick up Paul from school, or watch Simon, or do the washing up. Why did she have to be good now that everyone was watching her? Why didn’t anyone believe me when I tried to tell my family how terrible she had been, and that she should be kept far away from my young brothers?

I was only coming over because she went out of town to go visit one of her distant cousin’s niece and her new baby or whatever, but I still got paranoid that she might show up unexpectedly in the middle of the evening and do something horrible. I kept texting my dad so he could reassure me she wasn’t anywhere near London. My neediness pissed him off but I needed him to tell me so I could believe it myself.

I told myself to calm down and man up, which only somewhat worked. At 5 pm on the dot, I got off the bus and walked the rest of the way to my parent’s house. I still had the keys, a guilt filled reminder that I was constantly disappointing them by never visiting, because I also happened to be the world’s worst son.

I had barely got a foot in through the door when I heard little Simon screech my name and come barrelling towards me from the kitchen. I got in the rest of the way and shut the door behind me just as Simon launched himself at me like a torpedo. I scooped him up and swung him around until he was shrieking with laughter. He was already four years old and adorably chubby, which meant it was getting harder to pick him up and carry him around like I used to.

Simon threw his arms around my neck and I carried him on my hip. My mum had been telling me how his transition into kindergarten was going rough and he was clingier than ever, but I secretly didn’t mind that at all.

Paul came around the corner a moment later, eating a cheese string. He took a piece and draped it over his upper lip, sticking his lips out like a duck to hold it in place. “Look Pete! I have a moustache!”

I pulled him in for a side hug with my free arm, astounded that at seven years old, Paul was already taller than my belly button. I really needed to visit them more often. Maybe if I got the other guys to clear the house of all the drugs and alcohol laying around, my brothers could come over more often. If Roger was always bringing a kid around, I could do it too.

I tried to kick my shoes off with Simon clinging to me like a monkey, and Paul was already talking my ear off about his favourite show at the moment, and my mother came up from the basement with a laundry basket. She caught me smiling from ear to ear while I was surrounded by my brothers and she gave me a fond look. Ironically enough, she said, “Pete, I haven’t seen you this happy in a long time.”

She put the basket down by the top of the other staircase and gave me a quick kiss on the forehead,
which I had to bend down so she could reach. My mum was looking older every time I saw her which worried me. She was still the beautiful singer I’ve always known her as, but now a little worn around the edges. She combed my fringe out of my eyes. “You need a haircut. Have you eaten? How’s school? Are you feeling better? I’m sorry I couldn’t talk much earlier.”

“Uh,” I readjusted my hold on Simon, who was now so excited he was kicking his little legs and nearly hitting Paul in the face. “Could I borrow some money to go to a salon or something? I haven’t eaten, school is good, and uh, yeah, I’m just glad to be home.”

“You’re a boy, you can go to the barber,” my mother tutted. “I’ll put some money on the table for you before I leave. Just try not to look so messy all the time, alright? It’s not professional.”

I tried not to roll my eyes. Paul started laughing, which thankfully distracted everyone. “Imagine Pete going to the salon like auntie and putting his hair in big curlers!”

I pretended to pout. “What do you mean? I thought my hair would look so good in big curls like that.” That made Paul laugh even harder, which made Simon try and laugh louder even though he didn’t understand the joke.

My mother checked the time on the clock on the wall, and scooped up the laundry basket again, heading upstairs. “Pete, darling, you’ll need to cook the boys some dinner, and it’s bath night for Simon.”

I put Simon down and he and Paul ran to the kitchen. I trailed behind, habitually looking at the row of family pictures we hung in the hallway. There were photos of my parents as a young couple, and me as a relatively happy baby. We didn’t look like a very loving family, nor a very cohesive one. My mother was the incubator, and my father was the contents, and I was churned out unceremoniously. Aside from my resemblance to my parents, we just looked like three random people put together for a photo. My father’s rigid, forced hand on mum’s shoulder always made the picture seem haunting to me.

There were more photos of my mother performing, and my father accepting awards for his band. There was the taboo gap of pictures from the two horrible years I was separated from my parents and they didn’t have any photos of me. Suspended animation, my childhood passed me by. The professional portraits replaced the loving home candids, where I never did look happy again after that, when they made me pose for photos at the local department store. Then, photos of my parents forcing smiles at family Christmas parties. Then came the pictures of baby Paul, then later baby Simon, then the three of us who became inseparable as we reprised family trips and vacations and became a real family again. As per my own personal tradition, I gave the middle finger to photos of my maternal grandmother, and skipped all the embarrassing pictures of me after the age of eight.

Simon was singing along to the radio my mother left on in the kitchen, and Paul ran up to me with something behind his back. “Guess what I found in your room, Pete!”

That was never something you wanted to hear, but unlike Keith, I kept all the dangerous stuff back at the other house where my family would never find it. I acted more excited than I actually was. “What did you find?”

“I said guess!” he insisted.

“Is it a million pound note?”

“No,” he laughed, and Simon became interested and wandered over, too.
“Is it a chocolate cake?”

“No!” he laughed even harder in anticipation.

“Is it a real life dinosaur egg?”

“Even better!” Paul dramatically unveiled my old Gameboy, the silver one with the dual screen that at one point had been the height of technology.

“No way! I can’t believe you found it,” I took a quick look at it, all the fond memories came flooding back of taking it along with me on road trips or burning my eyes out from playing it under the covers at night.

“I wanna see it,” Simon tried to grab at it, but we pretended not to hear him so we wouldn’t have to tell him no.

“I’m getting really good at the old Mario games,” Paul beamed, turning it on. “They must have come out a hundred years ago!”

“How old do you think I am?” I teased, which made Paul laugh. I bent down to look over his shoulder at the screen, and Simon came on the other side and stood on his tip toes.

Paul made me watch him play a level, and after that Simon kept tugging insistently at the sleeve of my shirt. “Pete. Pete. Pete. Pete.”

“Yes, Simon?” I answered as I left to look through the cupboards for something to cook. I nearly teared up when I saw all the good food available. I would have a glorious buffet after I put my brothers to bed.

“Pete, I wanna show you my new toy too!” Simon kept tugging on my jeans.

“Sure, I’d love to see it,” I smiled down at him.

“Come with me,” he pleaded.

I went to look through the fridge. “Could you bring it here?”

Simon protested only for a moment before running off to the family room. My dad came downstairs a few moments later, his eyebrows permanently creased in either frustration or concentration. He was tying up his necktie, looking impeccable as usual. “Pete, have you seen my watch? The silver one?”

I started pulling out pots and pans, momentarily forgetting where we usually kept them. “Uh, no, I haven’t seen it anywhere, I just got in. How are you?”

“Great,” he answered absentmindedly, then dug through the mess of papers on one side of the counter. He only looked me over briefly and sighed. “Christ, Pete, fix your slouch.”

I propped my shoulders back. “Sorry.”

I hated when he did that thing where he looked me over, then started to speak, then decided it wasn’t worth it and closed his mouth again. I wondered what it would be this time; was I still too skinny? My jeans and t-shirt not chic enough? The fact that I still couldn’t grow any facial hair? My lack of girlfriend or inherent masculinity? But I wasn’t worth the lecture tonight, apparently. My dad found his watch and went back upstairs to finish getting ready for their band’s big celebration dinner tonight. Paul didn’t even look up from his game.
Simon came back later with an armload of toys, which he dumped in the middle of the kitchen floor. Half of the toys were mine, but he still needed to desperately show me anyways.

“This one is Wendell,” Simon showed me a stuffed lion, “and this one is Tony,” he showed me a stuffed leopard, “and this one is 905 and he’s a robot, and he just became alive because daddy bought him for me yesterday,” he showed me a little robot and moved his arms around to show me all his joints, “and this is P.B.O., and he’s my best friend.” Simon kissed his best friend, who was a small metal car only bigger than his hand, and Paul and I laughed. “Wait, Pete, I need to show you my colourings!

I sat with Simon on the kitchen floor and we looked through every single page of his colouring book. “See? I do it just like you.”

“You do it even better than me,” I told him, and he grinned.

My parents came downstairs again, at the tail end of another argument they would surely resume in the car away from my brothers. My mother was pinning earrings in her ears, and I pretended not to notice her dress was bordering on a little too short for a married woman of her age. My parents were going to a big dinner as a date, after all. Who was she trying to impress?

My dad searched for his car keys while my mother put a note on the fridge for me. She was uptight and serious as I’ve always known her to be. “I’ve written down the number for the restaurant on the fridge, and the doctor’s number, but you should be fine. We’ll try and be back by midnight, unless your father decides to make us stay even later for more drinks with his colleagues.”

“I’ll take us home when I want to take us home,” my father warned her with an edge in his voice. “And we’ll certainly leave early if I see you talking to Nicholas again.”

I noticed that Paul picked up on the tension between them, looking at my parents with more worry than a seven-year-old boy should ever have. I felt the need to protect him come even stronger. If my family fucked up my brothers too, I would never forgive them.

Already late, my parents kissed Paul and Simon goodbye, and avoided giving me any physical affection as usual, but gave me a list of rules and commands instead. We all promised to be safe and well-behaved, and my mother gave me one last long list of instructions before my father finally ushered her out the door. I locked the door after them, keeping all the bad stuff sealed outside, and enjoyed the moment of stillness where my brothers and I could finally live in peace for the night.

I connected my phone to the radio and searched through music that would be appropriate to play around my brothers. I figured Johnny Kidd & The Pirates would be good enough. Paul loved them because he thought they were actual pirates, and I took pride in reminding them that I knew Johnny through a mutual friend and he said he would try and get us to open for them sometime.

Simon tried to dance but it was hard when he was trying to sit and colour, so he sang the words instead, which he got all wrong but it was totally adorable. I’d have to get a video of him doing it sometime. Paul was glued to the Gameboy, so I started dinner before it got too late. I got two boxes of macaroni and cheese out, and started boiling water. I cut up some vegetables to give the boys while they waited. It was terrible but funny how I could take care of kids better than I could take care of myself.

I poured the noodles into the boiling water and stirred, and I did goofy dances to the songs to make Simon laugh. My stomach was growling by the time the noodles were done and I started to mix everything together. I turned down the music from my phone. “Alright, time to go wash your hands before we eat.”
Simon sprang up onto his feet. “Simon says wash your hands, Paul!”

Paul snapped the Gameboy screen shut, and bolted from the table to the bathroom. “First one there wins!”

Simon squealed and chased after him. I got three plates ready, with more vegetables because they were still growing, and I took a generous serving because I was a poor student and I needed all the help I could get.

While they were gone, the anxious thought kept creeping in from the back of my mind that Denny would come home early and burst through the door when I was least expecting it. I double checked both locks on the door just as my brothers came back, and we all sat at the table together to eat.

I forgot how slowly Paul ate, always very careful and precise, but somehow he always spilled at least once per meal. Simon was noisy and messy, but because he was young it was still cute.

“I’m still mad that mummy won’t let me see your show,” Paul told me, pouting.

“I wanna go!” Simon shouted, never wanting to be left out, even hypothetically.

I shrugged. “It’s gonna be filled with old people who smoke and stuff. It’ll be really boring.”

“But if it’s boring, why are you playing there?” Paul asked.

“Because if they like my music, they’ll want to buy it, and I need their money so I can keep making better music,” I explained. “We might even be good enough to get our songs on CD’s and everything.”

For a moment, I got caught up in my optimism again. Was I lying to Paul at this point? The band was halfway broken up already, but nothing was certain right now until the dust settled.

“I want a CD,” Simon hadn’t gotten the hang of talking and eating at the same time, and a gob of half chewed noodles fell out of his mouth. I left the table to get him a napkin, and then sat down again, absentmindedly picking at a blister on my thumb. I haven’t been practicing my guitar as much as I should be.

“How much does it cost to make a CD?” Paul asked, his eyebrows furrowing together like our dad’s did. “I have seventy pounds saved up, I wanna give it to you guys.”

I felt my chest tighten, and I gave him a smile. How do I break the news to my brothers that I had failed at the one venture I’ve ever taken, and I wouldn’t be their cool rock star older brother any longer? “It’ll cost more than that, I’m afraid. But we’re not ready yet. I haven’t, um, been writing any good songs lately.”

“Twinkle twinkle little star,” Simon sang. “I want to ride my bike real far.”

“But you always write good stuff!” Paul protested.

I pushed around some noodles on my plate with my fork, trying to explain it simply, and also so Paul would still think I’m still a bit cool. Did my self-esteem really rely on the approval of a seven year old? Maybe. I had to take what I could get. “I just don’t know what I want to write, and for who. I don’t have any inspiration, and I have so many things I want to say that nothing comes out.”

“Write a song about me,” Simon chipped in.
“Maybe one day,” I smiled at him.

I noticed Paul mimicking me, absentmindedly pushing his food around. “Just tell stories like you always do.”

I leaned back in my chair. “Well, the thing is, I need to also make songs people will like so they’ll keep listening to my music. But I don’t want to keep impressing everyone, I want to write the songs that I want to write. Except sometimes I feel like I was born too late, like I should have existed in a different time, you know? But it’s like, every idea in my head, someone else has said. Everything’s been done, and I’ll never be original, so what’s the point?”

Simon looked at me with big wide eyes, and Paul chewed slowly, thinking.

After a while, Paul wiped his mouth and said, “Who says you have to be new? People just want to know that there’s someone else out there like them.” He accidentally dropped the macaroni from his fork down onto his shirt. “Oh, darn.”

I looked at my little brother for a moment. What he said hit me more profoundly than I expected. My throat got all choked up because I really loved him a lot. While he dabbed at his shirt with a napkin, I stood up to reach across the table and kiss him on the forehead, because he was infinitely smarter than I would ever be and I adored him for it.

“Gross!” Paul laughed and wiped off his forehead, and Simon screeched because he wasn’t getting any attention so I kissed his head too, and all three of us started laughing for no reason at all.

After that, we all piled onto the couch together and watched telly for a bit. It was nearing bedtime and Simon was starting to miss our parents, but I was an acceptable substitute, so he sat with me and I cuddled him for a bit. Paul was also glued to my side, and for the first time in a long time, I felt strangely happy and satisfied. Being surrounded by this purity was a great comfort and helped heal me from everything that’s been happening lately. And plus, taking care of my brothers made me feel like I could finally do something right for once.

Later on, I took Simon’s hand and we went upstairs to the bathroom where I could start running his bath. I made sure the water wasn’t too hot and started letting the tub fill, even putting in a bit of bubble bath to celebrate this special occasion. Simon ran around the house trying to find the toys he wanted to take in with him, and when he was ready, I helped him undress and get into the tub.

Simon plugged his nose and closed his eyes, and lay back under the water to get himself soaked. When he sat up again he spat the water out of his mouth.

“Gross,” I teased, then started to wash his hair with a bottle of baby shampoo.

“This is Ronald,” Simon told me, showing me a plastic dolphin that he made jump through the water. “He’s got a white tummy but in my books they actually look pink. And this eye is scratched off because I wanted to know if it was a real eyeball or not but grandma said it was paint and I got sad because I wanted it to be real.”

I stayed quiet for a moment, and decided now would be a better time than ever to ask about the burning worry in my head. I covered Simon’s eyes and used a plastic cup to rinse out his hair. “Hey, Simon? Does grandma Denny ever give you baths?”

“No, her hands are old and shaky and scary like a witch,” Simon said, then started squeezing the dolphin’s middle. “Look, Ronald can spit out water like me!”

A wave of relief swept through me. So my brothers were safe from her horrible baths, at least. I kept
an eye on Simon playing with his dolphin while I got up quickly to fetch a washcloth from the cabinet, and then I started washing him with the purple lavender smelling soap.

“Ronald knows Ariel the mermaid because they’re best friends and sometimes I come and swim with them,” Simon kept chattering. I washed his chubby arms and his chubby legs and his chubby tummy, then his back and behind the ears as careful and loving as I could be. Once he was all clean and washed off, Simon stood up as I drained the tub, and I wrapped him in a big towel to keep him warm.

Simon’s voice was muffled from under his towel burrito. “You do baths better than daddy, you’re more gentle.”

Hearing that made me want to fucking cry, but I didn’t want him to see, so I scooped Simon up and carried him to his room and I could hold him close, feeling like I was protecting him for just a bit longer. I pushed all my emotions aside and dug around his dresser to find fresh pyjamas for Simon to wear. After, he crawled under the covers on his bed, all fresh and clean.

“Will you make us pancakes in the morning?” Simon asked as he rearranged his stuffed animals around him on the bed.

I felt bad about disappointing him. “Sorry, Simon. I’m can’t sleep over tonight. I have to go to school tomorrow too.”

Simon frowned. “Will mummy be home soon?”

“Yeah, she will,” I reassured him. I turned on his nightlight and shut off the other lights. “She’ll be home in a few hours.”

“I’m gonna stay up until she comes home.”

“No, you need to sleep now,” I coaxed him. “Would a bedtime story help?”

Still a little sad, Simon nodded slowly. I got under the covers next to him and thought about something that he would find funny. “Once upon a time, there was a little boy who lived in England.”

“Is it me?” Simon asked.

“No, his name is…” I paused dramatically. “Not Simon.”

“That’s my name!”

“No it isn’t, that’s why I said Not Simon.” Luckily, Simon found this to be hilarious. “Not Simon loved to ride his bike and play with his robots and explore with his older brothers…”

With Simon’s occasional input, I wove together a story about my little brother meeting himself from the future, and going on a big cross country journey with their imaginary friend to find a glass building filled with the best music in the world. He seemed to be enthralled until he got quiet again, and I looked over and discovered he fell asleep in the middle of my story, just as it was getting good. I sat quietly for a few more minutes until I was positive he was asleep, and I carefully eased out of bed so I wouldn’t wake him. Reluctantly, I left my little brother behind and shut his door, then went back downstairs to hang out with Paul.

He was still playing the Gameboy, but he put it down when I came back. I brought biscuits and milk from the kitchen, and we vegged out on the couch, channel surfing.
“Can we watch the adult stuff?” Paul asked. He sipped his glass of milk very carefully, but spilled a bit onto his shirt anyways.

I eyed him suspiciously. “What do you mean by that?”

“You know, the real dramatic ones where the rich people murder each other and say curse words and kiss onscreen for real.”

“Show me,” I handed him the remote. Paul expertly punched in the channel number, and a trashy soap opera came up. I laughed because I was expecting something much worse than that. “Does mum let you watch these?”

“She doesn’t know I do,” Paul told me, his eyes always glued to the screen. “Every night when it comes on, it’s the same time mum usually goes to the kitchen and tells everyone she’s washing up even though we all know she’s drinking.”

“Jesus,” I frowned, and Paul shrugged. I felt the need to say something cautionary and adult. “Just don’t do what mum does, yeah? Drinking is really—”

“I know, I know,” he told me as a woman onscreen started crying beautifully. “Alcohol is bad, it’s not my fault she drinks, blah blah blah…”

I stayed quiet after that. How did my baby brother get so smart? I wish I could be around more so I could still teach him things while there was still time. During the commercial break, I put an arm around him and he leaned against me, and we sat together in companionable silence. I missed him dearly when I wasn’t home.

The hour long drama was easy to follow, and I was surprisingly entertained. Paul knew all the characters and told me their backstories and everything. In hindsight, the whole situation was hilarious. Other brothers played video games or sports together, but I guess this was just another reminder that my family will always be different from the rest. I was about to text the group chat about it because my friends would find it funny, but I remembered it probably wasn’t a good idea right now.

When the show ended at nine o’clock, I sent Paul off to bed. He was self-sufficient and didn’t need my help anymore, so I said goodbye and promised I would visit again soon. When the light in his room went out, I puttered around the house. I sat at my father’s piano and played a few tunes, but I worried that it was too loud and would wake up Simon, so I stopped.

After, I decided to poke around my old bedroom. It was empty of the essentials, but still crammed with all my old junk and keepsakes. It was like a museum to my young teenager self, and I felt uneasy remembering the kind of person I used to be. I didn’t like myself very much now, and I certainly didn’t like the old version of myself either.

After looking through my drawers, I found some more Gameboy games and the charger cable. I put them in a bag and hung it as a surprise on Paul’s doorknob. Now that the house was quiet and I was alone, I felt empty again. I double checked the locks on all the doors again, which managed to fend off some anxiety about Denny coming in. I went back to the telly with more food, and I tried to write some lyrics in my notebook while another soap opera played in the background.

I was assembling some rhyming couplets together, and tweaking them to be about the same subject. The idea of a dual personality seemed to be sticking, and I thought it made a lot of sense at the moment. Being home reminded me of how I was supposed to be growing up, or rather, who everyone expected me to grow up to be. I didn’t live up to the expectations my parents had of me,
nor the expectations my profs at school had of me, or even the expectations my bandmates had of me. I even crafted myself in a way so that my own brothers would think I was cool. Was it a personal failure on my part for not being who everyone wanted me to be, when instead I was crafting myself into my own idealized version of me? And doesn’t that mean I’ve only got myself to blame for being unhappy because I’m bending over backwards trying to please everyone?

“The simple things you see are all complicated...”

I was relieved that the next soap opera came on after Paul went to sleep, because this one was raunchier and even included sex scenes that he shouldn’t be seeing. The plot was a lot darker, and I got distracted from my writing to watch it. A side story included one man had been fighting with his artist wife, and I hated how he even called her insane just for having some outlandish ideas. Then, he stormed out to seek refuge at his lover’s house, but the big twist was that his lover was a man too, but it’s 2017 and that sort of thing is more okay now, right? The two men started embracing and kissing and undressing each other. I turned down the volume quickly anyways, in case one of my brothers woke up. I debated on changing the channel in case anyone caught me watching something so dirty, but one little peek wouldn’t hurt, right? It was just a TV show.

They made the actors play out the scene farther than I would have thought, and some of it was a little unrealistic but I couldn’t take my eyes off the screen. There was something in the way the two men handled each other so tenderly that made me shiver, but this time not in a bad way. The episode ended with a dramatic cliffhanger where someone walked in on the two and started waving a gun around, but their face wasn’t shown. I was disappointed when their lovemaking scene got interrupted, but I realized that probably implied something that I didn’t like the idea of. Ashamed, I turned the telly off.

I curled up on the couch and tried to take a nap, because I was now on my fourth day without a proper night’s sleep. I pushed the thought of those two men together out of my head, and thought about my song instead, until the two ideas blended together. The lover was a substitute for the wife, wasn’t he? Or maybe the husband was a substitute for the ideal man. They called him gay on the show, but how could he be gay if he had a wife who he probably had sex with all the time? But then, how could he be straight if he went out of his way to be with another man?

The very idea of it was going to give me a headache, so I stopped thinking about it entirely. I kept thinking about what Paul had said about my songwriting, and it left behind a feeling deep inside that something is missing. I can’t help wishing that one day I’ll discover that we’re living a lie. And hopefully with my music, I can tell the whole world the reason why.

I was about to properly fall asleep when I heard a female voice outside the front door, and then a key sliding into the lock. I sprang up quickly, knowing fully well it couldn’t be Denny, but there was still a very small probability that it could be, so I got anxious anyways.

I poked my head around the corner to watch just as my mother opened the front door and came inside, and my drunken father stumbled in behind her.

“Christ, Pete!” I had accidentally startled my mother. She turned on the hall light and I emerged completely. “Why are you hiding like that? Don’t be so childish.”

“Relax, Betty. He probably got freaked out, he has that nervous face on,” my dad drunkenly slurred. I frowned. Did I really have a nervous face?

“I don’t see why he’s nervous, he’s a fully grown man who can be home alone from time to time,” my mother seemed to be angry about something before all this but took her anger out on me anyways. And as usual, they both got the whole thing completely wrong. “Cliff, go to bed. I’m
going to drive Pete home.”

“Okay,” my father agreed happily. He placed a sloppy kiss on my mother’s cheek. “I love you, baby.” My mother pushed him away, and he came to me instead. Surprisingly, he gave me a hug. “I love you, my actual baby.” He laughed at his own joke, probably delighted now that the alcohol gave him the courage to be affectionate to his own family. I nearly gagged from the smell of liquor on his breath which ruined the moment. I sure hope, if I was ever lucky enough to become a father, that I wouldn’t end up a drunk like him.

I remembered the money my mother left on the table for me and shoved it in my pocket before I left. I got my backpack on, and my jacket and shoes, and followed my impatient mother to the car. I watched as she fumbled with the car keys a little, and I dreaded realizing that she had been drinking too. She was in a terrible mood though, so I was better off keeping quiet.

“Did you give Simon a bath?” my mum asked as she drove a little more aggressively than she should.

“Yeah, and I got him to bed on time.”

“And Paul ate enough?”

“He ate a whole plate of dinner, and dessert, too.”

“Good. He wasn’t eating properly for a while.”

I scratched the side of my face. “Was there something bothering him?”

“No, he was just being irritable for attention, all kids do that.”

I suddenly loathed my parents for messing up my brothers like they did to me. I frowned, and there was an uncomfortable pause between us. “Did you and dad have a nice time?”

She shrugged. “As much fun as you can have when you’re babysitting your mess of a husband.”

As per usual, my parents couldn’t even enjoy a nice night out together. Everything had to be blown into a big deal, and they couldn’t put their troubles aside for one night to enjoy themselves. At what point did married couples stop being happy together? It seemed inevitable nowadays. Sometimes it felt like my parents actually liked fighting with each other, because they never wanted to do anything else. I started to feel blue again. I tucked my knees up under my chin.

“Don’t sit like that, you’re getting the seat dirty,” she scolded immediately, and I silently put my legs down again. More awkward silence. Eventually she softened her voice. “How are things coming at school? Are you getting good grades?”

“Almost, yeah,” I admitted. I knew I was in a slump now but I would work really hard so my final exams would boost my grades.

“Almost? Alright, then,” she said, it almost coming across as a sneer. She poked fun at my freshman work ethic last year. “What, are you distracted by girls again?”

“Oh, not really,” I started to explain things with the band. “I’m just spending a lot of time with the guys, and—“

“Jesus,” she muttered to herself, and I had somehow made her angry again. “Pete, if I didn’t know any better, I’d almost say you’re….wait, which one’s your street again?”
I didn’t bother to ask her to finish. We pulled into my driveway a minute later and I was eager to
jump out, and my mum hesitated again. “Hold on. Did I pay you already?”

I felt all sorts of angry at my mum, and if she took out her anger on me, I would take it out on her,
too. I smiled nicely. “No, you didn’t.”

She reached over to grab her purse on the floor, and dug through her wallet before handing me more
cash. She looked drunk and tired. “Oh, and here’s some more to cut your hair. Get something nice
and handsome for once, will you? Boys are supposed to keep their hair short.”

I stuffed the money in my wallet and I didn’t even feel guilty, as if my shit behaviour was justified
for once. I tried to help people but I got treated poorly in return. I need to stop bending backwards for
everyone else and start focusing on myself instead.
chapter 18

Tuesday, April 18th
11 days until the concert

After my mum dropped me off back home at midnight, I went to sleep right away—or attempted to, anyways. When I finally fell into a deep sleep, my mind chopped up and replayed clips of Keith getting sick from that horrible night. It was already done and over with and Keith was fine, so why did it taunt me like that still?
I dreamt of being trapped somewhere far away, watching. I knew it was Keith but it was so dark that it looked like it could even be Paul. Keith was shuddering and shaking on the cold pavement all alone, and I was never able to run to him fast enough. Blood started pouring out of his nose and staining his cheeks, and his jaw unhinged as thousands of snakes slithered out of him until he lay limp and motionless, and I knew I couldn’t save him.

I woke up cold and sweaty, shaking under my blankets. I turned on my lamp and reminded myself that we were both safe at home, and Keith was sleeping in the room just next to me. Nevertheless, I reached for my phone.
I changed out of my sweat soaked shirt into a fresh one, and crawled back into bed. I checked my phone one last time before I fell asleep again.

I love you & I hope you're doing okay.
Later that morning, I got myself across to college in a daze. As I walked past the campus coffee shop, I distinctly and without a doubt saw Summer and her tall, lanky, black floppy haired ex boyfriend standing together in line, holding hands and everything as if nothing had ever happened. Even though I was already angry at Summer, it still hurt a lot to have all my worst fears confirmed. I had only been a distraction to her, and a substitute for him until they got back together again. I was roped into the whirlwind of flirting and awkward sex just because I happened to look like the bloke.

That definitely kicked me down a notch. I tried to pay attention in Fundamentals in Art Theory and
make up for my shitty grades in my other classes, but the teacher's assistant gave the lecture today and it was really fucking boring, and this lecture would only be one or two questions on the exam, anyways. I worked on the song lyrics some more, and I finally had enough pieced together for a plain verse, bridge, and chorus, but something was still missing to tie it all together. Nonetheless, it helped me feel better about myself and rebound from my feelings. I was tired of feeling down and pitiful, and I couldn’t see how things could get much worse than this. For once, I tried to approach things with more confidence.

With my shoulders squared back, I walked into my Sculpture class listening to The Kinks because they were familiar, and I went right to work. Summer was at my worktable again, and she tried to say hi, but I paid no attention to her. Being with her that night made me feel weird and gross and I didn’t like it very much, and it’s not like she wanted me around for anything more than a one night stand. I tried not to feel guilty and weird for pushing her away for good this time.

Summer tried waving in my line of sight. I looked up at her for a brief second, and she smiled. I ignored her, and looked back down and continued detailing the hair on my four clay heads, and I saw Summer visibly shrink back in disappointment.

Near the end of class, our prof held us back a few minutes later to discuss the grading of our assignments. Roger phoned me in the middle of it and I had to ignore the call, although he was making a smart move by being first to apologize, so I answered his text right away.
Roger leaned back against the side of the car, waiting for me in the parking lot like he usually did, never committing to smoking a cigarette but holding it elegantly instead. I could always see right through him, and today I saw he was nervous and guilty. Just as he should be.

“Hey,” Roger said quietly, not in the mood for another fight. He offered me the rest of the cigarette.

“Hey,” I accepted it, and we got into the car.

I blew the smoke out the window as we drove in a terribly awkward silence, and it occurred to me
just then that I only smoked because other people thought it looked cool.

“So, how was class?” Roger asked.

“Same old,” I tossed the rest of the cigarette out onto the street. “How was work?”

“Oh, you know…” Roger cleared his throat awkwardly, and idly combed the hair out of his face. “Uh, Pete, I just want you to know that I feel really awful, about…you know, everything…”

“Good,” I said, starting to get angry at him all over again. “Did you apologize to Keith?”

“Ah,” he tightened and untightened his grip on the steering wheel. “No, it’s just that I figured…after a few days, he might…”

“Roger, I don’t think you understand,” I sat up properly and looked at him. “He just got out of the hospital and you beat the shit out of him, only after you went through his room and threw away his stuff? Dude, everybody does drugs—“

“He needs serious help—“

“And punching everyone you have a problem with is not how you help people!”

Roger started to say something, then held back. After a long pause: “Yeah. You’re right.”

So at least he could see where he was wrong. “We need to do things democratically now, since it’s clear none of us can get along. We just need to make it to the concert in one piece.” And after that? Who fucking knows.

Roger nodded slowly. “I’ve been trying to control everyone else’s life when it’s actually me who needs to get into shape. I want to be a better leader.”

“You can start by apologizing to Keith, maybe spend a week doing his bidding and getting on his good side,” I told him. Thankfully, Roger cracked a half smile.

“And I need to apologize to John too, for a lot of things now that I think about it…” Roger said as he turned into the grocery store car park, struggling to navigate the big hunk of metal through the busy rows.

In the store, I pushed the cart behind Roger, watching as he was a different kind of distracted today. He worriedly showed me two different cans of soup. “Would Keith be able to eat this?”

“It’s not like he got his teeth pulled or anything,” I put the cans back on the shelf. “The doctor just said to make sure he eats healthy these next few days, so just pick up some more vegetables or whatever. Also, just so you know, Keith hates soup.”

In the frozen food section, Roger gave me another worried look. “Pete, I need to tell you something. But you need to promise not to tell another soul, okay?”

I furrowed my eyebrows. Why the sudden guilty outburst by the frozen peas? “What’s up?”

“I think I need to break up with Jackie,” he actually looked pretty broken up about it. I felt bad for being so happy about it.

“I think you should do what you think is best,” I said, trying to remain neutral.

Roger sighed as we finished wandering through the aisles. “I want to focus on the band. I really
don’t want to lose you guys. I mean, I really love her, but our music is the only thing that makes me really happy anymore…”

Something struck me in the tenderness in his voice. We loved to make fun of Roger and Jackie but they truly loved each other, isn’t that hard enough to find these days? Then again, fundamentally it was a horrible situation, so the rest didn’t matter. Jackie was still 16 and Roger was still way too old for her no matter how nicely you tried to sugarcoat it.

I followed behind Roger with the cart as we finished shopping and waited in a terribly slow checkout line. I watched Roger anxiously fret, chewing on his bottom lip, his blue eyes staring off absently at something in the distance. I thought about my behaviour with Summer, and how I put an act to seem cooler for her, or how I pretended to be a starving artist even though my parents were rich, or how I made myself into the friend everyone wanted to have around. It all suddenly clicked now, didn’t it?

On the drive back home, I pulled out my notebook and I was finally able to write the missing verse in my song, and everything fell into place so nicely that I couldn’t help but laugh.

“What’s that?” Roger looked over quickly.

“I finally wrote us a song,” I sighed with relief. “One down, two more to go.”

“Oh, thank god,” Roger was smiling too, and I felt a huge weight dissipate off my chest. I finally got the ball rolling. I could do this.

We came into the house in a good mood, juggling bags of groceries. I saw the others in the living room. John was standing by Keith, who was installed on the couch with blankets and pillows, surrounded by comic books and electronics, and plenty of food and empty cups of tea. John had been taking care of him devotedly ever since Keith had come back from the hospital.

When he heard us come in, John quickly took his hand off of Keith’s arm, straightening himself.

“You’re home early.”

We had caught John off guard, enough that he forgot he wasn’t speaking to us. I smiled, showing we meant no harm. “We come bearing food and good news.”

John and Keith exchanged a look. Roger came in behind me and put the bags of groceries on the floor. “Keith, I, ah, bought lots of healthy food, but I can cook it really well for you so it doesn’t taste like the vegan shit you hate.”

Keith shifted contemplatively, sitting cross legged under his blanket. “Alright. Cool.”

“And, um,” beside me, Roger stood with his shoulders back, and took a deep breath. “I’m sorry. I didn’t handle that situation very well the other day, and I was way out of line.”

John snorted mockingly. “That’s a bit of an understatement.”

I flashed John a look, pleading with him to be patient, not that he had any reason to want to listen to what I had to say.

Roger shifted on his feet. “I’m seriously going to try to be a lot better to you guys. I’m not the best band leader and you guys deserve someone more professional.”

I watched John roll his eyes, but beside him, Keith actually looked sympathetic.

Roger tried again. “And, um. Seriously, I’m really sorry, Keith. I feel guilty as anything and I swear
to god I won’t do it again.”

John folded his arms over his chest and was about to protest, but Keith calmly reached over for a package of biscuits on the coffee table with a shrug. “I forgive you. I mean, it’s not like I didn’t deserve it.” The three of us immediately objected, but Keith interrupted, holding his index finger up. “I’m serious. I really need to get my shit together. I want to stay in the band, so I’ll do whatever it takes from now on.”

“Including having the shit beaten out of you for no good reason?” John demanded.

“No, no more of that, I’m swearing off any sort of violence for good this time,” Roger insisted. He recycled my words, but I let it slide. “I swear to sort out any problems in the band democratically from now on, even if you all have different opinions or whatever.”

For Roger, pledging to be a pacifist was a really big deal, and I was impressed that he had finally come through, although not everyone had the same thoughts as me.

John shot Keith a look, and Keith pointedly ignored John. Roger looked relieved that things had gone over smoother than any of us had expected. He looked over at John too. “And John? I’ve been treating you like shit when you’ve been nothing but reliable and loyal. I, uh, really value your artistic input for the band.”

Roger and John both stared at each other for a few tense seconds. It was hard for Roger to apologize and it was hard for John to accept a compliment from someone like him. I bit my tongue, silently praying that this would be the end of our fight. Keith and I watched them closely. Finally, John gave a curt nod, accepting the apology. Roger relaxed.

“So,” John sat on the arm of the couch next to Keith. “Our lead singer has agreed not to hit people when he’s upset. Now we’re back to square one.”

“No, not quite,” I swooped in quickly, hoping to save the day. “I finished the lyrics to a new song today. I just have to play around with a tune and then we can all collaborate on the instrumentals.”

John looked impressed, just like the morning I told him I had lost my virginity, as if he hadn’t thought that I could actually do it. “Alright, let’s see it, then.”

I dug my notebook out of my backpack, and I sat on the couch next to Keith. John sat on my other side, and Roger sat awkwardly on the edge of the cushion next to Keith, knowing fully well that no one was a fan of him at the moment. I held the book open for everyone to squish in and read, but eventually Roger took the book and read the lyrics out loud for everyone.

“You think we look pretty good together
You think my shoes are made of leather
But I'm a substitute for another guy
I look pretty tall but my heels are high
The simple things you see are all complicated
I look pretty young, but I'm just back-dated

Substitute—your lies for fact
Substitute— I can see right through your plastic mac
Substitute— I try walking forward but my feet walk back
Substitute— my fine linen suit is really made out of sack

I was born with a plastic spoon in my mouth
The north side of my town faced east, and the east was facing south
And now you dare to look me in the eye
Those crocodile tears are what you cry
It's a genuine problem, you won't try
To work it out at all you just pass it by

Substitute— me for him
Substitute— my coke for gin
Substitute— you for my mum
Substitute— at least I'll get my washing done

I'm a substitute for another guy
I look pretty tall but my heels are high
The simple things you see are all complicated
I look pretty young, but I'm just back-dated
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Substitute— you for my mum
Substitute— at least I'll get my washing done
Substitute— your lies for fact
Substitute— I can see right through your plastic mac
Substitute— I try walking forward but my feet walk back
Substitute— My fine-looking suit is really made out of sack”

“I can dig it,” John said.

“This is really good, Pete,” Roger smiled at me.

“Hell yeah, man,” Keith agreed.

In their own unique way my bandmates had congratulated me, and with their approval I could finally move on. Everyone had forgiven each other, we had a song to work on, and our biggest gig yet was fast approaching. There was plenty to do—Roger rushed off to cook for Keith, Keith closed his eyes to rest some more while John cleaned, and I went back to my room to figure out a tune, touch up the lyrics, write an essay, study for a test, and ignore the rest of my personal problems. Now, my only job was to focus on this new chapter of my life: The Who.
Wednesday, April 19th
10 days until the show

After my early morning literature class, I came home at around 1 o’clock again. I went right back up to my bedroom, kicked off my shoes, and flopped down in bed for a nap. I let my radio play as I dozed off, permanently tuned to the alternative rock radio station. My mind swirled with the remnants of this morning’s lecture on Victorian love poetry, sonnets about lovers that weren’t meant to be together, and eventually those thoughts mixed with song ideas and band worries. The last thing I remembered was falling asleep to the opening chords of that new Rolling Stones song, ‘19th Nervous Breakdown’.

When I slowly emerged from sleep about an hour later with my cheek sticking to the dried drool on my pillowcase, I felt like I had a breakthrough. I hurriedly shut off my radio and grabbed my acoustic guitar from the stand, and I stood in the middle of my messy bedroom on a pile of dirty laundry and strummed until I had drawn out the exact melody I had floating through my head.

I don’t know how long it took me to get it just right, but when I did I actually cheered out loud. I practiced it a few more times until I could remember it, and then I burst into Keith’s bedroom next door.

He looked up, startled at my disheveled appearance as I clutched the neck of my guitar like a trophy. Keith paused the song on his phone that was playing through the speakers on his desk, and put the textbook he was reading aside. I sat across from him on his bed and wordlessly strummed out the melody. It was sharp and bouncy and then tumbled deeper into a rolling chord progression that would probably be bass-heavy when I got John in on it.

I sang out loud to get a feel for the lyrical phrases. "You think we look pretty good together....you think my shoes are made of leather..."

I changed the key and sang a bit differently. "But I’m a substitute for another guy, I look pretty tall but my heels are high..."

I followed basic chord progression techniques that every amateur songwriter uses, but hey, I was still an amateur, and that’s okay. I could play around with it later. While I experimented with different ways of singing as well as backing with the guitar, I saw Keith focus intently, trying to get a feel for the natural rhythm of the melody and my singing. He drummed along absentmindedly against his lap.

A quick learner, he mouthed the words to the chorus along with me while I figured out what notes sounded best out loud. I noticed Keith pretended to drum out the word into separate syllables: “Sub-sti-tute, me for him. Sub-sti-tute, my coke for gin...”

So, I sang it along that way, with the word ‘substitute’ broken into three syllables. I thought it made the chorus punchier and gave it a pop song feel. I envisioned it getting stuck in everyone’s heads as our song played on the radio ten times a day and the cash rolled in. After I had run through the song a few times, it finally gained some momentum and started coming together. Keith and I exchanged an excited look. There was nothing better than the feeling of progress.

I used a piece of Keith’s notebook paper to write down the chords and some changes to the way the lyrics should be delivered. I got swept up in my own excitement, but as I wrote, I made sure to ask, “Are you doing okay Keith? Do you need anything?”
Keith lowered his eyes, scratched the side of his head, fiddled with his blanket a little. “I’m okay.”

I stopped writing for a moment. “You sure?”

“Yeah.”

“Keith.”

“It’s fine, it all clears up eventually.”

I chewed on the tip of my pencil. I really wish I knew how to help him.

While I wrote some more, Keith hit play on his laptop and The Beach Boys started playing again. It wasn’t indicative of his mood at all. The happy, cheerful, sunshine-y tunes were Keith’s go-to music in any mood. He used it as comfort when he was sad, and to keep him coasting along when he was happy. We all knew the songs by heart because of how often Keith blasted the same album on repeat. Originally he started liking The Beach Boys ironically, because their clean cut, parent-approved style was easy to make fun of, but I think Keith really saw them as a comfort. He even went as far as buying their music on actual CD’s the old fashioned way. He played *Surfin’ Safari* so often that the CD got worn out, and kept skipping on ‘Summertime Blues’.

We heard John come home from helping the elderly ladies with technology woes. When he came in to check on Keith, he seemed surprised to see me. I excitedly told John about what I had come up with. The three of us decided to go to the basement for a jam session, since we didn’t need Roger for any of the vocals when I could fill in for the time being. I put my guitar back in my room, opting for my electric downstairs. Keith slowly got out of bed, only accepting John’s arm for support. He was regaining his strength but still needed to take it easy as he recovered fully and completely. I thought Keith was doing fine but I noticed John had placed a hand on the middle of his back as we went down the stairs, so maybe he needed a bit more support after all?

In the basement, John and I sat on the floor with our guitars plugged into our amps, just like all those afternoons in our childhood together. I played him the tune I thought of, and he helped me work through it until it sounded as good as it could be. With his own freedom to create, John flourished. I was always in awe of how quickly his fingers could work the strings in his unique jazz-blues-swing-rock-and-roll hybrid style. His bass rhythm intertwined with my lead guitar, perfectly complimenting me without outshining me nor falling in my shadow. Keith followed us on drums with a basic rhythm where he wouldn’t exert himself too much, and I got shivers through my body when it all came together. Each sound fit together perfectly, and just imagining Roger’s voice along with us was enough to remind me why we were all together in the first place. We were solid, and we were unstoppable.

When I was satisfied with the instrumentals, I left John and Keith in the basement and went back up to my room. I set up my laptop and the microphone I bought, and using my acoustic, I recorded a few takes of the song with the refined melody, and I also sang with the vocals how I wanted Roger to sing them later. When I got the recording to sound how I wanted, I saved the demo and emailed it to Roger to listen to when he got home, labelling it ‘substitoot’. I flopped backwards onto the bed while the file processed, feeling so goddamn satisfied. I wanted to share my excitement with someone, but I didn’t have anyone else except for the guys to talk to. The only other friends I had were Sam and Max, so I texted them the good news.

I gave myself the rest of the night off to congratulate myself. John, Keith, and I ate dinner together before John left to get ready for his silly swimming thing. I brought my laptop and my drawing supplies in my backpack, and John and I left for the tube to get to the rec centre.
John was whistling the tune to ‘Substitute’ as we jogged down the stairs, and I felt proud that he liked it so much. I must have done a good job if it was catchy enough to get stuck in his head. We managed to get seats, and we shared a pair of headphones together while we listened to the Rolling Stones from my phone. Naturally, we felt competitive towards them, but we couldn’t help but like them. The Stones were so damn good. Even though they were miles ahead of us and already getting songs on the radio and local TV interviews, they were gracious and humble. Mick was always generous in sharing other indie bands' songs on Twitter, and he even shared ‘I Can’t Explain’ for us when it came out last year. Both of our bands were preparing for the concert at the end of the month, and I was eager to see them there and hang out.

“Is everything okay with Keith?” I asked John as one song faded out. “Like, deep down and stuff?” John sighed and took the earphone out. I paused the music and did too. “He’s…struggling a bit with some personal stuff. He opened up and told me everything. The poor guy.”

“Really? Like what?”

“Just…you know, emotional stuff, stuff with his family…” John scratched the side of his head. “Don’t take it personally, but he didn’t really want me to tell anyone else.”

I frowned. “Why can’t he tell me? Doesn’t he trust me?”

“No, he does, but…” John shifted, and I could tell he was trying to let me down easy. “He just didn’t want you to know the bad stuff. I think he wants you to think of him as goofy and fearless, just like when you first met.”

“I was there at his worst moment, I stayed with him at the hospital…” I felt frustration tighten in my chest. “I just want to help him too, why doesn’t he want my help?”

“Pete, it’s not like that,” John told me. “I just don’t think he’s the type to open up about his problems to a lot of people. He sees it as a weakness.”

Selfishly, I got angry. Even after all that, Keith chose John over me, and the two of them were back to their own secret friendship that no one else could get in on. And even though John and I had been friends for longer, he would choose Keith before me too now. Before I got myself too worked up, John put a hand on my shoulder, reassuring me kindly. “I’m going to help him, don’t worry.”

“And what about you? How are you doing lately?” I asked.

“It’s still hard without you-know-who,” John admitted. “But I’m figuring a lot of things out. This might be a good thing since the band is starting to take off.”

I nodded. I was about to tell him about Roger and Jackie, but Roger trusted me with that secret, and I was lucky to have one friend trust me like that. “Now you can really focus, cause now’s the time we’ll have to work the hardest.”

“Day to day things are hard. It’s the little stuff, you know?” John sighed. “But Keith is keeping me occupied, which is good.”

“Yeah, you two are getting close,” I remarked casually. I didn’t want to let on that I was jealous of their friendship, but I think John interpreted it differently, because I saw anger flash in his eyes for a moment.

John shrugged it off anyways. “I like to take care of people.” And that was all he would say on the topic, so I let it slide for now.
We got into the recreation centre at the same time as a few of the old ladies from the class, and when they saw John they squealed and surrounded him immediately, which I found hilarious. They were showering him with compliments, enthusing at how easy it was to read their emails or whatever now that John had helped them. John looked back at me briefly with a smug look on his face that made me laugh.

I sat with John in the empty locker room as he changed into Roger’s swim suit. I picked at one of my fingernails and mused aloud. “You better get used to all those women swarming you like that every time you go outside. It’ll be way more intense than that when we get famous.”

“Dude,” John turned to face me, a devilish smile appearing on his face. “I was born ready for that.”

Later on, I sat on the bleachers and browsed on my laptop while John and the ladies did their bizarre water dances, and the over-eager French instructor shouted all the moves for them. The WiFi connection was slow in the pool area so I ended up sketching in my notebook from memory. I really needed to practice drawing faces, so I filled a whole page with different characters and expressions. I left the pool to sit in the locker room for a bit, because Paul rang me and asked for help with a video game level he was stuck on. I was more than happy to be a proper big brother and help.

Later I went back out to the bleachers by the water. Whenever I looked over at John in the water, he was either looking back at me making funny faces, or talking to one of the women between the songs. It was Carol, who drove us home last week. I could have sworn she was openly flirting with John the whole time, laughing extra loud at everything he said and even playfully pushing him on the shoulder. I watched as John didn’t accept nor reject her in any way. He just happily basked in the attention.

After their session was done, I followed John back into the locker rooms. Carol was still talking to him, not trying at all to be subtle in her advances. The last thing she said before heading to the women’s change room was, “Wait for me outside, okay?”

I watched John shower and dress faster than the speed of light, eager to see Carol outside again. We ended up waiting what felt like a million hours for her, but then John and this 40-something year old woman were back at each other’s side again.

“I was wondering if you could help me set up my new stereo system, John,” Carol drawled as we slowly walked through the lobby again. God, she was even twirling her hair around the end of her finger. “It’s all so big and complicated, I could never do it on my own.”

“Isn’t that a job for your husband?” John raised an eyebrow.

“Don’t you worry about that,” she smiled at him. I saw cartoon hearts in John’s eyes, and I was ready to puke. “How about I make you dinner and you can help me out?”

“I suppose I can give it a try,” John said casually, apparently able to forget his broken heart now that he had a new woman throwing herself at him. As I trailed behind them awkwardly, I cleared my throat loudly. They both turned to look at me.

“Oh, uh,” John walked beside me again. “You don’t mind, do you, Pete?”

I tried to telepathically warn John that having an affair with an older woman who I’m pretty sure wore a wedding ring the last time I saw her wouldn’t be good for his delicate emotions right now, but it didn’t work. Carol turned to me kindly, almost condescending as if I were John’s kid brother. “I can drive you home, Pete. Your house is along the way.”
So, once more I was crammed in the back seat of Carol’s nice car while she and John flirted outrageously in the front. I focused on my sketches on the drive back, probably looking like a sullen child. I drew cartoon people with curly hair that I later coloured blond. When Carol pulled into our driveway again, I politely thanked her, and let my friend go off and be the boy-toy for some random woman who was probably in a crumbling marriage and get his heart broken all over again. But it made him happy, didn’t it?

I crouched down to say goodbye to John through the car window. He gave me a cheeky grin. “Night, Pete. Thanks for coming out with me. I’ll be back…” he turned to look at Carol in the driver’s seat, who had discreetly opened up another button on her blouse when he wasn’t looking. “…late.”

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes into the back of my skull. I waved goodbye again and let myself in the house. I was greeted by a huge wall of Dexy’s Midnight Runners sound, and an absolute circus in the kitchen.

Roger was cooking something by the stove, unironically wearing that dorky apron of his. At the kitchen table, Keith was standing on a chair for no reason whatsoever, and the two of them were belting from the top of their lungs. "TOO-RA-LOO-RA-TOO-RA-LOO-ROKE-AYE…"

I covered my ears as Keith sang out of key, "And we’ll sing just like our fathers…” Keith saw me in the doorway, and jumped down from the chair to start a solo Greek line dance while he and Roger exploded into the chorus. "Come on Eileen, oh, I swear what he means, at this moment, you mean everything…"

Roger looked over and jumped, startled by my sudden appearance. Keith swept him up in the line dance and they both started half laughing, half singing along with the song blaring. Keith tugged at Roger’s apron. "You in that dress, my thoughts I confess, verge on dirty…” They threw their arms up and cried, “Oh, come on Eileen!”

I hadn’t realized how stressed out and tired looking Roger was lately until I saw him like this, happy and laughing, dancing and having a good time. And it had been so long since I had seen Keith in such good spirits, with that endless overflow of energy and life to him. John was off getting laid and I just finished a song. Everyone was back on track and better than ever, and I couldn’t be happier to see my friends like this.

It was important for Keith and Roger to rebuild a healthier, less violent relationship, so I let them goof off in the kitchen and continue bonding to weird one hit wonders. I went upstairs to relax in bed. I set up my laptop and signed onto Netflix, putting on The Office (the UK version because it’s the best, obviously) while I coloured in some of my sketches earlier, even doodling a cartoon of Keith and Roger dancing.

Long after Roger and Keith had finished eating and went to bed in their respective rooms, I had started packing my things away and getting ready to sleep too. I heard John come in through the front door. I checked the time quickly—it was much too early in the evening still, and I knew something was wrong.

I got back into bed, and inevitably John came upstairs and opened my door, popping his head in. “Hey.”

“Hey,” I shifted over on the mattress and patted the spot beside me. “Come in.”

John came in and shut the door behind him, kicking off his shoes and sliding in under the covers beside me. He looked awful. I turned to him. “What happened?”
“I, uh…” John rubbed his face, looking utterly exhausted. “I couldn’t do it, man.”

“What do you mean?” I asked. “You couldn’t set up her stereo?”

“No, Pete, I mean…” he sighed. “Okay, let me start at the beginning.”

I sat up, cross-legged, and listened very intently so he knew I was reliable and he could confide in me from now on.

John took a deep breath. “So, after you left, things got really good. Like, I felt like I was back in the game again, flirting and feeling cool knowing that this gorgeous woman wanted me. She played the sultry housewife and even got me a drink when we got in, then started cooking for me and everything. Carol kept complimenting me and saying I looked really good and I was so smart and whatever, right?”

I nodded.

“And we have this fancy-ass dinner in this gorgeous house and I put on Ma Rainey and Carol knew every word to every song, and when we were eating she kept brushing her foot up my leg under the table and I was really enjoying myself. We have more wine and everything gets good, and before I know it we’re on her couch and she’s touching me and we start to kiss and eventually we’re snogging all hot and heavy. She has a hand stuffed down my jeans and I reach up under her shirt to grab her boob and I was so surprised because they’re way bigger than Alison’s, and suddenly I’m thinking about Alison and how much I miss touching her like that when we were in love and Carol started asking why I looked like I was going to cry—“

“Wait, you started crying in front of Carol because her boob was bigger than you were used to?”

“Yeah, but—stop laughing, you bitch— it was so much more than that.”

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry. Please continue.”

John leaned back against my headboard with a sigh. “So she had to sit there and awkwardly comfort me, and I just felt really guilty. It was like I was cheating on Alison. And I realized how weird it is because Carol’s, like, as old as my mother and she has photos of her and her kids all around the house and I miss Alison so fucking much so I tell her the whole story and she’s pouring more wine, and Carol is trying to stroke my thigh and I tell her I need to leave because I’m heartbroken and I sort of want to throw myself off of a bridge, so I walked through her neighbourhood trying to find a fucking bus stop, and I tried to phone Alison because I always phone her when I’m upset because she always makes me feel better, and then she answered and I got so scared and I hung up right away and maybe she thought of getting back together with me but I just ruined it, and—“

“John, slow down, breathe—“

“And I can’t fucking do it, man,” John declared adamantly. “I can’t do it without her. I thought I could learn to live without Alison Wise but I physically can’t do it. I’m dying, I wanna die.”

I didn’t know what to say, so I just pat his shoulder. I wanted to tell him that Keith would distract him, and the band would distract him, but even I knew deep down that 24 hours a day is long and going to bed alone sucks.

“You’ll get by, John. You always do,” was all I could offer. How do you tell your friend to accept the fact that the love of his life doesn’t want him any longer?

“And you know what the worst part was?” John didn’t wait for me to guess. “I didn’t even ask what
kind of wine it was. It was so fucking good and I meant to get a picture of the label or something so I could buy it later and I completely forgot.”

I blinked. “That’s awful, I’m so sorry.”

“How am I ever going to find it again? It was so smooth and delicate but the smoky aftertaste was unlike anything I’ve ever had before.”

“You’ll find it again, don’t worry,” I tried to reassure him, albeit a bit confused.

John grumbled some more and stole some of my water from the bottle on my bedside table, then turned off my lamp and noisily lay down and hogged all my blankets to his side of the bed. “My life fucking sucks and I’m grumpy. Also I’m sleeping here tonight.”

I quietly lay down next to him and tried to get as much blanket as I could. “Yeah man, go ahead.”

John snored all night and my feet were too cold, but finally I was someone’s first choice. I went to sleep happy.
no offense but what the
Thursday, April 20th
9 days until the concert

John had already went back to his bedroom by the time I woke up. It was still early in the day and I was feeling good, so I got dressed and went down to the shops nearby. I had a long list of basic stuff I needed to buy anyways, and getting everything done made me feel accomplished.

After I bought some shampoo from the drug store, I walked past an old hobby shop and thought of John. I went inside and found Tetris for the N64, and I bought it on a whim. He loved his puzzle games, and I sure knew he needed a distraction right now. I walked home listening to Rubber Soul by The Beatles and enjoying the tranquility of the early afternoon. When I got home, I left the game wrapped in the store bag at John’s spot at the dining room table, and I put a sticky note with his name on it on top.
We were festive guys, and as long as Roger thought we were joking about it, we were golden. Keith, John, and I lay stretched out on our backs on our basement carpet with the window open and the fan blowing. John and I shared a blunt but we didn’t let Keith have any, because we thought that forcing him to quit cold turkey was somehow helping him.

“Just one hit, come on, Pete,” Keith pleaded.

I took a long drag and blew the smoke out the corner of my mouth. “You really shouldn’t rely on drugs to have a good time.”

I handed the blunt to John, who took a big hit too. “All it does is kill your brain cells and make you
dumb.”

I took the blunt back. “It’s not even that great. It’s entirely too hyped up, if you ask me.”

“There are plenty of other wholesome things you could do instead of smoking,” John told Keith as he extinguished it on the corner of the coffee table. “You could do a puzzle, or some gardening. Maybe take up needlepoint.”

“Fuck you, this is bullying,” Keith glared at us. He took John’s phone from the table which we had been using to play chill electronic music through the Bluetooth speaker, and changed it to some music that was much worse, but the weed hit me just then and I didn’t particularly care.

John rolled over to turn to Keith, asking sweetly, “Keith, go be a dear and get us a snack.”

Keith grumbled the whole time, but went upstairs anyways. “I’m spitting in yours, John,” he called down the stairs.

“I don’t want your herpes,” John called back as he slowly moved towards the couch, turning the TV on and firing up the old N64. He put the Tetris cartridge in.

“I told you, it was a cold sore!” Keith shrieked. John and I laughed, because he was the only one that could break through and actually annoy Keith like that.

We were saving this strain of weed for a special occasion because it was trippy as fuck, but didn’t last very long. It would be perfect to occupy us for the afternoon but wear off right before I left for my class. I lay on my stomach and freely drew whatever came to mind, using all the bright colours I wanted. Keith came back down later and sat with John on the couch as they shared a bowl of something, but I couldn’t stand up because everything had gone so loopy.

For no particular reason, I was drawing an emaciated Christ-like figure on the cross, but he was radiant and wore a halo of red poppies around his soft blond curls. I was trying to focus on getting the shading right but my hand was going too slow. Behind me on the couch, I heard John slowly press the buttons on the controller, intermittently cursing and complaining about how the game was so slow too, and was it broken or something? Keith was howling with laughter and telling him how stoned he was, and that he was filming it all on his phone.

I ended up browsing the web on my phone for what felt like hours, not paying attention to Keith resting his head on John’s lap, or John staring blankly at the paused screen, wondering why it wasn’t moving. As my high wore off slowly, I floated upstairs to my room and started packing my bag to go to my photography lab. I changed into a rather nice outfit and I felt confident. Smoking always relaxed me and put me in a better mood. I spent a few minutes masking every sign that I had been high, grabbed a snack to eat on the bus, and left the house.

At school, I worked one on one with my prof to figure out a problem with Photoshop that was holding me back from more progress. When we finally got it sorted I was relieved as anything. I went back to our table at the back of the room and worked on my laptop along with Max and Sam. The stress for this final assignment was setting in and all of us in this class were slowly going mad. The three of us were working on the essay portion today which was boring and frustrating, but inevitably we gossiped while we worked.

Sam was filling me in on some drama with the friends from her old school group which had been pissing her off lately. Max was telling me that she booked that big client downtown but he was making her jump through flaming hoops to earn her paycheck. I didn’t want to tell them about that nasty fight between Roger and Keith, so instead I told them the end of the Pete and Summer saga.
They were very reassuring which made me feel a lot better about the whole thing. Sam reached over and patted my hand. “I’m so sorry to hear about that, Pete. Girls are terrible sometimes.”

Max nodded sympathetically. “Yeah, we are.”

By now we had long abandoned our essays. Max lowered her voice a bit, not that anyone else was really listening around us. “How was…you know, the whole experience for you? Since it was your first time?”

I was so relieved that someone finally asked me how I felt about it, because I really needed to get it off my chest. “Honestly, I think I convinced myself it was a lot better than it actually was. Like, I thought it would be…so much more than that, you know? I just felt weird and unsatisfied afterwards even though we went through all the motions like everyone else does.”

Max looked over at Sam and gave her a look I didn’t quite understand, and Sam elbowed her. “Max! Stop that.”

“But come on, it’s just like—“

“Not now,” Sam urged her, but I saw the ghost of a smile appear. “Anyways, Pete, I’m sorry it didn’t work out. That sort of thing happens all the time when you’re nervous or unprepared.”

Max chimed in. “Or if you’re—“

“—maybe she just wasn’t the right one,” Sam cut off Max but told me gently. “Don’t force yourself into anything. It’s supposed to be good, you know? And one day someone will make it extraordinary for you like it should be.”

I felt kinda weird and emotional when she told me that, but I kept what she said close to me in years to come. Sam was always right about this sort of thing. But I couldn’t just keep hiding myself away and being scared every time this situation presented itself. But does that mean I should throw myself at every opportunity and have awkward and mildly enjoyable sex with strangers until I find something that works?

We gradually drifted back to work, except for Max who was on her phone. Eventually she looked at me and said, “Pete, you’ve been through enough stress lately. Come out and have a drink with us after class.”

Sam gave Max another look, but then it seemed like something clicked in her head. “Actually, yeah, you should come out with us. There’s a place we like nearby, and a few of our other friends are meeting us there.”

I was really in the mood for a drink, and maybe even being social. I scratched the back of my head. “Are you sure I won’t just be tagging along?”

“Not at all!” Max smiled, looking much too excited for just a simple pub night. “Please come along, it’ll be so much fun!”

I could never say no to Max, and especially not when the two of them looked so genuinely pleased to have me along. I felt a swell of confidence knowing that these two actually prioritized me. And today I didn’t even look half bad. Maybe some good would come out of a restorative night out.

We worked on the assignment really hard for the next hour, and felt as though we had made enough progress to leave the class an hour early. I had gotten all the help I needed already from the prof, and it was more of a work period today anyways.
It was starting to get dark as we were leaving, and I was getting excited to meet their friends and have some good fun tonight. Sam and I were goofing off and Max was typing quickly on her phone, trying to wrangle in all their friends to meet at the same place at the same time. We had to cross campus to get to a street full of clubs and pubs that was popular among local uni students. I thought we were going to the pub I usually took Keith to, but I was surprised when we stopped in front of a place way before that. I looked up at the brightly lit sign: THE CIPHER.

“Is this it?” I asked. I’ve only walked past this place before. The front made it look like a pricey restaurant for hipsters or whatever, and never piqued my interest.

“What? Oh, yeah,” Max smiled. “You’ve never been here before?”

I shook my head. Sam grinned too, and they both looked incredibly eager. “It’s a restaurant in the front, but there’s a more casual space in the back and a dancefloor downstairs,” Sam explained to me.

“Michelle and Stevie are already inside,” Max waved her phone in Sam’s face for proof, and the three of us bounded inside. There were some people still eating in the front restaurant, but it looked like it was more popular for breakfast and lunch. I followed my friends through the back of the restaurant where it opened up into more of a pub style hangout where I was much more comfortable. We spotted their other friends right away and joined them in the back at a large circular booth.

One girl with long black hair stood up and hugged Max, and they squealed and bounced around in that adorable way girls do, and I clearly got the impression that they hadn’t seen each other in a long time and liked each other very, very much. Her much quieter counterpart, small with short flaxen hair, extended a hand. “Hey, I’m Stevie. Have we met?”

We shook hands, and I smiled. “Not yet, I’m Pete, nice to meet you.”

I sat next to Stevie, and Sam sat on my other side, and Max followed and sat next to her girlfriend, and the girl who must be Michelle sat on the end.

“Who else are we expecting?” Stevie asked.

“Three others, I think?” Sam said.

Max turned to gesture to me. “Michelle, we brought our friend Pete from school. He’s the sweetest boy we know.”

Michelle laughed and reached over to shake my hand. “I’m glad to hear that. I’ve had too many shitty boys in my life lately.”

“Sorry to hear that,” I smiled, joking. “I’ll try not to be too particularly shitty.”

Sam waved a waiter over and we ordered a few pitchers of beer which came back to us quickly. Only now did I properly take in my surroundings—the booths around the small room were quickly filling up with students our age, all of them artsy or alternative in their styles, just like Sam and Max. All over the walls were pictures of pin up girls or men in dashing suits, and framed posters that advertised live music nights and…drag shows? I scanned the rest of the room, and I suddenly noticed the type of coupling happening at the bar, and inevitably, the giant rainbow flag hanging above the door.

“Pete? You look a little lost,” Stevie teased me.

I poured myself a beer. “Um…I was just noticing…uh, is this a…”
“Yes, this is a gay bar,” Sam laughed.

“Am I…” I suddenly felt very out of place. I lowered my voice and leaned in to Sam. “Like, am I allowed here?”

On the other side of the booth, Michelle was giggling again. “Why wouldn’t you be? Aren’t you—“

A quick nudge from Max cut her off.

“Aren’t I what?” I asked, totally confused.

“Nevermind,” Max smiled.

“Isn’t he gay?” Michelle didn’t pick up on the cue and asked anyways. Max cringed.

“Oh my god,” Sam started laughing.

My cheeks burned, and I felt everyone staring at me. I mumbled quickly. “Oh, I’m not gay or anything…”

Now Michelle was blushing, but she laughed it off casually. “God, I’m so sorry Pete, you just seem—“

“Don’t worry about it, I’m not offended,” I tried to laugh it off too and be the progressive heterosexual friend of the group. I took a long drink anyways. “Anyways, I get it all the time.”

“To be fair, you’d think he was when you hear about him and his friends,” Sam threw and arm around my shoulder and I knew she was lightheartedly teasing.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I laughed as she poured more beer for me, and I downed it quickly.

“He lives with his three friends and they’re closer than any group of guys I’ve ever seen,” Sam told the group. “Pete told me once that he and his friend John still share a bed sometimes.”

“What?” Stevie exclaimed, bursting into laughter.

“No, no, no, of course it sounds gay when you put it like that,” I reassured them. I hadn’t eaten much today so I felt tipsy almost immediately, my speech already starting to slur. “It’s all very innocent stuff, just like when we’d share a bed as kids.”

“That’s a lot of intimacy there dude,” Stevie drank some more. “It seems like you both like that kind of thing.”

“And then there’s his friend Roger Daltrey,” Sam started, and I felt very loose and started giggling all over again, knowing exactly what she was going to say.

“Daltrey? That sounds familiar,” Michelle pondered aloud. “Max, where have I heard that name before?”

“We went to school with Carol, remember? That’s her brother,” Max smiled lazily, already nearing on drunk.

Michelle turned to me. “Wait, you’re gay with Carol’s brother?”

“I don’t think I’m gay,” I reminded everyone, then drank more.

“I wouldn’t be surprised if the two of them ended up together sometime down the road,” Sam
continued. “Pete’s talks about him like he’s the greatest person to ever walk this planet. I think he’s still in denial about a crush.”

“Shut up, oh my god,” my brain was liquefying already thanks to the beer, and I didn’t think about it too much. It just seemed really funny to me at the time so I laughed.

“Pete does really nice drawings of him, though,” Max agreed, and high-fived Sam.

“I don’t draw him!” I protested.

“At any given time, there’s an abnormal amount of curly blonds in your sketchbook,” Max wagged a finger in my face.

“Plenty of people have curly blond hair,” I insisted.

“Honey, nobody’s had that hair since the unspeakable perm craze of the 80’s,” Max told me, and we all laughed.

“Pete’s the kind of guy to be like, ‘Yeah, me and Rog jacked each other off because we’re such good buddies’,” Sam spoke in a mocking falsetto, doing a horribly inaccurate imitation of me.

“‘I said no homo before I came though, so it doesn’t count’,” Max joined in, and we were all laughing even harder.

I poured myself yet another beer, and gave the final, slurred word. “Look, you’re all making me horribly aware of a lot of inconsistencies in my life, and I’ll probably thank you for it someday, but now’s not the night for a massive identity crisis.”

“Cheers to that,” Sam held her cup out, and we all knocked them together.

“The morning after is the best time for an identity crisis,” Stevie said.

“Do let us know when you figure it out, we’ll go out for drinks again,” Michelle laughed.

I had long since lost count of how many drinks I had, but I was slipping into drunkenness so nicely that I didn’t mind. I felt warm and happy in good company, and I was in no rush to get home. Everyone else was quite drunk by now, and we were having a good time. Eventually a very queer looking trio drunkenly stumbled in and sat down with us, and I finally connected the dots that they were the other friends meant to join us.

“Sorry, we lost track of time while we were pre-gaming,” a gorgeous fellow with brown curls stretched across the table and kissed all of his friends on the cheek. He offered his hand to me, smiling warmly. “I’m Chris, lovely to meet you.”

I shook his hand, noting how his long fingers curled around my hand delicately. Michelle piped up. “He’s not gay, Christopher, don’t bother.”

Chris looked at me again, then gave her a funny look. “You’re kidding, right?” Sam waved a hand and dismissed the whole thing—we weren’t getting into that again.

Beside Chris, another guy and girl tried to squish into the booth with us. The handsome, elegant looking dark skinned man introduced himself to me as Taylor, and he introduced the girl next to him to everyone. “This is Jamie, she’s visiting London for the week, I thought I’d take her along tonight to meet you guys.” I thought the two of them were very good looking. Taylor looked at me for a moment. “Sam, is this the Pete you were telling me was in the band? Or the Pete who thought you
were straight?"

Sam nearly spat out her drink. “Taylor, that’s the same guy!”

I buried my face in my hands, horribly embarrassed. “Just let me live!”

“Wait, I want to hear this story,” Stevie said, and everyone else nodded.

“No, you don’t,” I pleaded.

“Oh, yes you do,” Sam teased.

“Then let me tell it, at least,” I insisted. Everyone was watching and expecting a good story, so I gave them one. “Sam and I met in our first year when we sat together for a drawing class, and she seemed really into me, and was constantly texting me, and one day she invited me back to her place. Who was I to say no to such a saucy offer?” A chuckle rippled around the table. “So I show up, doused in cologne that I thought would make me more appealing, and my coolest outfit at the time. We sit and watch a movie, and she breaks out a bottle of wine, and I realize it’s much more serious than I thought.” Now it was Sam’s turn to go red. “Things are going well, it’s getting late, and it’s near the end of the movie, so I’m working up the confidence to make a move, right?” My enthralled audience nodded back at me. “Then Sam gets up and says she has to work in the morning, and that I can sleep on the couch if I want. Then she just left. I nearly lost my shit.” Everyone was laughing now. “I wondered if that was some code and I was meant to follow her into the bedroom but I just got a door closed in my face—literally and metaphorically.”

“So is that when you figured out Sam was gay?” Michelle asked.

“No, actually,” I admitted sheepishly, and everyone giggled. “I thought about her blatant disinterest in me, and her buzz cut, and her backpack with pride flag stitched on it, and the poster of the naked woman on a sport’s car in her room, and I didn’t even clue in that she could be gay.” Everyone burst out laughing, and even Chris broke his poker face. “No, I’m serious!”

“Who has a wine and movie night with a platonic friend?” Taylor was laughing, and I pointed enthusiastically at him. “See? That’s what I’m saying! All this sexuality stuff is too complex for me.”

Sam wiped her mouth, and it was her turn to defend herself. “In hindsight, even we make a big fuss over sexuality when it’s the simplest concept on the entire planet. You just fuck whoever you feel like fucking. It’s not like you have to declare your sexuality and get a membership card and prove it after you’ve slept with someone.”

After that, I saw the world a whole lot differently.

“I want more beer,” Michelle tried to flag the waiter but Max pulled her arm down.

“I wanna dance,” she declared, and we all slid out of the booth and followed as Max drunkenly strut across the floor. I floated down the stairs behind Chris, and I felt like I was descending into heaven. There was a dancefloor quickly filling up, beautiful coloured lights flashing and revolving everywhere, and the best post 2000 dance pop anthems playing. I was too drunk to care about looking stupid, and the people I was with liked me already. We all ran onto the middle of the dance floor as classic Franz Ferdinand exploded on our arrival.

“Oh, kiss me.
Flick your cigarette, and then kiss me.
Kiss me where your eye won’t meet me.
Meet me where your mind won’t kiss me.”
The eight of us formed our own circle on the middle of the dance floor, dancing the most fun kind of dance where you just let loose and dance because it’s fun. I probably looked like an idiot flailing my spaghetti arms around, but I felt the bassline run through me because we were standing so close to the speakers, and I loved every moment of it.

“Lick your eyes and mine and then hit me—
Hit me with your eyes so sweetly,
Oh, you know you know you know that yes I love—
I mean I’d— love to get to know you…”

Stevie danced meekly next to me which made me feel better about being so uncoordinated. Sam danced perfectly on beat and Max was effortlessly gorgeous as usual. Michelle and Jamie danced close to each other, trying to talk over the music. Taylor was already looking at another guy dancing near us, and I couldn’t help but watch in awe at how great Chris looked. He seemed to have mastered the art of dancing seductively and picking up guys at clubs like it was a natural instinct, reminiscent of Roger being swarmed by women every time we leave the house.

Sam, Max and I sang the chorus at the top of our lungs. “Do you never wonder? No, no no—no you girls never know, oh no, you girls'll never know—no, you girls never know, how you make a boy feel.”

I was just drunk enough to feel like I was living on the edge of my skin, and I had no other responsibilities in the world except to have fun. The lights flashing everywhere looked really cool, and I felt like I was in a movie. I held my hands up to the lights, admiring how it filtered through my fingers. I felt so warm and invincible.

I turned to Max and we breathlessly shouted the end of the song. “Because I never wonder…oh, how the girl feels…”

Sam grabbed me and we danced together, and I mimicked every move of hers. “No, you boys never care—oh no, you boys'll never care—no, you boys never care how the girl feels…”

“No, you boys never care,” Chris appeared beside me, reaching for my hand and spinning me a few times, then steadying me with a hand on my waist that made my face go red. “You dirty boys'll never care…”

All night, the DJ played exactly what I expected to hear at a gay club, which made me laugh—Marina’s newest hit single, upbeat remixes of Lana Del Rey, Tegan and Sara, even Madonna. Someone requested Whitney Houston and we all cheered. Everyone in the room sang about how we want to dance with somebody. A man dressed in street clothes but with bold makeup, earrings, and high heels thrown on casually stole the show with his dancing on the middle of the floor. I watched in awe, more at his appearance than anything. It must be liberating to be sat happily on the fence between masculine and feminine. I drunkenly wondered if I’d ever have the courage to go out wearing something like he was.

Watching that man and all my new friends made me realize how truly, truly good this was. I don’t think it was the alcohol making me feel this way, either—I realized how carefully my actions and physicality was suppressed or crafted to seem neutral so I wouldn’t seem too feminine, or too gay, or so overly masculine that I wasn’t fooling anyone. I felt a huge weight off my shoulders when I discovered that here I could behave however I wanted in this liberal microcosm of a society that existed only within the walls of The Cipher. It left me feeling so weightless that I almost didn’t know what to do with my new freedom here. For a moment, I stood with my arms behind my head and my eyes closed, letting the warm lights wash over me for a moment, and I felt completely centered in the universe.
The lights turned all shades of blue, making me feel like I was under the sea. ‘Heart of Glass’ started playing and I came around again. I danced with a few beautiful girls in the club, and a few beautiful boys. I wound up with Chris again and he kept pulling me in closer, and I let him. Later, Max and I drunkenly held each other and danced close, crooning the words to each other as the song finished. A queue of the top pop songs on the charts this week started, and I noticed there was a commotion between my friends.

I approached their worried clump, and I listened to drunk Max getting emotional. “Look, it’s his first time at a gay club, and they still haven’t played it yet, his whole night will get ruined if it doesn’t happen…”

Sam was reasonable even when drunk. She wrapped a comforting arm around Max. “Babe, you just have to ask the DJ nicely to play the song for you.”

“Is that even allowed? Am I important enough to play God and change destiny like that?” I saw Max’s eyes get shiny and wet.

“You can, you’re totally hot, the DJ will do anything you ask,” Sam cooed lovingly.

“You’re right, I forgot,” Max fanned her eyes until they dried, and Sam threw her head back and laughed. Max unwound Sam’s arm and marched up to the DJ to start sweet talking them. I crept up to Sam and asked what was going on.

“Oh, don’t mind her,” Sam smiled lazily. She rested her chin on my shoulder, her cheek touching mine, damp with sweat. “She has this thing where she’s never been to an queer-friendly space or event or drag show or whatever where they didn’t play ‘I’m Every Woman’ by Chaka Khan. It’s practically superstition to her at this point.”

“Is that actually a thing?” I asked the group.

“I’m on Max’s side, it’s a queer staple song,” Michelle agreed.

“I think it’s silly,” Stevie said. “I’ve only heard it once at a drag show, and that was years ago.”

I looked at Sam, and she just shrugged. Before we could debate any more, the cheesy love song finally finished, and sure enough, ‘I’m Every Woman’ started. Michelle cheered just as Max came running back to us, basking in her victory.

Michelle and Max took my hands and we danced together, still drunk and sloppy. I didn’t know any of the words but the other girls did, and it was fun anyways. In our little trio with those two other women, I didn’t feel like I stuck out like a sore thumb anymore. It was nice to fit in.

At the end of the song, I followed Max and Michelle off the dancefloor, but stopped in the doorway when I almost accidentally followed them into the bathroom. Max tugged me along anyways. “It’s gender neutral, Pete, you’re good.”

I thought that was a neat idea. Everyone was just hanging out and peeing in the same room, no politics involved. Max went into a stall and Michelle and I stood in front of the mirrors. She combed through her hair with her fingers, and I used a paper towel to dab the sheen of sweat off my face. I looked raggedy and drunk, but also radiant and almost pretty. Michelle noticed me indulging in my appearance and smiled.

“Peeeeeete,” she put her head on my shoulder, hugging me from the side. “You’re so nice to me. You’re going to do so great with your band. Follow your dreams, you can accomplish anything. I loooooove you.”
I couldn’t help but laugh. I hugged her back, and suddenly we were drunkenly gushing to each other in the middle of the busy washroom. “I love you so much, I hope everyone is nice to you, and you get everything you want from life. You’re so beautiful, you deserve only the best.”

Max came out of the stall and squeezed past us to wash her hands. “God, break it up, you big lesbians…”

I crept up to Max at the sink, trying to sing what I thought were the lyrics to ‘I’m Every Woman’ but probably getting it wrong. “Max, what’s it like to finally be a woman?” I asked, playing off the song.

Max shook her hands dry, then turned to comb my hair back properly for me. “It’s fucking fantastic. You should try it sometime.” At the time I thought she was teasing me.

Our group eventually drifted back upstairs to top up on drinks in another big booth. Stevie and Jamie had disappeared somewhere which gave us more room on the benches. Max was already yawning. I snuck up next to Chris so I could squish into the booth beside him, hoping to get his attention.

We drank again until the dim bar lights went blurry, and every little joke was hysterical. Sam was pressing gentle kisses onto Max’s temple, and Michelle was on her phone trying to get a good picture of herself and Taylor. Chris and I were talking about TV shows, and he was sitting incredibly close to me, always leaning in so he could hear me better. At one point he wrapped his arm around me and I felt my whole body go hot. I felt shy all of a sudden, so I poured myself another glass to occupy my hands with something.

“Slow down there love, or you’re going to get a terrible hangover tomorrow,” Chris interrupted his own story to pour me water into another glass after someone ordered a pitcher of ice water to our table. I accepted the cold water gratefully, and told my brain to relax a bit. He was nice to me, and always spoke softly, so I could trust him. It was late and everyone was cozying into each other. My brain was back to swimming happily, and I wanted to be touched, too. I decided that I wanted to lean against Chris and relax into him, so I did just that. He was warm and he smelled nice, and I felt protected when he had his arm around me.

Chris ended up telling me about his studies, always seeming so composed even when he was drinking. I focused on his words very intently, my brain delayed in making sense of what he was telling me. I recall him saying he was studying politics and needed to keep a good public image for when he got a job after school, but he was still young and wanted to live a little. I nodded lazily, encouraging him to keep talking because I liked feeling the rumble of his voice in his chest when I shrank into him, resting my cheek against his chest. He chuckled and asked if I was still listening and I kept nodding, and he started stroking my back and I was in drunken heaven.

Later, Sam and Max took some cash from everyone and went to settle the bill for the river of beer we drank tonight. Michelle and Taylor were talking, lost in their own world. I was brought back into focus when I felt Chris’ hand slowly travel up my thigh under the table. Just like a girl’s hand, it gave me flutters in my stomach, and I curled my toes. It was strange but I didn’t necessarily want it to stop. I looked back up at Chris and his terribly unfair good looks, with his nice cheekbones and beautiful curly hair, and he smiled down at me with a perfectly white smile and I decided through all the layers of alcohol clouding my mind that I wanted to kiss him. Maybe I’d let him touch me more like that, because I liked how his hand was big and warm on me, and I kept thinking of his long fingers. Would I touch him back? Would I let him go any further? Screw cautious—I deserved the freedom to be a little slutty and experiment.

Max and Sam came back to the table, Max swaying on her feet already and needing to be steadied by Sam. They both sat down with us again and got our attention, and I eased away from Chris for a moment, feeling guilty if they saw me like that for a complex web of reasons I tried to push out of
my mind.

“How are you all getting home?” Sam asked.

Max wrapped around her from behind. “You lot need to go home so I can get back to the flat and have sex with my beautiful girlfriend.”

“What the fuck? That’s so gay, Max,” Sam told her, and Chris and I laughed.

“I need to find Jamie so we can catch a bus home,” Taylor pulled his phone out of his jeans pocket and tried to get hold of her.

“Stevie and I will ride with you guys,” Michelle yawned. Wherever Jamie was, Stevie would surely follow.

“Pete, you’re going in the opposite direction from all of us, I can call you a cab,” Sam was already mapping out everyone’s returns home. She had her phone whipped out in an instant, already punching in the phone number.

“Thank you,” I said, still slurring my words again. “Can Chris share the ride with me?” I honestly had no clue where he lived, but I wanted to stay glued to his side for longer.

Sam hesitated for a moment, then I realized she was calculating in her head. “Yeah, I guess you live close enough, Chris. You can work it out with the driver.”

“That would be lovely, if you don’t mind…” Chris smiled, and under the table his hand appeared on my thigh again.

Everyone was on their phones arranging rides and pick-ups and money. Chris started sliding out of the booth, excusing himself. “I’m just going to wash up, I’ll be back in a few.”

Sam nodded without looking up from her phone screen. No one was paying attention, so I slipped out of the booth and followed after Chris. He didn’t notice until he held the bathroom door open for the person behind him and looked back to see it was me. He smiled and pulled me in.

The upstairs loo was empty save for one person in the corner stall. Chris washed his hands casually and fixed his hair, even smoothing out his eyebrows. I leaned back against the sink beside him, trying to look alluring to catch his eye. Finally, finally, finally, he looked over at me. His gaze felt so intense that I blushed again, probably looking like a schoolgirl. He approached me, only slightly taller than me, but built broader too. I still felt small which was comforting as well as exciting. He got in so close that I could smell his cologne and fabric detergent.

I lifted my chin up for him, and Chris dropped his head, leaning in close to me. Someone came into the bathroom and interrupted us, and Chris pulled away quickly, looking elsewhere nonchalantly.

The original person in there with us before came out to wash their hands and it got busy again. When the man turned away to get paper towels, Chris slipped around the corner and into a stall. I hesitated a moment, then I snuck in after him and locked the door.

I pressed myself back against the cool metal wall, playing coy. Here I was, sneaking off to kiss a random boy just because I could. It was incredibly slutty of me, but my drunken mind justified itself a million times over. It was also incredibly gay, and for once I wasn’t scared off by that realization. I could experiment if I wanted to.

I was pulled from my thoughts as Chris closed in on me, and instead of feeling threatened, I felt secure, and delighted in a way I couldn’t explain. Chris placed a hand on my hip, sliding his arm
around the small of my back and pulling my hips against his. His free hand titled my chin upwards and I let him kiss me.

Chris’ mouth was hot and wet, and he kissed exceptionally. He guided and I happily followed along as his tongue teased my mouth open and deepened the kiss. It was just like kissing a girl, but so much stronger and so much more controlling. It made my head spin, but at the time I blamed it on the alcohol.

I could barely keep up with him. I was pinned up against the wall and Chris’ hands were all over me, touching and feeling everywhere. Those long fingers slipped under my shirt and traced along my skin, and soon enough his large, manly hands travelled down to my hips and to the front of my trousers, and I was breathless.

He didn’t ask, but I wouldn’t have said no. I arched my hips as he expertly undid the button on my jeans and pulled down my zipper. I nearly sweat thinking about how many times Chris must have done this before. He pressed up against me completely as if he were shielding me from something, and I loved feeling nice and small against him. Chris slipped his hand down into my boxers and wrapped those long fingers around me, and I involuntarily gasped into his mouth. I was genuinely surprised to discover I was hard already.

He moved so quickly, and I was feeling so many things at once. Chris expertly stroked me, easing me into it slowly at first, and then picking up his pace gradually. All I could think of was chanting ‘fuck yes’ in my head over and over. It felt so fucking good already, and he was just using his hand. Being drunk was just another added bonus on top of it all, because every small touch felt amazing. Chris broke away from my mouth to kiss the side of my neck, and his breath was hot and heavy in my ear. It made a wave of pure pleasure roll through me, and my knees went weak, but he had me pinned securely against the wall. I grappled at his back for support, and wove my hand into his hair. I twisted a curl around my finger lovingly. His hair wasn’t as long as I would have liked, but behind closed eyes I could imagine anything.

Chris kissed along my jaw and down my neck, and further down to my collarbone. He took his hands off of me and I nearly sobbed in frustration, until I opened my eyes in time to watch Chris sink down to his knees in front of me. Oh god, it was actually going to happen, and I wanted it so fucking bad without a doubt in my mind. What did that say about me in the heat of the moment?

People had been coming and going into the bathroom the whole time which gave me the challenge to stay quiet, but just when it was getting ridiculously good, a familiar voice came in and called for us.

“Chris? Pete? Are either of you in here?” Taylor asked. We were around the corner so hopefully he wouldn’t see two people in our stall.

Locking eyes with me, Chris slid his mouth off of me achingly slow, drawing out a whimper from me that I had to muffle. My voice was too shaky, so Chris wiped off his mouth and spoke for us.
“Yeah, I’m here, what’s up?”

“Your cab’s here, and we’re going to be leaving in a minute, make sure you find Pete and let him know.” Taylor seemed oblivious, thankfully.

“Be out in a moment,” Chris said, and we stayed frozen until we heard the bathroom door swing shut. Chris stood up again and kissed me. “Come along, then. We’re not done yet.”

He left first, and was the only one smart enough to think of tucking a few paper towels in his back pocket for later. I had to rub my face a few times to bring myself back to reality and composure. I was still slick with his saliva, but I left it that way and tucked myself back into my jeans, arranging myself in a way where hopefully no one could tell I still had a massive hard-on. I slipped out of the stall nonchalantly, and after just one step I felt the overstimulation from all my clothes rubbing against me and I nearly died. I tried to fan myself a bit so my flushed cheeks would go away, and then emerged from the bathroom to meet my friends.

Sam was busy wrangling everyone together and getting us ready to leave, and no one seemed to be suspicious in the slightest. I felt like I was getting away with the biggest heist in history.

“I already gave the driver both of your addresses. Just be safe, okay?” Sam told us, and I nodded enthusiastically, then thanked her for everything tonight. I hugged everyone goodbye and wished them safe travels home, and we all promised to add each other on Facebook or whatever tomorrow. The new people I met tonight even wished me luck at the concert, and said that they’d come see us sometime. Honestly, this night couldn’t get any better.

Chris was getting adorably impatient, and after I basked in the love of my new friends, he slipped an arm around my waist and guided me out the door. I waved goodbye again, and Max was the only one who noticed Chris touching me like that. She gave me a sly look, and I felt triumphant that someone had seen us.

We got into the back of the cab and turned the light off. Sam already told the driver our addresses and he started driving after a quick hello. I was still incredibly turned on, and we had just barely gotten back onto the street before Chris had his hands on me again. This time I started the kiss, throwing my arms around his shoulders and pulling him in close. My mind was screaming for more, and I couldn’t think of anything else now other than sex. Things heated up again quite quickly. I wanted to get closer, I wanted more stimulation, I wanted this strange man to use me thoroughly for whatever he wanted. An irrational thought turned into a daring risk mixed with some inherent sexuality that had been dormant up until this moment. I managed to crawl onto Chris’ lap, ducking my head from hitting the roof. I shifted to straddle his hips, and took things a bit further.

I could only see his face in brief flashes of light from passing streetlamps, but Chris was looking up at me with such a sultry look, I felt like I was going to be devoured by him any minute. He grabbed my hips firmly, and maybe he was guiding me, or maybe it was all my own doing, but I was rolling my hips against his and the friction from our jeans made sparks go off in my head.

Now it was my turn to kiss him just like he taught me—down his jaw, along his neck with my hot breath against his skin, a breathless whisper timed just perfectly: “I want you so badly.”

In response he grabbed me even tighter, and he made me feel so, so small. I arched my back and pressed against him, letting my hands run everywhere on his body. I was in complete ecstasy, and newly appreciative of how far away I lived in this moment so the cab ride would go on forever.

I was shy but not unwilling. Chris took my hand, his long fingers wrapping around mine again, and slowly guided it further down to the front of his trousers. I went to unbutton his jeans but my hands
were shaking again—the difference this time being I was so eager I couldn’t focus on the small
details. I slowly slid the zipper down and pulled all the fabric back for my first, proper grand reveal.

It was exactly what I should have expected, but I was still pleasantly surprised at the sight of him,
hardened and aching, nestled in a patch of dark hair. Just like mine, I suppose, only much thicker. I
took him in my hand and lazily starting stroking just as I would do to myself.

Chris let out a groan, quiet and low, and he called me baby over and over again. It was the hottest
fucking thing I’ve ever heard in my life.

I smiled like an idiot, utterly pleased with being called things like that. I started working faster, and
kissing him slow and deep again, although I couldn’t stop sneaking a look down below at what I was
doing. I couldn’t believe I was actually doing it, when previously the very idea of touching a man
like that had made me nervous and gave me the cold sweats. But now I was actually doing it and it
was delightful, already I liked it immensely. It all came along naturally. Chris had one arm firmly
around my waist, holding me close, and one arm behind his head, mouth agape, and eyes closed, lost
in the feeling. What came after this? Should I get down on my knees for him and blow him? Or
would he want something much more than that? Suddenly it all didn’t seem so daunting, but rather
exciting.

Outside, the roads started looking familiar. Chris seemed to like the slight variations in my stroke—
tighter on the bottom, a twist at the top. He was thrusting into my hand, and it moved me along with
him on his lap. I decided it was now or never, so I lowered my mouth down by his ear. “Come home
with me.”

Chris was almost out of breath, but he lovingly stroked the side of my face. “Not tonight, I’m afraid.”

“Please,” I whispered. “I want you.”

“You’re drunk,” was all he said, but distracted me by going back and unbuttoning my jeans again
and slipping his hand back in. A moan escaped my lips, and Chris smothered it with a kiss. The
whole thing was so hot and I was already desperate for more touch. I was still achingly hard and
verging on the edge of finishing.

I pushed all the other creeping thoughts out of my head, and let all the other extraordinary feelings
take over. Chris was biting at the sensitive skin on my collarbone, and I felt sweat drip down my
back. I imagined us like this but in a different context—perhaps with me pinned under him, in a
proper bed, and he was really fucking me, using me how he wanted. It was so scandalous and
exciting. I groaned Chris’ name, moving my hips along with his hand. He knew then to hastily pull
the paper towel out of his pocket from earlier just as I hit the point of no return. I buried my face in
his neck and let him finish me off while I struggled to keep up my pace on him.

It was like every cell in my body was exploding like fireworks when I came. I accidentally moaned
much louder than intended, and Chris smiled at that as he prevented a rather large mess with the
paper towel. I fought through that post-orgasmic haze as I finished off Chris. He was so loud I
thought the driver would notice, but that just made it even sexier. I was the one responsible for that,
after all. For some reason, knowing that I could bring a man to finish just with my hand and feeling
him like that under his skin was so incredibly satisfying and left me full of pride.

Chris needed to sit back and catch his breath, and while I cleaned up with the paper towel and tucked
myself back in my trousers, I admired him looking so beautifully disheveled and ragged. I figured he
wouldn’t want to be my boyfriend after just one night, but I could only imagine how good we could
look together, fashionably dressed and good looking as we walked the streets of London together. I
got off his lap and snuggled into his side, burying my face in the crook of his neck. Chris wrapped
his arms around me and stroked my hair as we floated down softly, together.

Thankfully the cab driver said nothing, although I always did like giving performances anyways. Chris started patting his pockets, checking to see if he had his keys and his phone, and then pulled out his wallet. It clued in that we were almost at his house, and I clung on to him tighter. He was kind to me and gave me attention, and naively I thought I loved him for it.

Chris started yawning and I was yawning, and I was utterly shocked when I read the time on my phone. Chris gently broke away from me to lean forward and tell the cabbie about the side entrance for his apartment building. I watched as he went through his wallet and handed over a wad of cash. “That’s his fare, too.”

I blushed, selfishly pleased that he was taking care of me like that. For a brief moment it really did feel like we were boyfriends.

Chris kissed me one last time. “Get my number from Sam. Let’s do this again sometime.”

I nodded, and he squeezed my hand again. Chris thanked the cab driver and got out, and we waved goodbye before the driver took off again. I recognized the area, and was pleased to find he only lived about fifteen minutes away from me. The rest of the ride to my house didn’t take long at all as we sailed through the empty early morning streets. I felt really good about everything in general—it was like finding a pair of jeans that properly fit you for the first time.

When I stared out the window I didn’t feel so lonely, but instead rather triumphant. I thanked the cab driver again without a shred of shame. I took the nasty used paper towel with me so the driver wouldn’t have to deal with it, and threw it in the rubbish bin we kept by the door of our house when he dropped me off. I unlocked the door and went inside doing a walk of pride back up to my bedroom. I stripped off my clothes and felt beautiful for once, and crawled under the covers and fell asleep smiling.
PETE did you make it home okay? Text me when you get this xxxxx❤️
PETE did you get laid???
Tell me all about it in the morning you big slut,
okay? xxxx❤️
Friday, April 21st
8 days until the concert

I woke up the next morning feeling…well, feeling a lot of things, actually.

I stared at my ceiling and tried to organize my thoughts.

Was I feeling guilty again? Not for the sex, at least. It was deeply satisfying and left me feeling really good even the morning after. I wish there could have been more, but that’s okay.

Was I hungover? Very much so.

But most importantly, I had a huge dilemma staring me in the face. Am I gay? Or did I just like the attention?

I couldn’t kid myself—I’m not gay, I was just drunk and horny. It was probably a one-off thing. Of course I could get off from a handjob, it doesn’t matter who’s giving it. It’s just stimulation.

If I were really gay, why wasn’t I seeking this out all the time?

I probably just liked the novelty of it—doing something thrilling and sexy, happy just to belong to an exclusive community for a night so I could feel like I was better than everyone else. I was dabbling in a culture that didn’t belong to me. I probably just wanted to be a part of something now that a whole new generation was triumphant and proud to be gay.

Why would I want to be gay? Queer people got harassed and discriminated against all the time, even killed for it depending on where you lived. Why would I want to go through that ordeal if I was perfectly fine with being with women?

Just because I had one bad experience with a girl doesn’t mean I’m gay, right? And so what if everyone teased me about being gay? It was just a running joke. Or maybe it was all coming out now because I had been subconsciously suppressing it? I was in such a welcoming environment last night, I felt like I could be myself and let my instincts run free and truly be myself.

But who am I, anyways?

And furthermore, how did I know what was an exclusively gay feeling and what was exclusively straight? I’ve just been myself my whole life. How do I know if everyone else feels the same way as me or not?

I suppose the real question was if I was sexually attracted to men. If I was, I would want to sleep with men. Like, really want to. But I’ve spent my whole life convincing myself it was wrong, so where did that leave me? If I unlearned all the things my parents have told me and I’ve told myself, would I feel comfortable living life like that?

I love girls without a doubt in my mind. They don’t seem to like me in return but that’s no excuse to go changing my identity. I definitely know I don’t love guys as much as I love girls. Or do I? I haven’t tried out a lifestyle where I could be that liberal. Is there truly an in between, a middle ground? I know bisexuality is a thing, but it doesn’t seem right for me. It always seemed to be a phase when you couldn’t decide what you wanted most.
I, Pete Townshend, have always been one to play it safe. Well, so far, anyways. I cursed that about myself, and the band was supposed to give me more opportunities to let loose and fuck things up, and see the world in a different way. But something was still holding me back.

“Pete, what’re you staring at?” John asked me, waving a hand in my face. I had already floated downstairs and made breakfast. I must have been on auto-pilot while lost in my thoughts. Keith was sat at the table with us, and was watching me with a curious look on his face.

“Sorry,” I mumbled, and stood up to get a glass of water. My hangover was threatening to make my head explode.

John looked at me carefully as I sat down again. “Did something happen? Every time you come back from a night out you look like you’re battling something worse than a hangover.”

“I’ve had too much to think,” I told him, taking a bite of toast. “Have you guys ever noticed how life is, like, really big? And weird?”

Keith nodded, talking with a mouthful of food. “You can say that again.”

“Wanna talk about it?” John asked over his cup of coffee. He sounded so sincere, and even Keith looked sympathetic. I had caught them at a really good time and all I had to do was trust my closest friends and open up. Four words: I think I’m gay. But I was terrified of what they might say or think. Or rather, the things they wouldn’t say out loud, and stay icy silent about. Was it wrong of me for thinking of my friends as such bad people? Or was I just paranoid?

They were waiting for an answer. “I’ve, uh, just been thinking about, like, life stuff. I wanna tell you guys but I still need to figure it all out.”

John looked concerned, but I could always count on him to understand. “Take as much time as you need. You know Keith and I are practically hermits at this point. We’ll be around.” Keith nodded enthusiastically.

I looked at my friends’ smiling, supportive faces, feeling disappointed in myself that I couldn’t trust them with my problems when I expected them to trust me with theirs. What was I being so paranoid about?

Later on, the two of them went up to John’s room and shut the door, and I basked in the silence downstairs, returning to my thoughts. I went through Facebook on my phone and accepted everyone’s new friend requests from last night. Through Sam’s profile, I managed to find Chris’ page, and I searched through it. Even when I was stone sober he was incredibly gorgeous, and all his posts were genuine and intellectual. We had a ton of things in common and I liked his sense of humour. I stared at a picture of him on a dock by a river, posing for the camera, in his bathing suit and sunglasses. If he were to show up at my house right this very second, when I was disgusting and hungover, would I let him fuck me? Or would I tell myself I wanted it regardless?

Because it was a Friday night, Roger came home half an hour later than usual, and this time there was no Jackie in tow. By the time he had his shoes kicked off I could tell he meant business. The four of us joined together in the basement for a band meeting.

“So, we only have 8 days until the show, as you all know,” Roger told us. He was standing and talking while the three of us sat on the couch. “Pete’s written one new song so far, so we have to finish the instrumentals for that and rehearse it. I listened to the demo and I think I’ve got the vocals down pretty well.”
So, we rehearsed. Everyone was optimistic, although cautious. John and I worked together closely to get the riffs right, and Keith was trying out different techniques on his own behind us. Roger lead us with his vocals, strong and sure. Everyone let me direct things to sound how I wanted as if I were the producer. Well, I sort of was, wasn’t I?

The finished song was just like the ones we studied and memorized. There were bouncing drums and a stiff swing in my guitar. John kept turning up the amps so his rolling bassline could be heard over Keith’s crashing and my lead guitar. Roger sang pure and honest, with John and I on backup. Keith was trying to sing along with us, and we let him because he couldn’t be heard over his own drumming anyways.

I was incredibly satisfied after a solid’s night work on the song. We figured out all the little details and problems, now we just needed to rehearse it until we knew it so well we could play it in our sleep. Before it got too late, I grabbed my laptop and the microphone from my room and brought it downstairs so we could record the good copy of our song, for reference as well as prosperity. By no means was it a professional recording, but now we knew what the song should sound like so we can rehearse it properly.

The feeling of satisfaction and accomplishment was mutual between all four of us. Nearing midnight, we all crashed on the couch with some snacks and a random TV show playing in the background for white noise.

“So, what are we gonna wear when we perform?” John asked during a commercial break. Roger yawned, and I rubbed my eyes. Yet another little detail I didn’t think of.

“I dunno, I thought we were just going to go on in our everyday clothes. It’s about the music, isn’t it?” Roger leaned his head back and closed his eyes. He crossed his arms over his chest, and his knuckles accidentally brushed my arm, not that I noticed or anything. “Plus, we’re fashionable lads as it is...”

“That is literally so tacky, let’s definitely not do that,” John responded, and Keith laughed.

Roger popped an eye open. “Wait, what do you mean?”

“I mean, I’m not performing in my street clothes. A performance, especially a rock and roll one, should have some sort of dramatic flair to it, don’t you think?” John said.

“What, so you want costumes?” Roger challenged him.

“We definitely need something that’ll distinguish us from every other suburban indie pop-rock band trying to distinguish themselves and get noticed, too.” John said, and I thought back to Gustav Metzger for a brief moment. Look different, act different, play different…

“Plus, it adds some cohesiveness to our overall look, you know?” I added in. “Like how The Beatles all had their skinny black ties and their weird bowl cuts.”

“Except we should look the opposite of their Sunday-school chic look,” John said.

“Alright then, you have any ideas?” Roger gave up on getting some shut-eye.

I grabbed for my sketchbook to jot down some possibilities. “One of my profs mentioned that colours like white and light blue show up really well onstage with all the lights on, you can be seen from super far away.”

“What kind of overall attitude are we going for, anyways?” Keith asked. “I need to know how to
market ourselves online, anyways.”

“The Beatles and The Rolling Stones started all nice and clean cut,” John mused. “And they’re making pop songs just like us.”

“I don’t want to be clean cut,” I moped. “I want to be real rock and roll. We’re young, scrappy, and angry. We need an edge to our act.”

“I think it’s still too early to get rebellious,” Roger advised. “We need to save that for when we’re established to buy us some more years.”

“So, we stay clean cut, and then break out of that as soon as possible?” John offered.

“Yeah, like a whole ‘good boys gone bad’ sorta thing,” Keith said.

“I love that porno,” John deadpanned, and Keith laughed for a solid minute.

Roger wrinkled his nose at the distasteful joke, but considered it anyways. “I mean, that could work to our advantage. We show up looking professional and respectable so they want us in their show, and then onstage we can be really rough.”

I thought back to auto-destruction. I envisioned myself thrashing around onstage, with fire and explosions everywhere, but that alone didn’t seem quite right.

“I don’t think I can do my drumming in a dress pants and a button-up,” Keith objected. “Unless I get to rip the sleeves off onstage?”

“Let’s not limit ourselves to that,” Roger thought aloud. “Plus, dress clothes are expensive, and the cost of getting them dry-cleaned properly…”

“Do we want to match by colour? Or dress in a novelty way?” John suggested.

Keith moved to sit on the ottoman and face the rest of us on the couch, completely serious. “I nominate that our novelty is going naked. Like, full monty.”

“Easy for you to say!” Roger protested jokingly. “You have a whole drum kit to hide behind. I have a skinny mic stand and nothing else.”

“Okay, what about something like a slutty French maid costume?” Keith offered. “That’ll grab everyone’s attention.”

“It’ll sure grab the attention of some fetishist community,” John mumbled.

“What about just full drag?” Keith added.

“Keith, you’re really obsessed with drag for a self-proclaimed heterosexual man,” I chewed on the tip of my pencil.

“It’s fucking funny! I’m not queer,” Keith hollered defensively, and John and I dissolved into laughter. Roger just looked confused.

“I know for sure that I don’t want the fetishist community being our target audience,” Roger brought us all back to reality. “Who are we aiming to please, anyways? The modern day English teenager, right?”

“Nah, I don’t want to go mainstream,” I said, and my friends gave me that look they often gave me
when I accidentally came off sounding pretentious as fuck. “Look, I mean, if we appeal to a specific demographic, we’ll have more loyal fans, and we know what kind of lifestyle to cater to.”

“Our target audience is hot girls who do freelance lingerie modelling from 18-21 years of age,” Keith pretended to write it down.

“I’m thinking about kids just like us,” I turned on the couch to face everyone. “You know, the lost and confused teenagers, the angry ones, the ones who can’t catch a break in this world.”

“Everyone is lost and confused and angry, that’s what being a teenager is all about,” Roger objected. He was getting testy now because it was late and he was tired.

“And we know that experience better than anyone right now,” I said.

“So we get the edgy, angry kids?” Keith asked.

“And the lonely artists, and the hip kids trying to fit in when they know they’re different from everyone,” I said.

“And the sad kids who’ve been fucked over?” John added on his own behalf.

“And the fuck ups who just want a little redemption and respect,” Roger grumbled.

“That’s it!” I was so ecstatic because, finally, we were all on the same page.

As midnight struck, John picked up his game controller again and fried his eyes out with blue light from the TV, and Keith sat squished beside him on the couch on his laptop. Roger kicked me out of my spot so he could lay down on the other half of the couch, falling asleep almost instantly. I gathered all my things and went back upstairs, and we all went back to our regular routine feeling more inspired, and relieved that we finally had some direction.

I changed into my pyjamas and curled up in bed. The idea of costumes gave me some ideas for new logos for the new Who, which I sketched and coloured in my book. Below that, I jotted down all the new ideas we thought of this evening, and I wrote a quick few snappy sentences about our beloved audience—angry, lonely, modern, sad, fucked up kids.

I absentmindedly leafed through my sketchbook for some more inspiration. I had all my graphic art designs from first year in there, and sketches from my life drawing class. There were a few pages dedicated to men to practice drawing muscular physiques, and I noticed how many figures I really did draw with long curly blond hair.

I looked at the posters on my wall of my two favourite blonds, Kurt Cobain and Debbie Harry. Next to them, The Kinks, with Ray Davies giving me a charming smile. I thought about Summer, who also loved The Kinks. I thought about Chris, the other charming brown haired man with a nice smile.

I turned off my lights and buried myself under my covers so I wouldn’t have to think about it any longer. I browsed the web on my phone for a while after that. I accidentally wound up on my usual porn site. I accidentally hit the gay category. I accidentally plugged in my headphones. I accidentally pressed play on a video, and my hand accidentally slipped into my trousers.
Saturday, April 22nd
7 days until the concert

The next morning, Roger was in one of those anxious moods that made him the exact opposite of Keith: he tore around the house like a hurricane, but he obsessively cleaned and repaired things. When I first stumbled downstairs, bleary eyed and desperate for a coffee and some food, I saw Roger on his back under the sink fixing the pipes or whatever, and probably the dripping faucet that was annoying us for months. Roger was one of those assholes who could perfectly pull off baggy grey sweatpants and a t-shirt, and I was really jealous. I must have startled him because he raised his head too quickly and hit it on one of the pipes. “Ow, fuck!”

Roger emerged from under the sink, rubbing his head. He stood up to get a dish towel and dry off his hands, and I realized he was wearing his JAWS t-shirt (even though he only saw half of the movie before falling asleep) with the sleeves cut-off for when he did dirty housework, shamelessly showing off his muscular arms. Every time he wore that shirt around the house, my mouth went dry. Like now, for example. I swallowed quickly a few times, then tried to play it off casually and start the coffee maker. “You okay?”

“I hope that doesn’t leave a bruise,” Roger grumbled, then dug around through the toolbox he was so proud of owning, and went back under. “Otherwise I’m alright, what about you?”

While my bagel toasted, I unashamedly admired Roger’s arms while he was busy and couldn’t see me from under the sink. I even allowed myself the freedom to look at the ridges of his stomach muscles under his shirt, those hips, further down… “I’m doing quite well.”

Later, I sat down with my bagel and cream cheese and asked, “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Yeah, of course,” Roger said nonchalantly as he was on his hands and knees furiously scrubbing the inside of the oven clean, giving me a view I would definitely not complain about.

“There’s nothing on your mind that you want to talk about?” I asked as I wrote some rough ideas for lyrics in my notebook on the couch with my feet up on the coffee table.

“Nope, nothing at all,” Roger said nonchalantly as he aggressively vacuumed every inch of floor, then nudged my legs so he could get past.

“You sure there’s nothing bothering you? Even in the slightest?” I asked while I wrote an email to my prof on my laptop at the table.

“Not at all, I’m perfectly swell,” Roger said nonchalantly while he frantically polished every already-cleaned cup and dish we had in the cupboard.

I was on the couch, curled up to read one of my textbooks, when Roger gave up on dusting and polishing the living room and collapsed on the sofa next to me. “I lied. I’m not doing that well.”

I closed my textbook, and set it aside. “Want to talk about it?”

Roger gave me a rather desperate, nervous look. I could tell he was being hard on himself lately.
“Pete, I’m trying. I’m really trying to be better.”

“I know, Roger,” I told him sincerely. I really wised I could just reach over and touch him, comfort him, reassure him in any way I could. Instead I sat there, frozen still before I made a damn fool of myself.

Roger buried his head in his hands, rubbing his eyes. “Have I ever mentioned how we don’t have any money?”

“Once or twice, yeah.”

“Well, I tried to see about renting a van or something to get all our equipment over for the show, and we’re dipping into a budget we don’t even have,” Roger sighed, then ran his fingers through his curly hair a few times. I tried to focus. “This is one expense we just can’t cut. I even tried asking around but I don’t know anyone who has a van we can borrow, and I can’t get another advance on my paycheck, and—“

“Hey, come on, we’ll figure it out,” I briefly reached out to put a comforting hand on Roger’s (very bare) shoulder, trying to calm him before he would start to overflow like a baking soda volcano.

“Pete, I really hate to play this card, you know that I hate it but I have to ask anyways, please forgive me…” Roger’s blue eyes looked pleading, and my mouth went dry again. “Could you ask your dad for some money? We’ll pay it back as soon as we start getting booked for gigs again, I swear on my life I’ll— “

“It’s no problem at all, I get it,” I reassured him. We were good people; we didn’t play the Pete’s-got-a-rich-daddy card unless we desperately needed to, like now. “I’ll try and ask when he’s in a good mood. How much are we talking?”

Roger chewed on his bottom lip nervously, once more teasing me. “I have a few different quotes written down in my room, but definitely a couple hundred.”

“I’ll get on that right away,” I gave him a comforting smile, and he forced a smile back, but I could tell that wasn’t the end of his woes.

Roger didn’t need any prompting, though. “Jackie rang me the other night because she was upset that I didn’t want to see her, and she started saying how I was the most important person in the world to her, and I couldn’t do it, man. I can’t break up with her now, she needs me and I need her, and I have a feeling I’m never going to get out of this.”

I scratched the back of my head nervously. “Don’t think like that. You don’t need her to function.”

“You don’t get it—people like John and I are romantics. We work better when we have someone to take care of and love, you know?” Roger tried to explain. I swallowed quickly and pushed a thought out of my head. “I’ve always been seeing someone, I’ve never not had a girlfriend since I was in school. I don’t know how to function alone. God, how pathetic is that?”

I reserved all judgement. “You can find someone much better, or even enjoy your new freedom…”

Roger just shook his head. “That’s what I’m trying to convince myself. I need to do it soon, preferably before the concert. But she’s been so moody lately, I think something’s wrong but she won’t tell me.”

“She’s a—” try not to cringe, Pete. “—a hormone crazed teenaged girl. She’s just playing you to make sure you won’t leave her.” God, Roger’s life must be so hard, having a girl who desperately
loves and cares for him.

Roger only looked slightly better, but he just went quiet and stared into space, lost in his thoughts while he chewed on a thumbnail. I watched him intently, trying to memorize that beautiful but forlorn expression on his face so I could draw it later. That sounded pretty gay even in my own head, but it was exhausting trying to push it all down sometimes, and I think that just connected a few dots further in my head.

We were pulled from our trance when Keith and John came in through the front door in the middle of a laugh. They were both carrying Starbucks cups which was well out of our price range, and I saw Roger’s face harden. “What’s that?”

John looked down at the cups in question. “I asked if you wanted anything but you never responded to my texts.” I knew John meant it genuinely, but Roger barely knew how to use his phone.

“John, you know that costs a lot…” Roger said quietly.

“It’s okay, I had some extra money left over. Mrs. Marsh gave me a ton of cash for setting up her printer this morning,” John told Roger as he took off his shoes and jacket.

“Wait, what?” Roger furrowed his eyebrows. “You didn’t tell me about any of this.”

The three of us froze. John cleared his throat. “Shit, I, uh, thought I told you. The ladies from that swim class pay me for help with the simplest computer things, it’s quite funny actually…”

Roger looked more upset than I thought he’d be. “No, you never told me. You guys never tell me anything.”

John shot me a desperate look, but I had no clue. Keith just shrank behind John, trying to stay out of trouble. John tried again to save his own ass. “I’m sorry, Rog, I thought I told you. It was an honest mistake, mate.”

We were bordering on some much more deep-rooted issues that we really couldn’t afford to get into right now. I think Roger knew that too, because he pulled his classic move and turned his insecurities into white hot anger. “Are you planning on contributing any of that money to the band? I know your job pays more than mine and you have a lot saved up, and yet I’m running this house and the band all on my measly minimum wage paycheck, yet you always seem to have enough money for you and Keith to do fun things and my card got rejected just trying to buy a movie ticket and—”

“Okay, okay, yeah, you’re right,” John tried to defuse the situation before it exploded further. “We’ll sit down together later and figure out our finances, yeah?”

But Roger was already up on his feet again, fretting over organizing the magazines we had lying around on the coffee table. “—and I haven’t been anywhere except for work and at home in what feels like months, someone told me that they made another Star Wars movie and I literally didn’t know because I’ve been so disconnected from the world, and I’m dating a girl who’s way too young for me and I’m not man enough to break up with her and I forgot my mum’s birthday the other day because we haven’t talked in a million years and I’m so tired I nearly fell asleep at work yesterday and cut my finger off? How am I supposed to live without one of my fingers? Do I really need that in my life right now? I swear I—“

John and Keith were on either side of him in an instant, trying to calm him down, gently coaxing him back down onto the couch. I spoke soothingly. “It’s alright, I’ll take you to see the new Star Wars movie, it’ll be okay—”
“I’m trying my best, really, I am,” Roger looked at me with that same panicked expression from the day of our audition, when his brain was going haywire and there was nothing we could do to stop it. “It’s really hard taking care of everything when no one ever takes care of me, you know? I can’t do it all on my own even though I say I do, I’m letting you all down—“

“It’s okay!” Keith tried to reassure him.

“Yeah, it’s okay,” John tried too.

“Nothing to worry about, you’re doing just fine,” I tried as well. “You’re okay, Rog, we’ve got you.”

Roger was combing his hair back over and over, trying to relax himself. I briefly wondered how soft his hair might feel under my fingers, as calloused as they were. “Yeah, you’re right, you’re right. Okay. Cool. Good thing Keith cleaned the bathroom today, all I need right now is a long bath…”

John and I quickly looked over at Keith, who looked more panicked than Roger.

Roger slowly looked up at Keith. “You did clean the bathroom like I asked, right?”

Keith stood absolutely still. John tried to feed him lines telepathically. I said a quick prayer in my head.

Keith spoke after what felt like hours. “I, uh, was just about to do it—”

“I asked you to do literally one thing today,” Roger looked like he was about to explode.

“I just got busy, I’m sor—“ Keith didn’t even get a chance to finish before Roger lunged for him, and John and I pulled him back down onto the couch before he would have likely strangled Keith, which was sort of justified. John shot me a panicked look. It was my turn now.

“Hey, I have an idea,” I almost shouted. I didn’t have an idea, none at all, but I pulled the first thing that came to my head now that I had their attention. “We, um, have all been working so hard, and I think we deserve one night to cut loose and relax, especially Roger. It’s been ages since we’ve all hung out together. We can have a guy’s night out just like we used to. No girls, no drugs for Keith, lots of booze, we can even go out dancing until the sun comes up.”

John was nodding enthusiastically, agreeing before anyone had the chance to object. “That’s a great idea, Pete, we should definitely do that, doesn’t that sound like fun?”

Keith was nodding enthusiastically, and I was nodding enthusiastically, and John was nodding enthusiastically, and we all nodded enthusiastically and waited for Roger to make the final verdict. He closed his eyes and relaxed himself for a few moments, then stood up, standing as straight as an army general.

“Alright. Let’s go out tonight. John, you run out to the shops and buy us alcohol with your secret stash of money. I want something hard and strong enough to make me forget my girlfriend’s name. We know Pete likes vodka, and get Keith something fruity and girly with a low percentage because he’s still under probation.” John saluted, took his Starbucks cup, and left to get his shoes on again.

“Keith, you better scrub every damn inch of that bathroom down or next time I’m using your toothbrush to clean it.” Keith nodded and dashed upstairs, thankful to have avoided a certain death.

“And Pete, you make dinner. Cook something full of carbs because I don’t want anyone puking later. We’ll eat at seven, start pre-drinking at eight, and leave to get downtown by nine. We’ll spend an hour at each club, aiming for approximately five venues in one night. I’ll make a color-coded map and itinerary later, but first I need to jog around the block a few times before my brain explodes.”
“Yes sir,” I shook his hand very business-like, and we split.

In the kitchen, I connected my phone to the Bluetooth speakers and played a super old-school R&B playlist, filled with those icons from the 50’s and 60’s. I only knew how to cook a dozen variations of pasta, or stick frozen stuff in the oven. No problem, I could figure it out. I watched the Food Network all the time, they made that shit seem really easy.

I started boiling some water for the noodles, and started narrating in my head as if I were the host of my own cooking show, just for fun. We had leftover chicken in the fridge already, so I cut that into thin slices and refried it in another pan, because it sounded fancier to say that I refried it instead of ‘I just reheated it in the microwave’. I cooked the noodles and drained them, then prepared four bowls full. I poured some alfredo sauce over it, tossed some chicken on, and sprinkled on a whole bunch of spices as if I were a damn pro. I kept forgetting if Roger was a vegan or a vegetarian so I threw together a big salad just in case.

At seven on the dot, just as Roger orchestrated, we were all sat down at the table, eating and joking like old times. Roger was freshly showered and had his hair wrapped up in a towel like girls do, and Keith nearly fell out of his chair laughing at it. Thankfully, Roger laughed along with him this time, too.

John helped me clean up after dinner, and then we all gathered around the coffee table in the basement. Keith was demanding a drinking game before we had even cracked any bottles open.


“No they don’t!” Keith told us.

“What kind of games do you even want to play?” I asked Keith as I sat on the floor between Roger and John.

“Flip, sip, or strip!” Keith started chanting.

“Keith just wants some drunk gay action,” John explained, and Keith started yelling that no, he didn’t, it was just funny sometimes.

Roger had long abandoned the towel and was now combing through his hair with his fingers again, distracting me. “Is that one of those games where you have to confess all your secrets or whatever?”

“It’s an intense game of luck and strategy—” Keith started, but John cut him off.

“It’s an excuse for Keith to be an exhibitionist,” John said. “You’ll probably see at least one penis tonight if we play, not that I’m judging your preferences or anything…”

“As long as I don’t have to confess anything weird and personal,” Roger said quietly. “Plus, I don’t want anyone to get all sad before we go…”

“So you’re saying no gay shit, and no emo shit?” Keith threw his arms up in exasperation. “Then what’ll Pete play?”

I threw a pillow at Keith’s head, catching him off guard and nearly knocking him backwards. “You’re looking for an excuse to whip out your dick for us and I’m the gay one?”

“It’s called tasteful nudity and it’s an art,” Keith shouted back, and we both started laughing like goofs.
John and Roger already looked playfully exasperated. John poured some whiskey for the two of them, and they clinked their glasses together while Keith and I were jokingly bickering. John later had the brilliant idea of putting on a playlist of 80’s music videos on YouTube and inventing our own drinking game. Keith plugged in his laptop to the TV while Roger and I wrote down the rules on a napkin.

**TAKE A DRINK EVERY TIME…**
- you see a bad perm
- you see a bad hairstyle in general
- you see horrendous shoulder pads
- you see a giant boombox
- someone breakdances
- there’s computer generated graphics
- there’s a bad metaphor for sex in the lyrics
- blatant homoeroticism
- there’s androgyny
- there’s a synth solo
- the singer did something that was considered edgy and provocative back then

**Bonus:**
- you see the camera in the mirrors in the video for ‘I Ran’ by A Flock of Seagulls

We instantly regretted a lot of our choices when the playlist started with ‘Sweet Dreams’ by the Eurythmics. The uncensored version of ‘Relax’ by Frankie Goes to Hollywood was five minutes of blatant homoeroticism and we spent the whole video debating on how many times we should drink if it was technically one uninterrupted stream of gayness. Modern English and Simple Minds were bit more gentle and gave us a break, but when ‘I Ran’ came up on the playlist we all braced ourselves for certain death.

After one minute, John and I counted the camera in the mirror 16 times, and Roger forbid us from taking sixteen shots in a row. Then we argued whether the INXS videos were homoerotic or not. Keith and I thought they were but Roger didn’t, and John said we should all pour one out in honour of that damn sexy riff in ‘Need You Tonight’.

‘Like A Virgin’ got a few more off our list, and by the end of the video I had knocked back enough shots of my screwdriver to start feeling really drunk.

“I want to be pretty, young and free like 1984 Madonna,” I mused, clutching my bottle of vodka to my chest.

“Tell me about it, sis,” Keith told me as he was trying to recreate her provocative dance moves in front of the TV, fuelled only by his weak strawberry-flavoured beer that barely had any alcohol in it. John got it all on Snapchat anyways.

Later on, John gave Keith his whiskey out of pity, and by the time we got to ‘I Want to Know What Love Is’, we were all so drunk that Roger and Keith were holding each other and belting it out dramatically, drunkenly swaying together.

By the time we got to ‘Careless Whisper’, we were all so drunk that John dug his old saxophone out of a box in the laundry room and stood on the couch, trying to play the sax solo by ear.

By the time ‘Africa’ by Toto came on, well, we were already really far gone. We lost the napkin with all the rules on it, so we all took a shot because the song was so fucking beautiful and no one truly and non-ironically appreciated this masterpiece. Roger was digging through the couch cushions
trying to find his phone, and John was telling Keith to keep his shirt on.

At one point I remember that Roger herded us back upstairs to get ready. John blasted Duran Duran from his room, and came in to use my mirror again to fix his hair while I changed into one of my other favourite outfits. I was a too drunk, good looking enough, and ready for a fun night with my best friends.

It was rare to see Roger excessively drunk, but even then he was still in charge and taking care of us. He ushered us outside and locked all the doors, then we walked to the bus stop. Keith and I could barely walk straight on the sidewalk, so we linked arms to steady each other. Keith also started (trying) to sing ‘Whiskey Bar’. Keith started swearing on dead people’s graves that The Doors wrote the song even though John kept trying to tell him it was a cover. I sang along with him anyways, in an exaggerated style of Jim Morrison. John provided a lovely harmony.

“Guys, shh…” Roger tried to get us to settle down as we saw the bus approaching down the street. He tried to speak very proper, which was fucking hilarious. “We must be professional. We can’t let anyone know we’re drunk.”

“Do people still get arrested for public intoxication? I thought we left that in the sixteen-hundreds…” John wondered aloud before Roger told him to shut up. Roger tossed his hair back over his shoulder, stood up straight, and walked onto the bus. “Have a lovely evening,” Roger told the driver in a posh accent, and found us some seats near the back.

John mimicked Roger and sauntered onto the bus flamboyantly. “Have an extra lovely evening,” he told the driver.

Keith and I nearly lost our shit, but I pushed Keith on the bus ahead of me, wishing the bus driver the loveliest evening imaginable. We tried to keep a straight face until we joined our friends at the back of the bus, completely cracking up. A few poor passengers looked back at us, worried. Roger tried to keep our voices down, but we got a bit too loud anyways.

Keith gestured us all in closer, then whispered, “But would any of you actually fuck Madonna?”

“I would,” John shrugged. “Young Madonna was cute.”

“Yeah, me too,” Keith said quickly.

We looked over at Roger, who shook his head. “Not my type at all.”

Everyone looked over at me, and of course I had no discretion when I was that drunk. “I really want to have her as a friend, you know? She knew all the coolest people, and she seems really fun to hang out with…”

Keith rolled his eyes dramatically. “Pete, how come everything you ever say sounds super queer?”

John elbowed Keith to keep him quiet. “Would you guys rock a Flock of Seagulls hairdo for one million pounds?” We all unanimously voted, yes, yes we would.

The club closest to us was supposed to be popular lately with students. We got off the bus and walked to Essence, and discovered it was one of those seedy dance clubs with no cover, expensive drinks, lots of girls, and three levels of dance floors.

We went straight for the basement, filled with a rougher, grungier crowd, and everything went according to routine. I counted six seconds before a group of girls shimmied their way over to Roger and he started dancing with them. Then, two more girls tried to get Roger’s attention. Then, another
big group of people joined them, with a few guys mixed in there.

John wasn’t much of a dancer, and instead he went to the seats in the back corner to sweet-talk the girls who were also above Roger’s charm. I was holding Keith’s wallet so he couldn’t buy anything to drink, but he flocked to a table where a guy and a girl were having a drinking competition and cheered them on.

I stayed with Roger, and he tried to nudge me and a black-haired girl together. She was cute enough, but we were both uninterested. We politely danced with each other for a bit before breaking off. This club seemed to play nothing but shitty EDM music, but everyone here was clearly too fucked up on their choice of substance to care.

The music bored me, however. After we were there for nearly an hour, I bought us all a round of shots and met John at his table at of the room. He had his arms around a few girls, and perked up when I came to sit with them. He even kicked one of the girls out of the booth so I could sit with them.

“Ladies, this is Pete, he’s been my best friend for about a million years now,” he announced proudly, which made me happy. A few of the girls introduced themselves to me, but no one caught my eye.

Roger joined us a minute later with an arm around a random girl’s waist who was even more drunk than we were. I guess this time it was my turn to take care of Keith since I was unoccupied. I left briefly to drag him from the other table and regroup. As we sat down again, I noticed Roger putting his number in that other girl’s phone.

We ignored the girls for a moment (after everyone already broke the first rule of the night), and the four of us clinked our shot glasses together and drank. Keith checked the time on his phone. “Time to keep moving, lads.”

One of John’s girls wanted to tag along but he managed to shrug her off. Roger dodged his girl trying to kiss him and promised he would call her sometime. Keith waved goodbye to all his new friends, and we went outside to catch another bus.

The next club was sketchy, but it was one of Keith’s favourites so we had to go. We arrived at Lost and Found and as usual, half the girls flocked to Roger, and John scooped up the other half. I may have been wasted, but at least I could tell that the crowd here didn’t provide the best selection of girls. It wasn’t as full considering the place was taking a nosedive and going out of business. Keith was tugging at my hand and taking me into a dark back room that was perfect for getting murdered in, but instead I found it was full of old pinball machines and arcade games from the 80’s. I slipped a five pound note into a little machine that gave me a handful of coins, which I split with Keith. We stood at machines beside each other, while Keith battled with Pac-Man and I struggled with a knock-off Space Invaders in Japanese.

“So when you say you’re going out, you’re actually coming here to play the arcade games?” I asked him.

“Yeah,” Keith said, eyes glued to the screen. “Some of my mates just hug the bar all night, but this is more fun.”

“You’re really good,” I told him, sneaking a peek at his score, almost triple mine.

Keith smiled. “Thanks. I’m trying to get as good as John so I can kick his ass on the N64 one day.”

John started drunk-texting us, asking where we were. When Keith and I emerged from the secret back room, he and Roger were practically dragging us out the door. The only thing they said was:
“The girls here are fucking terrifying. Let’s go.”

We hopped on another bus, determined to find something on our journey, although we weren’t sure what.

We wound up back in the neighbourhood by my school, and walked down that same street of pubs and clubs. We walked past The Cipher and I stared at the sign, drunkenly hoping it would give me some gay luck tonight. Instead we went to one of our favourite pubs. We ordered a pitcher of beer to top ourselves off, and then went to another club across the street called The Union, which was probably the best club we had, even if you had to pay cover.

Once more, everyone came to check out Roger and try and get his attention, which he gave in equal amounts to everyone as if he were a loving king to his loyal subjects. Then, like always, he would pick out one woman he liked best. The woman at this club dragged Roger back to her friends who had a large table to themselves on the upper level, with an ice bucket full of champagne and everything.

I tried to be bold, and I plucked up the courage to approach a rather feminine and well-groomed man alone at the bar, figuring God ought to strike me dead if I was wrong and the bloke wasn’t actually gay. I even ordered the cheapest drink on the menu so I had a right to be there. I sat down next to him and we exchanged some small talk. He was very friendly, but I got increasingly paranoid that everyone would know what I was doing, and that the world was judging me behind my back. Even worse, my seat at the bar was within eyeshot of where John and Keith were on the dance floor, and I panicked, thinking that they might see me trying to chat up another guy. I totally jumped ship, grabbing my drink and wishing the man a nice evening, and fled.

Luckily, this time I ran into a group of people from my sculpture class and they invited me to dance with them. I made a weak joke about my friends abandoning me in pursuit of girls, and they laughed. We weren’t really friends but I knew the group well enough from the other mandatory classes in our program. They were all very kind to me anyways, and I made a mental note to talk to them more. Although at this point, I wasn’t sure what I would remember the next day considering how much I kept drinking.

This club at least played some classic dance songs that I liked and could sing along to. Still, I only knew so many dance moves to keep awkwardly recycling, and I was curious as to what my friends were up to. I caught Roger and one of his girls sneaking off from their table upstairs, although I couldn’t see where they were going. At a secluded booth in the back of the room, I spotted John with a good looking girl cozied right up to him. I watched as John reached into his inside jacket pocket, and was fiddling with whatever small thing it was discreetly under the table. He put a small white pill on his tongue, showing the girl. John tilted his head and kissed her deeply with plenty of tongue, exchanging the pill and leaving me mesmerized by the whole scene. The girl threw her arms around him and kissed him more and John didn’t object in the slightest, holding her waist and pulling her closer. Keith appeared out of seemingly nowhere and flew to his side in an instant, and his sudden arrival was the only thing that could possibly pull John’s attention away from the girl on him.

Keith, who was now very drunk and very animated, said something that made the girl pull away and look hurt. She gave John a pleading look, who just sat back, laughing. Finally, she grabbed her purse and left the booth in a huff. Keith took the spot on John’s other side, and shouted something again as he watched her leave. John placed a gentle hand along Keith’s jaw, turning his head away from the girl and back to John’s attention. John leaned in slowly to whisper something in Keith’s ear. Keith turned to John completely and I couldn’t see the expression on his face, so I couldn’t possibly guess what John might have said. The whole exchange nearly made me sweat.
Roger finally found them at the table, and John and Keith broke apart suddenly. I took that as an excuse to leave, so I told the group I was dancing with that we were getting ready to go again, and we all said goodbye. I crossed the dance floor to go sit with my friends.

Keith looked a bit worried, Roger looked like he was trying very hard to conceal his guilt, and John just looked smug and content. I yawned but tried to fight my tiredness. I took a break and checked my phone. We couldn’t end our night yet. I was still expecting something to happen, but I’m not sure what. My brain turned to soup and I was tired from all the dancing already.

“This DJ sucks, I could do so much better,” Keith said. “Guys, I think I’m going to quit the band and become a DJ here, okay?”

“Where to next?” I asked, trying to keep us all on our toes, hopefully avoiding that tired slump in the night.

“We could just stay on this street, there’s a club a block away that we can try our luck at,” John offered. We all looked at Roger for his final approval, but he was struggling to type something on his phone. Roger only used his phone to talk to us or Jackie, and since we were all here with him, he was obviously guilt-texting Jackie.

He looked up a moment later, still looking a little distracted. “Yeah, sounds good. You guys lead the way.”

Another bouncer, another dance floor, the same top 20 pop hits. Roger got a steady stream of girls, same as always. John approached a girl at the bar, and Keith showed up seconds after to scare the girl off. And yet when Keith started hitting on a girl at her table later, John appeared to drag Keith away.

The fun part of being drunk was wearing off as I was feeling underwhelmed with the club, and I was getting tired. I started feeling self-conscious, knowing I probably looked like an idiot because I was too skinny and these clothes didn’t fit me right, and I don’t know how to dance and my face is all funny looking. No matter where I went, I never got the same attention as the other guys did. Even all the lonely people sitting at the bar alone didn’t notice me. I could walk through the crowded throngs of dancing people and no one would turn to look at me. Everyone else on the planet was preoccupied with each other and I started believing that there was no one out there for me. The girls I tried to approach didn’t look interested, and neither were the guys who I tried to approach. I got the impression from everyone’s quick, dismissive looks that I was probably too gay looking to get any girls, but too straight looking to convince any guys. Yet my friends could easily pick up someone they fancied, and form meaningful connections with other human beings. I was left on the outside of the fishbowl looking in, never being able to ever be like the others. All I wanted was to be seen, felt, touched. All I ever wanted was to do things the regular way and fit in like everyone else.

My mood dropped and I started feeling quite lonely, and I didn’t really want to do this anymore. I’d rather just go home early and curl up in bed where it was more acceptable to be on your own. A dreadfully nasty thought floated in my dramatic mind and refused to leave. What was even the point of being around if no one really wanted me?

I strayed off to the sidelines and checked my phone to distract me, hoping someone would randomly confess their love and adoration for me and save me from my bad mood, but of course there were no messages waiting for me. I was about to find somewhere to sit when someone stuck a bottle of beer in my face. When I turned to look at who the arm belonged to, I noticed it was John, giving me a warm smile and I felt alright again. I managed to take a swig before Roger showed up behind me and stole the bottle for a drink, laughing. Then Keith showed up, took my hands, and dragged me back out to dance. I will shamelessly admit that I got a little choked up again. Even when I was being an
angsty piece of shit, I would always have my friends to take care of me.

We unanimously decided to end the night somewhere smaller so we could wind down. Keith managed to convince John to give him a piggyback ride while we walked three blocks to get to my all-time favourite place. Roger and I walked side by side in perfect bliss, and we stopped momentarily to look at a club that held a special place in all of our hearts. The Goldhawk was where we all met for the first time to talk about the new band formation and get all the business things sorted. I had spent all night trying to impress Roger and even suck up to him because I thought he didn’t like me that much at first. Keith was still underage but we snuck him in anyways, and he got too drunk off of the beer we ordered and John had to drive him home at the end of the night, probably marking the start of their lifelong friendship. After that, we even got booked for a few gigs there because we could play the Motown music the owner liked.

Our final destination was instead a cute little storefront thrown together by some local artists who had been renting the space for a few months. During the day they used the space as a workshop, letting people watch them work through the windows. During dinner they aired all the paint fumes out and cleaned up, even covering the windows with brown paper. On Fridays and Saturdays they played music and invited the local college kids to their improvised parties to dance. Cover was pay-what-you-can, and it was the hottest spot for all the Ealing students to go to, even though it was so underground that the place didn’t even have a formal name. I felt proud for discovering it and taking everyone there.

The place was already clearing out for the night, but the owner let us in anyways. He even recognized me, which made me feel quite important, as if I actually made a mark in the art community somehow. The four of us chipped in some pocket change into the pottery bowl on a small table by the door just as one song ended and faded into another one. Right away we all recognized the intro to the old school Beyoncé song.

Keith’s eyes blew wide open. “Holy shit.”

“Here we go,” John laughed. Keith ran into the middle of the room and started dancing to ‘Crazy in Love’ as if his life fucking depended on it. For our own personal reasons it was a song we all knew by heart, even every frame of the music video. I think the same thought all went through our heads at that moment—life is so incredibly short, we were all so incredibly young, we’re the only other people in this place, and Beyoncé makes some damn good music.

So, us four fully grown and super masculine men shamelessly and provocatively danced to Beyoncé in a random building in the middle of London and it was one of the best moments of my life. I guess this is what it means to truly grab life by the balls and have fun with it.

I looked at my friends, their faces lit up by the flashing disco lights set up hastily in the corner of the room, and at the owner of the place who was laughing his ass off at the spectacle in front of him. And it was during a fucking Beyoncé song that I had one of the biggest revelations of my life.

I thought back to every club I’ve been to, and every person I’ve met and danced with, and all the random people I’ve drunkenly snogged. I thought back to every shitty and over-produced pop song played at every trashy club we went to tonight and how you couldn’t help but love it anyways. I thought back to my friends and their friends and their roommates and their neighbours, and my classmates and colleagues and contemporaries. Two things came to mind:

1: Deep in the back of my mind is an unrealized sound.

2. My generation doesn’t have anyone to represent us. Could a mainstream pop band break past the allure of money and fame and really listen to their audience? Could we rely on all these new bands to
represent our time in history? Or could we really keep worshipping 90’s grunge bands and expect those aging 2000’s punk rockers to know how we feel, and how hard it is to be a teenager these days?

Maybe it was my ego getting in the way, but this time I let it shine over all my thoughts. We were in the right spot at the right time. We could do this. The Who were a band of guys who didn’t know what the fuck we were doing. No one knew who we were, and we’re just as lost and directionless as anyone else our age. We have so many problems to swim through, and we have to keep growing up even though we don’t know where to go and what to do with ourselves.

John was sensitive and hurt even though he tried to be proud and tough on the outside, always quick to make a smart, snappy remark. Roger was trying to bravely lead us but he was more lost and insecure than you’d ever guess. Keith was riddled with personal problems and family tensions and felt like he needed to be the funny and outrageous guy all the time just to be loved. And me? I was a million different people crammed into one. I have so many different versions of myself in my head that they all cancel out until I’m no one. I don’t know anything about who I am, except for that I can play a guitar and write a few nice sounding lyrics now and then.

So didn’t it make sense that we should be the ones representing our generation? Everyone around us was lost and lonely, insecure and anxious, acting and struggling, creative and complex, confused but hopeful. The four of us knew those feelings the best. When I think back to all my idols pinned onto my wall as posters, I worshipped them because they reminded me that the feelings I went through were natural and human. They told me exactly what I knew I needed to hear, and exactly when I needed to hear it. Maybe it was our turn to listen to the teenagers around us, and share their feelings with the world so maybe we could be understood for once.

That was what we were meant to do. Just like my brother said to me at dinner: people need to know that there’s people out there just like them. My band and I would write the songs we always needed to hear, and be the people we always needed to guide us. We would make music for my generation, by my generation. This is it. This is what we were meant to do.

“Pete? You there?” John was snapping his fingers in front of my face, trying to get my attention. Roger and Keith looked worried. The owner even stopped the music for us.

“I need a fucking pen,” I said.

We all huddled around the counter at the back of the room, and the owner tossed me his pencil case. There was no time to find a piece of paper. Thoughts were running through my head like a freight train going a thousand miles an hour. Roger was right next to me, so I grabbed his tan arm, and wrote on him in Sharpie so I wouldn’t forget.

PEOPLE TRY TO PUT US DOWN—
I’M TALKING ABOUT MY GENERATION

Chapter End Notes

we're so close to the end already! D: i hope you're all liking it so far. leave a comment and let me know what you think!
Sunday, April 23rd
6 days until the concert

It was past four in the morning, and the buses had stopped running and wouldn’t resume again until 5. We spent all our money on booze, and had no choice but to wait for the buses to come by again. John, Keith, Roger and I lay back in the grass of a nearby park by the bus stop we were waiting at, kept company by the homeless people who slept here regularly.

“So it’s like, music for the people, by the people, you know?” I finished explaining my thoughts, staring up at the early blossoming trees against the night sky.

“Music for the people,” Keith echoed. “Like Marky Mark and the Funky Bunch?”

“Exactly like Marky Mark and the Funky Bunch.”

Roger sneezed a few times, the mixture of pollen and grass in the park was already irritating his allergies. John handed him a tissue from his jacket pocket, and turned to me. “Every artist shares stories about the human experience, that’s what it’s all about.”

“So, philosophically speaking, we’re on the right track, then,” Roger said before he blew his nose. Us four fuck-ups—two students, an accountant, and a steelworker—were all artists, on the same playing field as Michelangelo or Shakespeare or Prince or Andy Warhol. In all seriousness, it was quite empowering to know that we were all weird kids with the same ideas. If those guys got famous thinking the same way that we are now, then we were golden. There wasn’t really anything holding us back in the grand scheme of things.

“I think right now, we should focus on making music for people like us,” I mused. “Let’s be their microphones so the whole world can hear them.” My head was pounding, I was thirsty and tired, but truly happy. The lyrics for a new song were floating around in my head, nearly lulling me to sleep. To my left, I think Roger had already fallen asleep, actually. His anxiety yesterday usually took the energy right out of him, but then he spent all night out with us. I can’t imagine how he lasted that long. To my right, Keith was staring up at the night sky with a content smile on his face. As usual, he was practically glued to John’s side. John never did seem to mind. It was too dark for me to see his face, but I think he was contemplative like me.

“John,” Keith whined.

“What?”

“Give me a cigarette.”

“No.”

“Please.”
“No.”

“I have a headache, I’m gonna die without one.”

“Then I don’t think a cigarette will help prolong your life.”

“I’ll buy it off of you.”

“I’m selling them for ten pounds each.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Keith cried.

John turned to look at Keith. “Nope.”

“Why are you hurting me like this?” Keith wailed melodramatically.

“You need to hold up your end of the pact,” John told him, and I wondered what he had promised Keith in their secret pact. I guess when they were spending all that time together alone, they were busy making secret promises to each other. How gay.

“Yeah, and I’m using cigarettes as a sub-sti-tute for another substance abuse problem.”

“Smoking the world’s most addicting drug isn’t a very good sub-sti-tute.”

Keith crossed his arms over his chest. “Why are you being so awful to me? You know you love me.”

“You wish.”

“If you were really my friend, you’d at least share half a cigarette with me.”

“Go sub-sti-tute cigarettes for something healthier. Go smoke, like, a piece of celery or something, I dunno.”

“Fuck you.”

“That’s not nice.”

Keith sighed dramatically and rolled over, turning his back to John and smushing his face into my arm. “Pete is my favourite now.” Keith’s hand crept up the side of my leg, trying to feel for the pack of cigarettes in my trouser pocket that I didn’t have with me.

I swatted his hand away, teasing. “Keith, stop giving me a handjob in the middle of the park.”

“A handjob in the park?” John said even louder, humiliating Keith further. “Why are you never that romantic with me?”

“Ladies, ladies,” Keith announced. “God gave me two hands for a reason. There’s enough love for the both of you.”

Our bus came at 5:02 a.m precisely. I gently shook Roger’s shoulder to wake him up, and us four weary travellers climbed onto the first bus of the morning, earning a sympathetic smile from the driver. We sat at the row of seats in the back. Roger slept on my shoulder, and I slept on Keith’s, and Keith slept on John’s who was supposed to be paying attention to where we were, but he dozed off too. It was Roger who woke up on time to signal our stop on time.

We barely made the last stretch back home, and I was so tired I was afraid I’d sleep all week and
miss the concert. Roger and I tossed an arm around each other’s shoulders and walked home as if we were coming off a battlefield. We left Keith and John to do whatever it was they did behind us.

Finally, we made it to our house, and Roger unlocked the front door and let us in. No one bothered to turn on the hall lights. While I was untying my shoelaces, Roger spoke kindly and broke the silence.

“Not to be gay or anything,” he announced ceremoniously. “But you guys are the best friends I’ve ever had. Tonight helped a lot.”

“Platonic male friendship is too gay for me, sorry,” John cracked the last joke of the night, but softened immediately. “I feel the same way, though.”

“No homo, but c’mere,” Keith tried to pull us all in for a group hug, but we jokingly avoided any contact with each other, teasing that we had had too much affection with each other for one day. At six in the morning, it was pretty funny.

As John and Keith went upstairs to their own rooms, Roger spoke quietly and awkwardly to me, because this sort of thing was usually hard for him. “And I know I don’t say it nearly enough, but thank you, Pete.” He caught me by surprise and hugged me quickly, which was something entirely unusual from Roger, but not unwelcome by any means. I wrapped my arms around him quickly and hugged him back, and I tried not to be so damn awkward for once and share a normal hug with a normal human being. Of course, even that was too difficult for me. The feeling of his soft curls brushing against the skin of my cheek and his warm breath on my neck as he pulled away reminded me too much of another drunken night, in the back of a dark cab. The whole exchange left me shaking with excitement as I crawled under the covers of my own bed and quickly fell asleep just as the sun started to rise.

I woke up at around noon still drunk, but more oriented in the sense that I could only focus on one thing at a time. And today, that was the song.

Everyone else was still in their rooms. I went down to the kitchen and snatched a box of cereal, then retrieved my notebook and pen. I ignored my homework once more, and went down to isolation in the basement to work. I ate with one hand and wrote quickly with the right. Roger texted me a picture of my writing on his arm which got the gears going again. It was all pouring out of me this time, and I had more good ideas to work with—so many that I even had the liberty to cut lines because there were too much for once. I decided to keep it simple. I would have the rest of my career to get complex. This time, I was writing an anthem. It should be short, crisp, and snappy. It needed to be simple enough to be shouted, but it needed to be the tip of the iceberg, representing so much more.

People try to put us down, just because we get around.
I'm not trying to cause a big sensation, I'm just talking about my generation.

I couldn’t look back onto pop songs for inspiration for the tune—the sound needed to be different. It needed to be real rock and roll. It was an anthem, but it needed to be angrier. You get frustrated when the world doesn’t have a spot for you. You get frustrated when the world is selfishly pit against you just because you’re young. The lyrics needed to come off like a sneer, the ultimate fuck-you to all the mean and impatient older generations of the world. I wanted the lyrics to be clean and understandable, but not to a point where it became bland.

I went through the three inevitable cycles of writing in one short afternoon. First, the pride of putting your feelings perfectly into words. Second, the frustration of when you ran into a technical or formatting problem, or a writer’s block. And third, the slow creeping of self-doubt and icy
anxiousness of contemplation. Will the audience like it? Will people understand that? Or has my ego gotten in the way and I’m just an untalented fraud?

In a few hours, I had produced a very, very rough draft of the song. Primarily, I believe I had gotten my message out concisely: I know that my generation gets a lot of shit, but there’s nothing wrong with us, and I’m proud to be young and free. Now, to articulate that I didn’t want to end up like our parents, just like John and I feared.

But is this song so different? Am I doing it all again? It may have been done before, but then, music’s an open door.

Because we were pressed for time to compose songs for the concert, I called everyone downstairs for an instrumental session, and I promised it wouldn’t be very long. When the other guys showed up, bleary and tired and hungover, I explained the concept of the song and told Roger what I was looking for vocally. I used my electric guitar to play a rough mock of the tune I was going for, and sang so everyone understood the rhythm. We were fast tracking the whole process quite a bit, but as long as we had something to perform we were golden. We could continue workshopping it until we managed to secure a deal to professionally record it.

Roger suggested we harmonize in the background a bit more to add intensity to the vocals so he wouldn’t be drowned out by our loudness. After a bit of thought, I suggested echoing the hook to the chorus, but keeping it bouncy: “Tal-kin’-bout-my-gen-eration”. John and I practiced along with my guitar, and with Roger we managed to develop a nice call-and-answer rhythm to it, making it sound even catchier. We originally practiced with John on the lower harmony and I on the higher, but somehow it sounded better flipped around the other way. Keith, the poor lad, wanted to be included too. I taught him how to do a middle harmony, and hoped that he wouldn’t be heard over his drumming.

All together, our playing was sloppy because we were hungover, but passionate sounding because we were ecstatic for the new song. I think I actually preferred it that way. During a gap I left for a musical interlude, John and I improvised a funny solo. He plucked a cocky little phrase, then I responded, then it went back to him, then back to me, and I gestured to everyone to come crashing back in. It was brilliant, and I figured, why not keep it in?

Overall we were satisfied with how the song sounded, although there was still something I wanted to change in Roger’s voice, but I was unsure what. Even then, I could work with him privately another time, assuming my brain wouldn’t try and convince me of some weird gay feelings for him. We all packed up for the night feeling good about how things were progressing, and we all were eager to go back to bed. None of us could anticipate how crazy this week could ever be.

I curled up in bed, surfing the internet on my laptop before I went to sleep. I wound up on Chris’ Instagram, and I cursed him for being a swimmer and uploading so many pictures of him by the water in his bathing suit. On top of that, I felt even worse being reminded of my lanky body and twiggy arms, compared to how nicely he looked in the pictures.

I was still in a good cushion of time where I had the perfect opportunity to ask Chris for his number, or even simply add him on Facebook or something. If I waited much longer, my opportunity would sail away before I knew it. All I had to do was send him a friend request with one hit of the button. No one would suspect anything of it, we could have just been professional colleagues or something normal like that. I could casually ask Sam or Max for his number—they would be surprised, but also the very last people to judge me. So what was holding me back? Once more, I had all my wishes lined up perfectly, I just needed to hit the first domino and everything else would fall forward for me. And once more, I was paralyzed with the immensity and I couldn’t make a single decision.
Thankfully, before I could beat myself up over it too much, John knocked twice on my door, and I let him in. He sat on the bed next to me, above the covers this time. He had a bowl of crisps with him and I stole a few.

“Who’s that?” he pointed at my screen, and I panicked. I forgot to close the tab after freakishly stalking poor Chris.

“It’s—ah, no one,” I tried not to stammer and seem suspicious as if he were my crush or anything. I went to close the page, but John swatted my hand away so he could take a closer look at the photos. I sat there and prayed that John wouldn’t be able to see right through me and figure out that I was a gigantic homosexual and that I got off on imagining I was deep-throating Chris the other night.

John scrolled through a few of his photos. “He’s quite good looking,” John said simply, so totally neutrally and unbiased that I wanted to scream. He looked over at me very closely, giving me that stupid annoying face he’s been giving me since we were kids, where he was pleasantly allowing me the opportunity to say something if I needed to, because the bastard always knew when I had something to confess.

So, this time I decided to be equally as annoying. “Yeah,” was all I said. I gave him an identical, seemingly pleasant face. He raised an eyebrow, further encouraging me. I raised an eyebrow too, encouraging him to say what he was actually thinking. He gave up and rolled his eyes.

We scrolled through the rest of my Instagram feed just for fun, until John stretched out and sat with his arms behind his head. “The song is awesome, Pete. But now it’s making me realize that I’m old and I have a job that I’m going to need to go back to eventually.”

“Oh, shit, you’re right,” I mused. “How long was your time off again?”

“Two weeks for a fake bereavement and two weeks of unpaid vacation days. Still, I don’t want to ruin the one steady job I have,” John sighed. “I mean, even if things go really well at the festival and the band takes off, it’s not going to last forever, right? And you can hardly make a living as a musician anymore. I might need to go back to school, learn some actual shit that will get me a better job and distract me from the very fact that I can’t actually make a living as a musician anymore.”

I frowned. John was being far too sensible right now. Here I am, still off at my silly little art school and dreaming of being a performer, thinking that I can still realistically achieve my romantic artist life. Why was I just delaying the inevitable realization that I can’t actually live off it? Was I doing what I should be doing? Or should I be planning better?

Before I had a chance, John continued. “And like, fuck. Are we all going to live together for a while after this? I still don’t know if I qualify for a mortgage of my own. What if my head doesn’t clear up by then and I can’t even live on my own? Shit, what if one of us gets married and moves out and the band suffers?”

John and I looked at each other for a moment, and we started laughing because we were awkward and romantically doomed. I stopped laughing when I realized how I was going to have to live the rest of my days repressing the sexuality that I’m still somewhat convinced I’m just inventing in my head to feel special.

“Dude,” I said after a while. “I don’t know what I’m doing with my life. I don’t even know who I am.”

John lay back completely, and I did as well. We stared up at the ceiling. After some time, John said, “I only know what I don’t want to be.”
“Like what?”

“Fat and ugly,” he started. “Unsuccessful, ambitionless, stuck in a loveless marriage with no sex. Stuck in a day job, going to bed at 10 pm every night, watching my days go by. I guess I just don’t want to be stuck.”

“Amen to that,” I said quietly.

“What about you?”

“I don’t want to have to hide things,” I swallowed quickly. “I don’t want to spend my days carefully rehearsing every word and movement because I’m too worried about if I fit into everyone’s preconceived expectation of me. I don’t want to be scared about doing the shit I want to do just because someone else frowns upon it. I don’t want to be sad anymore, and I don’t want to become an alcoholic, and I don’t want to live alone because I’m too scared to put myself out there.”

Beside me, John nodded slowly. “I don’t want to be like my parents.”

“Please actually kill me if I ever end up like my parents,” I turned to John. “I don’t want to marry a woman because I feel like I have to, and I don’t want to drink just so I can show love to my family, and I don’t want to abandon my kids and send them away just because I can’t manage my lousy marriage, and I don’t want to go to bed unhappy and wishing I were with someone else.”

John turned to me, too. “I don’t want to fight and beat my spouse because I’m a selfish coward who needs to control everything just to feel secure. And I don’t want to drag my kids through a brutal divorce and ruin their family’s reputation and make the kid suffer for the rest of their life. I promise to kill you if you promise to kill me if I ever turn out like them.”

I gave John my pinky finger, and we swore on our double-murder pact. Hey—John and I had our own pact now, too.

John sat up, and we broke from our horribly depressing thoughts. “Hey, why don’t we just fuck it all and do something dumb like start a rock band?”

“Hey, that sounds like a good idea,” I answered, and we both laughed. I was still sad that John eventually got up to leave, and we exchanged goodnights. He shut my door behind him, and a moment later, I heard him knock twice on Keith’s door and let himself in. For some reason, I was jealous.

After that, I turned off my lights and put my laptop aside, curling up on my side and trying to sleep. Now instead of being anxious about boys and what that implies about me, I was now anxious for the rest of my future. Where would I be if the band fell apart? Would I betray myself by settling down with the first girl who seems like she’d be a good wife? Would I ever make it far enough to have a stable job, wife, and 2.5 children in the suburbs with a white picket fence? Or would I burn out and live in my parent’s basement forever?

God, I don’t want to burn out. And I don’t want to fade away into stability and security and ruin my life like my parents, just like it was expected of me. I don’t want to abandon my dreams just because I won’t make enough money. I don’t want to work my ass off so I can get enough money to pay my debts and then retire with no passions or hobbies or fulfillment. I don’t want to watch my final years wither away while my joints weaken and I get old and wrinkly, and it takes me longer to do everyday tasks until the highlight of my day is going to the senior’s centre to make crafts and wish for a swift death so I don’t have to realize I wasted my life doing exactly what everyone expected of me and—
I suddenly bolted upright in bed. I scrambled to turn on my lamp and search frantically for my notebook, finding the right page and opening my pen to write down the perfect one-two-punch sneer of a lyric that would complete my song.

_I HOPE I DIE BEFORE I GET OLD._
Monday, April 24th
5 days until the concert

I brought Keith to campus with me on Monday, and after my lecture we installed ourselves in a secluded study spot, and promised to work our asses off.

Keith had a month’s worth of readings to catch up on, and a research paper to start. I had a test to study for and an essay to finish. I helped Keith make a condensed study schedule for the day because I had a pretty good idea of how his attention span ran. I made him a playlist that alternated between upbeat songs he could tap his feet to, and they faded into songs that lulled you into a meditative mood. If he worked for a solid hour, he could have a fifteen minute break, where I’d encourage him to walk around, or eat the snacks I brought along for him from home. In return, Keith sat on my phone so I wouldn’t be tempted to look at it, and he even set up some weird Chrome extension so I’d be blocked from going on any social media websites on my laptop. He even gave me realistic pep talks when I started to get frustrated, cynical, and dramatic.

We went in full force, and I will admit I got some pretty good work done. Every hour I alternated between studying and writing. The pace was quick enough to keep me on my toes. By the fourth hour we both started getting restless and hungry. We voted to take an hour long break and find somewhere new to work for a change of scenery. Once we were set up in a livelier area, I went to run a few little errands while Keith held down the fort.

I made laps around the building with a roll of tape and a giant stack of posters I printed this morning. Technically I needed permission from the student union to put up posters, but that wasn’t very rock and roll, was it? Half of them were posters advertising the festival, taken straight from the website, but they can’t get me in trouble for advertising and getting them more money, right? The other half of the posters were ones I whipped up during class one day while I was bored, and they specifically advertised our band playing at the festival. It was pretty cocky, but perhaps I was beginning my inevitable power hungry downward spiral early.

When I was done that, I dug out the cup of ramen out from the bottom of my bag, humbling me quite quickly. I filled the cup with water from the fountain and microwaved it in the eating area, and by the time I stirred the flavour packet in I vowed to myself that whatever I did in life, I needed to make a lot, lot, lot of money.

I had some extra posters under my arm, and I was holding the hot cup of noodles in one hand and doing a Buzzfeed quiz on my phone to see which Kardashian I was in the other hand. I was walking along the wall and turned the corner too closely, and since I was a damn idiot and wasn’t paying attention, I collided violently with some random person like a goddamn cliché rom com moment. I made some weird noise which turned into a yelp as the scalding hot ramen water splashed all over my arm, and I dropped the posters.

“Watch where you’re fucking going—“ I snapped angrily, immediately turning grouchy as I tried to wipe my arm off.

The other person, a woman, fumbled and almost dropped her book. She straightened herself immediately. “Excuse me?”

“I, fuck,” I looked up at the woman, her soft brown eyes angrily shooting lazers through me, putting me right into my place immediately. I stammered. “Um, sorry, that was really rude.”
“Right,” she looked me over, sparing me no mercy. She fluffed her rather beautiful, soft brown hair back over her shoulder.

“Um,” I stuffed my phone in my pocket and bent down to retrieve all my papers. The girl pitied me and held my ramen for me while I gathered my papers. This was exactly like some terrible indie romance movie.

She glanced down at my papers, and I handed her a poster to read. She raised an eyebrow. “And I’m to assume this is your band you’re shamelessly promoting?”

“Uh, yeah,” I pointed to the graphic I made, made from a picture we took of all four of us last year. “That’s me, um, Pete. I’m the guitar and the nose of the band.” I watched her smile a bit at my joke while she scanned the page. I was quite smitten with how cute her little mouth was, and she wore thick eyeliner that made her look like a model. I decided to pull the line. “You should come see my band at the festival this weekend.”

She looked up at me with those intense brown eyes and I was almost winded. “And why should I?”

“Y’know, it’s all about sex, drugs, rebellion…all the good stuff rock and roll is made of,” I tried to sound cool, but she still looked unimpressed. “And there’ll be plenty of eyecandy. Not me though, but like, the other guys,” This time she laughed. “And, uh, I’ll even give you my autograph after the show,” I smiled, and she gave me a teasing look. “Okay, fine, I’ll buy you a beer if you cheer for me and stuff.”

She gave me a wicked smile, and I couldn’t help but smile back. She extended a hand and shook mine firmly. “It’s a deal, then. I expect the most expensive pint they offer.”

I shrugged jokingly. “I guess. And to whom will the pint be going to?” Whom? Are you fucking kidding me, Pete? Why did I do this to myself?

“Karen,” she told me, and I swore there was a glimmer in her eye as if this were a shitty romance novel. With perfect timing, she took a poster and started to leave. She must be a damn pro at this.

“We’re already off schedule, you bastard—” when I approached our table, Keith started waving the study schedule I drew up, but pulled back quickly. “Holy shit, are you okay?”

“I just saw the most beautiful girl on the planet and I almost had a heart attack,” I told him, only exaggerating slightly.

We both sat down again, and I dug through my backpack for a fork. Keith waved a dismissive hand. “Keep it in your pants and get back to work. You’re seventeen minutes behind schedule.”

I put the cup of cold noodles down on the table dramatically. “Do my ears deceive me? Is Keith John Moon, of all people, telling me to stop chasing after girls and study?”

Keith threw his head back and laughed, and I laughed too, and I really did try to work after that but my mind was spinning in circles. How could I be gay when some random girl who I’m most likely never going to see again could send me into a frenzy like that? I knew I was just making it all up this whole time. I was set back onto a successful heterosexual life path with a perfect nuclear family and a golden retriever waiting for me at the end.
I was skimming through my notes and shovelling noodles into my mouth, when behind me I heard a familiar laugh. I looked up just as Summer walked by with Karen. They looked over at me and I froze with ramen hanging out of my mouth like a fucking idiot. Summer turned to tell Karen something, and a moment later they disappeared out of eyeshot. Alright, so if Karen was friends with Summer, then I may as well abandon hope now. Summer would probably trash talk me like there was no tomorrow. To make matters worse, I was further humbled when I finished the Buzzfeed quiz and to my disappointment, I was Khloé Kardashian. Today was not my lucky day, apparently.

Keith and I dragged ourselves back home at around 8 o’clock, tired and starving. I accepted the fact that I would have to pull an all-nighter to finish this paper in time for the deadline tomorrow. I had lost over an hour and a half helping edit Keith’s research paper. Morality be damned, because he needed all the marks he could get. If he flunked and his parents found out, they’d pull him right out of the band and force him back home.

To thank me for editing, Keith threw some frozen food in the oven for us to eat while I continued working. I was able to power through without distraction thanks to my sheer desperation alone. I would not flunk out, and I would prove to everyone that I can handle school and a band and being a girlfriendless loser all at once.

By 11, Keith had fallen asleep on the couch, probably out of boredom more than anything. I made a coffee, and while it brewed I calculated a rigid sleep/work schedule for the rest of the night and into the morning, up until a half hour before I had to get ready to leave again. As long as I didn’t fuck it up, I could finish the rough draft and submit a half decent paper tomorrow.

Okay, so I fell asleep with my face on the keyboard by 2 am. Keith and John were hanging out downstairs and no one was there to help me stay awake. I had somehow justified to myself that I had earned a quick little nap, but instead I was out cold. What woke me up, however, was a phone call. My phone ringing right beside my face was a harsh wake up, and I was so disoriented I almost didn’t pick it up. I finally answered on the last ring.

“Hullo?” I yawned, trying to wake up fully.

“Pete? It’s me,” Roger slurred over the phone, and I started to panic. It hadn’t occurred to me that Roger never came home tonight. Now it was 2 am, and he was speaking funny. It was more likely that he was having a stroke than drinking heavily.
“What’s the matter? Are you okay? Where are you?” I closed my laptop, and left to find my shoes and my jacket right away.

“I’m not okay,” his voice was muffled. “I got kicked out of the bar for starting a fight. I’m way too drunk and I can’t drive home.”

Roger never got this sloppy drunk, and especially on a Monday night. Something was very, very wrong. “I’m on my way. Can you text me the address?”

Thankfully, I caught the very last bus that would take me close enough to him. I found Roger sitting on the curb outside of the bar which had already closed for the day. He looked fucking terrible. When he saw me, he tossed me the car keys and dejectedly got into the passenger side of the car that he had parked on the street. I was equally pissed off and concerned for him. I started the car and drove us back home. Roger sat silently with his face buried in his hands next to me.

I had to help Roger inside, and he was stumbling around so much that I had to get him to sit down on the stairs so I could help him take off his shoes. He was just as bad as Keith that one night, and I needed to make sure things didn’t turn out like that again.

Roger looked distressed under the thick blanket of drunkenness. He put his hands on my shoulders, more to steady himself than anything. “Pete. I fucked up. I fucked up so bad. I’m so sorry.”

I immediately thought back to the band. What could he have possibly done to ruin us? Roger looked like he was going to be all kinds of sick. I took him to the couch and sat him down. “Rog, you need to tell me what happened.”

Roger looked over at me, and only in better lighting did I realize how tired and haggard he looked. “Please forgive me. I really fucked up, Pete.”

“Roger, tell me.”

He looked away from me, now too ashamed to even show me his face. He could barely choke out the sentence. “I got Jackie pregnant.”

“Holy fuck.”

“Yeah.”

I just sat there in silence, too shocked to say anything more than every iteration of ‘holy fuck’. There was so much to consider in one moment, but most important was making sure Roger was okay. He looked like he was going to cry and vomit and die all at the same time. Without hesitating, I wrapped an arm around his shoulders and pulled him in. He rested his head on my shoulder and I stroked his back slowly, hoping to comfort him in any way I could.

“Pete,” his voice came like a pitiful groan against me. “I know what you’re thinking, but please don’t judge me, don’t be angry, I’m begging you—“

“Shh, come on now,” I tried to plan my words carefully. “I’m not angry.”

“I’ve truly ruined my life now, I keep fucking it all up,” he said softly. “I’m letting you all down.”

John came up from the basement at the absolute worst possible moment. He froze in the doorway when he saw me holding Roger like that, and I gave John a look that told him just how screwed we were. Roger lifted his head, looking at John. “Go get Keith. I have bad news.”
John called Keith up, and they both sat on the coffee table facing us. When we told them, their jaws dropped in perfect synchronicity.

“Oh, shit,” Keith’s eyes were as big as saucers.

“Roger, are you absolutely positive she’s pregnant?” John spoke very carefully. He did bring up a good point, Jackie could get quite obsessive and dramatic sometimes.

“Yeah, what if she made it up just to get you to stay with her?” Keith asked.

Roger shook his head, and I felt my stomach fall. “She waited to tell me until after the doctor did the tests and all that. She has the papers and everything.”

“Oh god,” I cringed. “And what about her parents?”

“She’s going to tell them tomorrow,” Roger answered.

“Is she going to…you know…” Keith looked at us. “Sorry, but I gotta ask. Is she gonna keep it, or…?”

Roger just looked even more tired. “I don’t know. I really don’t know. But I can’t make her choose anything. She’s acting as if she wants to keep it, though.”

“Oh god,” I said again. We all fell quiet, a million things to think and digest all at once. I looked up as John just started to laugh at the most inappropriate time.

“I’m sorry, this is so….” John started laughing harder. “Roger, this fucking sucks. You fucked up so bad.”

The whole situation was so absurd that Roger couldn’t help but laugh either. “I really did it this time, didn’t I?” Something clouded over his face, and his smile faded away. He looked past us at the living room. “Where are we even going to raise a kid? I can’t do it here, and we can’t do it at Jackie’s house. I don’t even have any money. I don’t know how to raise a kid. I don’t even know the first thing about children.”

“Are you going to marry her?” John asked.

“What are you going to do about her parents?” Keith asked.

And I had to drop the biggest bomb of all. “What are we going to do about the band?”

“I…I don’t know, guys,” Roger said softly. “I have to be realistic here. I’m going to be busier than ever. I need to find a steady job, and then come home at night to help take care of the baby—my baby, it’s my child in there and—oh god, I’m going to be sick…”

He didn’t get sick, but we jumped back anyways. God, this was so bad. And there wasn’t anything the rest of us could do about it at all.

“I’m not even proud, or excited. Just fucking guilty,” Roger hung his head in shame. “Guys, she’s sixteen years old. I ruined my life by getting kicked out of school and now I dragged some innocent kid down with me just because I can’t fucking control myself. I’m the worst human being to ever exist.”

“Don’t think like that,” I tried to convince him. “We have time. We can figure it out.”

Keith looked absolutely horrified still, and John had some expression that I couldn’t read. Pity?
Tenderness? I decided that, at 2 am, there wasn’t much we could do except worry him further. I stood up and offered my hand to Roger to help him up as well.

“I think you should get some sleep now and leave this for tomorrow,” I coaxed Roger, and he didn’t object.

“Good night everyone. I hope you can forgive me,” Roger sighed, looking weary.

“Don’t worry for now, just take care of yourself,” Keith patted him on the shoulder.

“We’re here for you, whatever you need,” John reassured Roger.

I ushered him back to his room, but to my surprise he pulled me in with him and shut the door. I stood awkwardly in the middle of his room, and watched Roger pace around and fret. He was stumbling a little less, at least. He even stripped down to his boxers in front of me, and got into bed. I wasn’t sure what I was supposed to do, so I continued standing there like an idiot.

“Uh,” I mumbled. “Do you need anything else?”

Roger yawned and closed his eyes. “Can you stay with me for a bit longer? I feel like utter shit.”

I felt my heart jump in my throat, and I tried to keep it cool. I could never say no to Roger, not when he asked me like that. I shut off his bedroom light but turned on his lamp for him. I don’t think I could lay next to him like I would with John, nor do I think that’s what he expected me to do. It didn’t occur to me until now how much I wanted that simple luxury with him, as perverted as it was to think of your friend and colleague, who was also a man, in that way. If I sat on his bed, he would feel it when I got up to leave and I’d accidentally wake him up. Instead I sat on the floor by his bed, and rested my head against the mattress. I was so fucking tired, too.

Roger opened his eyes again, looking down at me. He always looked at me with such warm, kind eyes. “Pete?”

“Yeah?”

“Do you think I can actually do it?”

“What do you mean?”

“Like, can I actually raise a child without messing it up or dropping it or something?” Roger asked. “God, I hope I don’t sound as immature as I feel.”

“Rog,” I reached over to pat his hand, and the touch made sparks go off in my stomach. “You’ve been taking care of three grown men and a band for the past year. I think you can handle one little baby.”

Roger laughed. “You’re too kind to me.”

“I know you give yourself a hard time, but genuinely, you’re more capable than you believe.” You’re amazing. You’re fantastic. You’re manly and gorgeous and talented and I love living with you and working with you.

Roger thanked me with a warm smile, watery and genuine and tired. I felt a pang in my chest, and I tried to get my brain to stop thinking things about Roger that I shouldn’t be thinking. He closed his eyes again and properly fell asleep this time, and I just sat there watching him.
Were any of us truly surprised about all of this? We figured it might happen to Roger eventually considering how much he slept around. I just feel guilty, as if I could have prevented it in some way. I could have convinced Roger to leave her sooner, to slow down before it was too late. Plus, now I was stuck with thinking about how it all happened. Suddenly the idea of finishing inside a woman and going through all the bodily functions to get pregnant seemed alien and repulsed me. I don’t understand how other guys found that sort of thing sexy and irresistible.

I thought about everyone in my life, and what I would do if I was ever in this situation. I couldn’t imagine how hard Roger must be taking it on himself.

My first chance with Summer—I blew it, I better start it all again. I tried too hard to be someone better than myself, and she didn’t even care. I would have been better off being honest the whole time.

My second chance, with Chris—I knew it wouldn’t be as easy as they said. He just made me more confused and anxious. I had so much to figure out, and if I didn’t have him in my life, I could postpone accepting these truths about myself.

My third chance, with a random encounter with Karen—I’m cut up, life’s like a razor’s edge. I could have pursued her further if I wasn’t such a chicken, but I’m positive Summer would convince her not to give me the time of day.

Fourth chance—I’m all shut up and I’m standing on the ledge. I couldn’t even humour myself with any possibility of being with Roger. He was lightyears ahead of me now, and I don’t know when we would be on the same playing field again. Now I’m just as lost and confused as to what I really want, and who I want to be, and who I really am.

I’m not a loser, but did I really win? Can I afford to go through it all again?
Tuesday, April 25th
4 days until the concert

After I left Roger’s room, I was feeling too unsettled to sleep, so I stayed up even later and finished a really good rough draft of my paper. I fell asleep on the couch on the main floor, and I didn’t wake up until there was a commotion in the front hallway at around 9 in the morning.

Keith answered the door to a man who requested Roger. Naively, Keith called Roger to the door. Roger came out of the kitchen in his t-shirt and boxers. I opened my eyes just in time to see Roger’s jaw drop, and then the man at the door lunged inside our house and clocked Roger in the face, sending him flying backwards and falling to the floor.

I ran to them in an instant, and I tried to push this manic old guy out of our house. He was smartly dressed as if he dropped by on his way to his law firm to casually assault my friend in his own home. He was shouting over me as I struggled to get him out of our house.

“You disgusting pervert!” he shouted at Roger, spit flying everywhere, an angry vein in his old bald head throbbing. “I’m going to have you fucking arrested for touching my daughter!”

Oh, shit.

Ironically enough, it was Keith who was helping Roger up, and standing in front of him to protect him as Roger clutched his face. I had never seen Keith get so mature so quickly. “You get the fuck out of our house or I’m phoning the police.”

I pushed Jackie’s father back out onto our front porch and threatened to shut the door. He stuck his head back in anyways. “She’s a child and you got her pregnant! You’re a deadbeat with no job, how do you think you’re going to support her after you ruined her life? Why did you do this to us?”

Keith came forward, not taking any shit today. “Pete, phone the police.”

I reached for my phone in my back pocket, which was enough to get the guy to back off. By now John had showed up, and he retrieved a bag of frozen peas to hold against Roger’s face. Outside, I saw Jackie come out of what I assumed was her father’s car parked on the street. She ran up the driveway.

“Daddy please, just stop this, let’s go home—“ she pleaded desperately, but looked horrified when her father turned back to her.

“No. You’re not welcome in our house any longer. You’re not dragging our family name through the dirt because you’ve decided to become the town whore,” he yelled back at her. “We’ve given you everything you’ve ever wanted and this is how you act?”

Jackie burst into tears in the middle of the driveway. God, the poor thing looked so worn out and tired. I can only imagine how much stress she was under this past week alone as her whole life changed, all because of Roger. I noticed some neighbours were watching us from their window. Jackie just stood there, sixteen years old, disowned, hopeless and pregnant and sobbing in the middle of our driveway. My heart broke for her.
“Get the fuck off of our property,” I yelled at her bastard of a father. I watched the precise moment on his face as he decided to give up on his own daughter and abandon her. He tore back down the driveway angrily and got back into his car and drove off, deciding we weren’t worth any more of his time.

I went outside barefoot to Jackie, her small body shaking with huge sobs. My stomach sank when I got closer and saw the ghost of a nasty bruise starting to appear on her cheekbone. I wrapped an arm around her small shoulders and coaxed her inside, feeling a weird brotherly need to protect her. I guess we’d be seeing a lot more of her from now on, I may as well start liking her more.

Once back inside, Roger gave me a look that would haunt me for years after this—it was as if he had truly given up any hope, and now he was truly desperate. It looked like he was begging me for a lifeline, any sort of help he could get. He kept looking at me as Jackie flew into his arms. This was the end of days. Roger had to forget about himself and now take care of two people. His future was set in stone. My chest tightened when he stopped looking at me and looked down at Jackie instead, stroking her hair and soothing her. He truly belonged to her now, but my window of opportunity was gone the moment he met her. Now I needed to move on.

Jackie pulled away from Roger a few moments later, and gave us all a weak smile. “Thank you for all that. This hasn’t been my day.” Roger held her close to comfort her, and rubbed his face where he was hit.

“Jackie, I don’t want you going back to that house,” I watched as John stood straight with his arms folded across his chest. It seemed he and Keith were feeling just as protective as I was. “You can stay here as long as you need. We just want you to be safe.”

Jackie wiped another steady stream of silent tears from her cheek with a watery smile. “Thank you, John. I don’t have a lot of money to pay rent or anything, but I promise I’ll cook and clean every day, I’ll even wash your clothes if you want—”

John waved a hand. “Don’t worry about it. You need to rest a lot now, considering you’ve got a, uh,” he awkwardly gestured to Jackie’s stomach, which we had all been eyeing discreetly since she got in. “You know. That.”

“Don’t you worry your pretty little head,” Keith teased, bringing some light back into the room. He gestured to himself, John, and I. “We’ll take care of things. We’re going to be uncles now, after all. We better start actually being responsible.”

Uncles—I guess I hadn’t thought of it that way. Roger and Jackie even cracked a laugh, smiling at the three of us. The odd sadness in my chest lifted when a new realization dawned; we were all in this together now. It would take a band to raise a child.

Roger took Jackie into the kitchen to help her calm down and make her something to eat. When they were gone, John, Keith, and I closed in on a worried huddle. We all exchanged the same expression: holy fucking shit.

“Now we’re all going to be caught in the middle of this whole family drama,” John fretted.

Keith looked panicked. “I feel like we’re going to let her keep staying until before we know it, she’s having the baby and one of us gets kicked out so they can make a nursery, and I’ll keep tripping over a crawling baby and accidentally kill it—“

“You’re not going to kill it, Keith,” John reassured him. “They’ll be moved out by then, most likely.”
“What if the *Trainspotting* thing happens to the baby?” he panicked more.

“None of us do heroin, Keith. It won’t happen,” John told him.

“Fine. But if I get kicked out of my room, I’m sleeping in yours,” Keith said to John.

“Do you guys think I should ask Sam to bring over some girl clothes for Jackie tonight?” I asked, already composing a text.

John bit his bottom lip. “Yeah, that would be a good idea. She doesn’t have any of her things with her.” I assumed her father dragged her along this morning simply to give him our address.

“What time is everyone coming over?” Keith asked as I sent the text off to Sam.

“At three-ish,” I reminded them both. That would give us enough time to settle down, thankfully. We invited our friends over to help us make new *Who* merchandise to sell or give away at the show. I was skipping my classes today, and it seemed Roger was taking the day off work to get his life sorted. We had quite a lot to do before the weekend.

My brilliant, darling brother Paul advised me to call my dad at lunch when he was distracted with work. He was usually too preoccupied with things that he’d just say yes to anything to get it over with. While I fixed myself a sandwich, I rang my dad’s cell phone and prayed for the best.

“What is it?” my father, obviously the king of affection and love, greeted me.

“It’s Pete,” I said. “How’re you?”

“I’m at work, Pete. Make it quick, okay?”

“I need £500 to rent a van to get our equipment to the show on Saturday.”

“Jesus, Pete.”

“I just want to do this show and make you proud—“

“Alright, alright. Can you swing by later to pick up the money or should I do an e-transfer?”

“e-Transfer, please.”

“Fine, I’ll do it on my break. Don’t tell your mother, okay?”

“I promise.”

“Okay, I’ll get that sorted.”

“Thank you.”

A brief pause as I heard my dad click a pen and write himself a note. “So, how’s your music going?”

I was taken aback, to say the least. My father rarely had the time nor interest to ask me about my life, let alone my music. He only cared if I was getting good grades and if I was looking for a job. I wasn’t used to speaking this freely around him, so I stammered and grasped for words that would make me sound intelligent. “It’s, ah, going really well. I wrote two new songs for the show, now I just need one more. It was hard to figure out what I really wanted to write and who I wanted to appeal to.”
“And the other boys? Are they working hard? Making good music together?”

“Yeah, dad, they’re great. I think we finally found the direction we want to go in.”

“And you?”

“What about me?”

“Really and truly, how are you doing?”

“That’s a good question. I’ll get back to you on that one.” I was certainly better now than at the start of the month, but only now am I realizing how much there is to the world and I don’t know how much of it I can handle. For some reason, I felt like my dad understood my young man blues, as he must have already gone through it as a budding musician when he was my age.

I heard my dad sigh and stretch back in his chair like he does when he’s about to say something quite important to me. “Pete, if there’s anything I can pass on to you, as a musician and as a father, it’s this.” He cleared his throat. I listened intently. “Sometimes life feels way too big. You’re alone above the street somewhere, wondering how you’ll ever count out there.”

I nodded, except I forgot I was on the phone and he couldn’t see me nod anyways.

“You can walk, you can talk, you can fight. No problem. But inside you’ve got something to write,” my dad said. “Pete, never spend your guitar or your pen.”

“Okay.”

“When you want to complain, there’s no one who can stop you. But when your music proclaims, there’s no one who can top you,” he continued. “But is that what you want? To be rich and be gone?”

“Well, no. Not when you put it like that.”

“There’s just one thing left in the end, Pete. It’s your guitar and your pen. Got it?”

“…Yeah.”

“Like do you actually get it, or are you just saying that—“

“Could you…maybe elaborate just a little bit?”

My dad sighed. “I know you, Pete. You’re my son, and you take after me so much that it’s almost scary. People like us tend to get distracted, to get wound up in the frivolous things that come along with our musician lifestyles. Just try and stay focused. You’re here to make music, that’s your purpose. You’re going to do a hell of a lot better than I ever will, because you’re stubborn and driven and full of fire I lost long ago. But you can’t get distracted when you’re young. Forget about useless friends, forget about money, forget about pleasing big suits, forget about the girls. Just write and never stop. And never spend your guitar or your pen.”

“Got it,” I said. “My guitar and my pen.”

“Good. Don’t you forget.”

“I won’t,” I said quietly, trying not to get overwhelmed with emotion. “Thanks, dad.”

“Alright. I’ve gotta go. I’ll talk to you later, okay?”
“Of course.”

“Have a good night. I love you.”

I smiled. “I love you too.”

I waited until he hung up first, then I sat quietly for a moment. I had my dad’s blessing, I had his confirmation, I had his advice. I don’t remember the last time I felt this proud to be his son, and now I had a reassuring sense of security.

I’m okay, and I’m going to be okay. I’ve got this.

I took a moment to let everything sink in, and let the emotional lump in my throat clear. Next, I started preparing snacks in the kitchen for our guests, and I saw Keith coming upstairs.

“Keith, can I talk to you for a minute?” I called to him.

He walked over with big puppy dog eyes because he thought he was in trouble. “What’s up?”

I wiped my wet hands on a dish towel. “My friend Max is coming over to help us.”

“Oh, cool,” he leaned back against the counter, looking at me.

“You’ve never met her, so I just want to remind you. Max doesn’t look like a girl and it might be confusing, but Max is still a girl and you’ll refer to her as such, yeah?”

I watch Keith work it out in his heard before it clicked. “Oh, she’s one of those—“

“Yes. But don’t be…weird about it, okay?”

Keith nodded very seriously. “Yeah, I got it. I’ll call her a girl and stuff.”

“And ask ‘her’ if ‘she’ wants a drink or something, right?”

“Right,” Keith grinned, proud of himself for catching on.

“Atta boy!” I patted him on the shoulder. “Can you take this bowl out to the living room?”

Next, I sent Roger next door to ask Maureen if we could borrow her iron so we would have two. After that, I sat down at the kitchen table and edited my paper one last time, and submitted it an hour before the deadline. I was on the ball today.

The doorbell rang, but not so someone could punch Roger again. John opened the door for Carol, and invited her to come in. She was wearing a skirt that was much too short, and carrying a box containing the giant colour printer that we asked to borrow. John took it from her and set the printer on the staircase, and they started talking. I hid in the kitchen to eavesdrop.

Carol seemed like she wouldn’t take no for an answer after their disastrous date. And it seemed like John didn’t mind her persistence. He got cocky and started flirting with her, and she flirted back hardcore. I rolled my eyes at nearly every other sentence they exchanged.

I saw Keith come up out of the basement and creep up behind them in the hallway. John noticed him, and handed him the printer to put in the other room, which seemed to irritate Keith. To Carol, John said, “I’ll be sure to drop that off at your house once you’re done. I really appreciate it.”

“I’d be delighted if you came over later. I’ll bake something nice for you for dessert,” Carol cooed
“You know exactly what I like,” John said all smooth, and I gagged.

Keith butt in to their conversation again. “Thanks for the printer, lady. But we have work we need to get done. See you later.”

I heard Carol laugh and open the front door again. “Well, then. I’ll see you soon, John.”

“Take care,” John told her as she left, then shut the door. I poked my head around the corner to watch them in the hallway as they watched Carol leave through the window.

“Maybe when you go over, you should remind her to bleach those roots,” Keith huffed. “And maybe not wear a shirt that shows her muffin top like that…”

“Are you jealous, Keith?” John shot back immediately, but I saw he was smiling. Why would he be amused that Keith was jealous of Carol?

“I’m not jealous,” Keith grumbled quietly. “I just think she’s trashy looking, is all. And super old. She’s ancient.”

“Of course,” John replied with a laugh.

After that, Sam and Max showed up with plenty of warmth and enthusiasm, setting the mood we needed to get some good work done. We all met up in the living room. Roger fussed over Jackie, sitting her on the couch instead of the floor, asking if she needed more cushions or a glass of water. Jackie laughed and insisted she was alright.

When Max walked in, Keith straightened himself as if she were an army general coming in for an examination. Keith brushed off a couch cushion and rearranged the pillow. He gestured to the spot, and spoke as if he had been rehearsing, which he had.

“Would the lady like a seat?” Keith asked, his voice cracking.

Max laughed. “Yeah, sure, why not.”

To complete our team, Keith’s weird friend Mike came over with a couple cases of beer, and we all applauded him. He lived a few streets away and Keith spent a lot of time there. Plus, Mike was our main drug dealer, so he was always welcome in our home.

We took over the entire living room and set up a cheery sweatshop. I would operate my computer and oversee the whole production line. John would take care of printing the posters and iron-on transfers. Jackie and Roger would carefully cut out the logos on the transfers, then hand them to Sam and Max who would carefully iron them onto various sized blank shirts, and a few canvas bags. Sam picked up all the material from a discount art supply store near their flat, and I paid her back today with cash and a kiss on the cheek. Keith rolled up the posters tightly and taped them down, and when he was done that, he and Mike folded the t-shirts and neatly tucked the merchandise into cardboard boxes. When I had some time, I hand drew our logo and name onto some hats and homemade business cards that told you where to buy our music. I figured having everything hand drawn would add a nice personal touch.

I cranked up London’s hottest pop radio station, everyone took a beer, and we made a toast to our factory. Jackie and Keith clinked their own pop cans together in sober solidarity.

We sang along to our favourite songs on the radio while we worked, and told jokes and stories. I was
having a great time, and everyone liked the finished logo I made. I based the designs after a big red, white and blue circular target, identical to the Royal Air Force roundel. It had a pop art feel, big and bold and trendy. On other designs I added a flourish to the ‘O’ in ‘Who’ by tacking on an arrow, making it look like the male symbol. It was unspoken, but we naturally evolved into appearing masculine and aggressive, and we never bothered to change since we needed a solid brand more than ever. I guess we were a group of proud guys, and we made male-centric songs. The other guys had no problem being rough and drinking lots and sleeping with women. For me, the aggressive masculine persona of the band would have to be more of a guideline for me to try and live up to.

We made a ton of different variations of our name and the logo, sometimes adding in iconic British symbols like the flag. There were only about three pieces of whatever merchandise with the same iteration of my design, making each piece rarer than the other. I wonder where some of this merchandise will end up in twenty, thirty years? A landfill or a museum?

We had slowly fallen into a break from work. John was browsing on his phone, when he stumbled upon something. “Guys, the Rolling Stones just put out a new music video this morning. Everyone’s losing their shit on Twitter.”

Okay, we were all more excited than we should be. The Stones were really good even if they were competition. I put my laptop on the coffee table and we all crowded around the screen to watch the video on YouTube. Instead of just a tame promotional video of everyone singing and playing, the Stones were getting dramatic and racy their music videos lately which always stirred up controversial reviews. I personally loved it. It was great to see bands being bold with their art again.

The haunting opening for ‘Under My Thumb’ started, and we were already hooked. The lyrics were up to a loose interpretation as it was, but whoever directed the video made the concept a lot darker. They had the band use and abuse this one gorgeous girl, just like the person in the song was manipulating her. As a joke, Sam covered Jackie’s eyes. Already I could see how some people would be outraged by some of the graphic imagery and the brief but suggestive shots of that girl being bound up and gagged. But it was just a music video, nothing more than entertainment. Keith Richards looked cool as ever, Brian Jones was mysterious and haunting. Bill Wyman and Charlie Watts even made brief appearances guarding the poor girl in her metaphorical prison cell. And of course, Mick Jagger looked utterly delectable and made me question my identity all over again. I absolutely loved it.

“Now that’s what I call edgy,” Sam muttered after the video finished.

“I can’t wait to read all those articles tomorrow about how the Rolling Stones are corrupting our children and ruining the sanctity and pride of Britain,” Max laughed.

“Don’t forget about how their racy video is actually using metaphors to brainwash kids into joining Middle Eastern terrorist groups,” Keith added in, and Max nearly snorted her drink out of her nose. I was pleased at how well they were getting along.

“A fucking marimba,” John was shaking his head. “Like, we get it, you have a ton of money to rent a marimba and record in the United States and all that. Stop rubbing it in.”

I stuck up a finger. “I firmly believe that our lack of success is due entirely to Keith not being able to play the marimba.” Everyone laughed.

We were interrupted by the doorbell ringing, and poor Roger flinched. I answered it, pleased to see our neighbour Maureen on our doorstep with a giant plate of freshly made biscuits. I nearly wept with joy.
I invited her inside to meet everyone, who greeted her warmly. Maureen smiled and put the plate down on the coffee table for us. “I hope I’m not intruding, I accidentally made too many biscuits, and I heard you were having friends over, so…”

We made a space on the couch for Maureen to sit down, and surprisingly she got along with us rebellious youth quite well. She treated us like we were smart and successful adults which was a weird but not unwelcome change to how adults usually treated us. She was even cracking jokes that I would have never expected her to find funny.

John and I went to the kitchen to boil some water for tea, and juggle nine glasses and some milk for everyone.

“Do you think we’re ever going to make weird edgy music videos like that?” John asked.

“I actually don’t know,” I said. “Music videos seem pretty tame, and they’re only like, three minutes long. I want to make long movies and musicals and fucking operas or something.”

“Oh, Pete,” John laughed. I was so pleased to see him in such a good mood today. “God, I can’t believe they had Mick Jagger tie a girl up and whip her on camera. I mean, I’m not surprised, they’re really pushing that super sexual, wild bisexual persona of his. But I can’t believe the video hasn’t been taken down or anything yet for obscenity.”

I was pulled from sexual reverie of Mick Jagger in leather with a whip. “Wait, he’s bi?”

John furrowed his eyebrows. “Dude, he mentions it like, every five seconds.”

“No way,” I genuinely couldn’t believe that Mick Jagger would want to have some sort of dalliance with men. It was almost too good to be true. I mean, the thought was fucking hot, but technically that left some tiny percentage of a chance that he would be attracted to someone like me, right?

“Yeah. Cool, huh?” John was busying himself with teabags and whatnot, avoiding my eye. “Everyone is so chill with…you know, that sort of thing nowadays.”

“Yeah, I suppose so,” I fiddled with the hem of my sleeve, testing the figurative waters. “But is bisexuality actually a thing? It seems like…um, people who want to identify as that just want an excuse to sleep around, right? Like, that’s what I’ve heard people say.”

John looked over at me. “I don’t think that’s quite true. I think that—I mean, I’ve heard that people think that bisexual people just like the person, and aren’t really preoccupied with what’s in their trousers, right?”

I scratched the back of my head, increasingly nervous that I’d let something slip. “I dunno. It just seems like, people in general, you know, should just pick a side, right? That makes most sense.”

“Why bother?” John was avoiding my eye again. “I mean, life is way too short, why do people in general need to have all these complicated rules dictating our lives? Shouldn’t the goal be just to have a lot of sex and listen to some cool music and have fun?”

I started laughing. “You’re getting way too complex with the guy who was a virgin up until two weeks ago.”

John laughed too, and when it subsided, he gave me that insisting look again. Except this time I couldn’t tell if he was pushing me to say something, or begging me to ask him something. I think it was better that we didn’t go any further, as we were thankfully interrupted by Roger sticking his head in through the kitchen door.
“The people are demanding a show,” he grinned.

As a thank you for helping us work, we went to the basement and played our friends’ favourite songs and took all the ridiculous requests they threw at us, which we humorously struggled to play from memory. Jackie asked for silly pop songs by the Spice Girls, One Direction, even the Beatles. Max begged us to do that Céline Dion song from Titanic, and Sam requested a bunch of crazy 80’s synth pop songs that we physically couldn’t recreate. Maureen took pity on us and just asked for an old Elvis tune.

As whacky as it was, it was actually pretty funny. John and Keith adapted marvellously to any sound from any generation of music, and Roger was surprisingly really funny. He had a knack for entertaining the audience and making them laugh, and he jokingly did impersonations of the singers we were copying. I didn’t know he could play characters so well. He seemed to have a natural acting gene in him. And me, well, I just played the best that I could and laughed along with my friends.

When I snuck glances at everyone enjoying themselves, my heart swelled with love and admiration for my friends and my bandmates. These people were just happy to simply exist in the presence of good company. Despite everyone’s horrible problems, we could all join together for a brief moment and have a bit of fun. I loved these people dearly. I would protect them with my life, just as they would protect me.

My gaze fell on Roger, boldly uncertain of everything except for his own protective nature. His instincts told him to care for Jackie, and I knew he would devote himself fully to taking care of her and their child. I was envious of that attention that I wasn’t getting, but I also felt a sense of pity for him. Roger had fucked up, certainly. But he trying to tightrope along a fence, and one day he would inevitably fall to one side. Roger was way too smart and way too talented to be stuck working in a factory and living in the suburbs with a wife and kids until his death. As selfish as it may seem, someone like him has a higher duty to fulfill. He could support his accidental family from the road while making millions as a rock star.

My father’s advice echoed through my head. Long after we had abandoned the instruments and we were all sitting together and hanging out, I broke away from my friends and went upstairs to find my notebook at the kitchen table. While a huge round of laughter erupted from downstairs, I scrawled onto the thin pages of my notebook with a cheap ballpoint pen, running out of ink but still going strong.

“I know sometimes I must get out in the light. Better leave her behind with the kids, they’re alright.”
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Wednesday, April 26th
3 days until the concert

I was woken up by two screams downstairs. I scrambled out of bed and raced to the top of the stairs before I heard what was going on. Keith walked into the kitchen in nothing but a towel, completely forgetting that Jackie sort of lived with us now because she was pregnant and disowned. Jackie was also sixteen and Keith shouldn’t be naked around her, but obviously the best thing to do was scream and startle everyone instead of handling the situation. I rolled my eyes and went back to lay in bed. Jackie should be lucky Keith even remembered to put on clothes at all. He was a notorious naked-sleeper during the warmer months, and he had way too much confidence to throw anything on if he was going to the bathroom in the middle of night, which works out just as well as you might think.

I didn’t want to go downstairs and entertain Jackie while Roger was at work, but I know Keith and John were hiding out in Keith’s room avoiding doing the same thing. Eventually I needed breakfast anyways. I pulled out a few books from my bookshelf, cringing inwardly when I caught myself debating if she was old enough to read some of the more serious and heavy books I collected.

When I went downstairs, Jackie was washing the dishes for us, bless her. I cleared my throat to get her attention so I didn’t startle her. “Uh, don’t worry about the dishes, I’ll take care of that later.”

She looked up at me with big puppy dog eyes. She was wearing some of Sam’s old clothes that were brought over yesterday until we could find her more stuff to wear. The sleeves on her sweater were comically oversized, making her look even younger. “Are you sure? I feel like I should be doing something to help….”

Cleaning our house should be the least of your worries right now, kid. “That’s okay, you can take it easy for now.” I awkwardly offered her the books. “Um, if you wanted something to do.”

She smiled appreciatively. I took her into the basement and showed her how to use all the remotes for the TV and get to Netflix and everything. She already knew the Wi-Fi password, but I fetched Roger’s laptop for her and punched in the password for her. The whole thing was reminiscent of a kid being occupied with more entertainment than they could ever need while the adults were busy fussing over adult things upstairs.

Jackie was appreciative of my help anyways, and I felt even worse because she was always so nice to me but I always shrugged her off like an annoying sibling. Now I felt guilty about how awkward it was to have this kid living with us who had another kid inside of her which was gross and weird, and for some reason I was jealous of her for hogging all of Roger’s attention which was also gay and weird. Okay, so, I had some issues to work through. No big deal.

I ate some leftovers for breakfast at the table upstairs, enjoying the solitude. While we were fussing over the band and van rentals and payments—as well as the imminent fact that Roger would probably have to marry Jackie and they would need to look at prams and shit soon—got my head swirling in exactly the way I needed to write more of that song. I had thought of a simple chord progression on my acoustic last night, and if I could get Keith to drum the way I imagined in my head, it would take a serious concept into a fun pop song. But in a way, a sad but energetic pop song.
“Sometimes, I feel I gotta get away.
Bells chime, I know I gotta get away.
And I know if I don’t, I’ll go out of my mind—
Better leave her behind with the kids, they’re alright.
The kids are alright.”

Much like the situation we were all stuck in now, we had to try and make the best of a shitty problem. At the moment we were all still cracking jokes and making light of it as a temporary coping mechanism. But we all knew the 16 year old hanging out in our basement and using our Netflix was a ticking time bomb that none of us knew how to handle when it exploded. But we needed to focus on one thing at a time and get through the gig on Saturday alive.

After I ate, I took my notebook upstairs to show the others. I knocked on Keith’s bedroom door, always mysteriously shut.

“Just a sec,” Keith called. Someone paused the music they had blasting. There was some shuffling and rustling around inside. Finally, Keith opened the door for me. Behind him, I saw John sitting at his desk using his computer on the giant spinny chair, looking almost irritated that I had interrupted their seemingly idyllic hangout.

Keith let me in and I sat at the foot of his bed, and they joined me. I handed my notebook to John, and Keith leaned in as they both read it. I scratched the side of my nose. “I’m also throwing this one together. It’ll be another upbeat pop song to add to our repertoire.”

“So this makes it our third song?” John asked. Keith finished reading and nodded, giving me his approval on the lyrics.

“Yeah, if that’s okay,” I know it wasn’t an epic masterpiece in any sense, but I needed to finish the three songs requested of me so we could spend the rest of our time before the show rehearsing. Plus, I wanted the focus to be on perfecting My Generation. I think that one could get big if we played our cards right. I wanted to push that song the farthest because I was most proud of it.

“I think it’s good,” John smiled, handing me back the notebook.

“Thanks. I’d suggest we all go downstairs and practice, but I don’t want to kick Jackie out,” I frowned a little. We shouldn’t be letting her obstruct our practicing, but that wasn’t really the case. We were just too awkward to interact with the girl our best friend accidentally impregnated.

“We may as well wait to rehearse with Roger anyways, it’ll go a lot quicker,” John said, and we agreed with him. There wasn’t much to do for the whole day. We were stuck waiting until Roger came back home and for John and I to go out to the recreation centre later. Plus, I had skipped my lecture this morning. I hate how the band always gave me an excuse to slack off from school, but deep down my priorities lay with our music.

We went to John’s room to try and watch a movie or something on his desktop computer. His set up was nice and the sound was good, but sitting on his bed wasn’t very comfy and my back got achy because Keith hogged all the pillows. We talked the whole time anyways. Plus, Keith and John were in that mood where they could communicate with only a look or a whisper when I was sitting only a foot away from them the whole time. I got grouchy because once more I got left out of their super exclusive duo.

Collectively, we got bored of the movie and turned it off early. They really don’t make movies like they used to. All the new stuff coming out nowadays sucks compared to the stuff from our parent’s generation. John decided to go out and run some boring errands and make a brief appearance at work
to try and talk to his boss since he was due to come back next week, and inevitably there would be piles of work to catch up on. Keith and I willed ourselves to get out and take a walk or something while the weather was nice.

We didn’t have money to spend at the shops, and I debated on getting stoned but Keith was proud of himself for saying no, so I didn’t push it. We decided to take a bus to popular spots and watch tourists. I brought my notebook in case I thought of anything neat to draw.

We installed ourselves on a bench by a fountain outside of a museum you’ve probably heard of before. Keith liked making fun of the dumb tourists who took photos of every little thing and didn’t understand basic signs and directions. I wasn’t as pessimistic. I felt proud watching people from all around the world admire all the little things my beloved Britain had to offer.

Keith played The Beastie Boys from his phone, and I thought we looked rather great sitting on this bench, scrappy and dressed in our hip jackets and the tight jeans that were in fashion now, listening to music by bands who were popular for being unknown. I sketched what I thought we must look like sitting together while Keith purposely gave tourists the wrong directions. There was a group of American girls by the fountain across from us, already wearing summer dresses in the damp English springtime. I thought they were a cute group, and I sketched the three of them laughing together and enjoying themselves for a pleasant memory. I tried to be discreet, but one girl kept looking over at us, until I realized of course she was looking at Keith. Except Keith wasn’t even paying attention. He was busy texting someone, oblivious to the girls when normally he would have already been over there chatting them up.

“Keith,” I nudged him.

He quickly shut off his phone and looked up. “What?”

“That girl has been looking at you for the past five minutes,” I whispered.

“Who?” He looked over at the group of girls and caught their eye, giving them a charming smile. On instinct he sat back casually, knowing he looked good and that they wanted him. But only now did it seem like an actor slipping into a familiar character.

“Are you going to talk to her?” I asked, watching as the girl played the next step, doing the adorable thing where she giggled and looked away, playing shy. This was normally when Keith would have stood up to make his way over to say hi, but instead he just sat there next to me.

Keith shrugged. “Nah, I’m not really interested.” Which was something I rarely ever heard Keith say.

“You don’t think she’s good looking?”

“I mean, yeah, but…” Keith trailed off. “I dunno. I’m just a bit preoccupied.”

“With who?” I asked incredulously. Keith normally never shut up about girls he fancied. The last girl I remember was the one he brought home after that party ages ago, but they didn’t really hit things off, did they?

Keith shrugged again. “Uh, you know. Just someone from school. It’s no big deal.”

“You can tell me, come on,” I prodded him. Did he think I was going to be jealous or something?

“I said it’s no big deal,” he looked irritated, and pulled out his phone again. “It probably won’t even be a thing anyways. I just caught feelings and now it’s a silly crush. I’ll get over it.”
I grumbled, selfishly making it all about me. “I bet you’ve already told John about her.”

“Pete, come on. Don’t be like that,” Instead of snapping at me, Keith was sympathetic with me, which was more mature than I ever tried to be. “John doesn’t know, and you don’t know, and I’m never telling anyone so it’s no big deal.” Then, he softened. “Fine, I’ll tell you something big that I didn’t even tell John. But you have to promise to keep it a secret, okay? I just really need to get it off my chest.”

Okay, I was forgiven. I needed to be mature now. I closed my notebook and faced him, giving my undivided attention. “Of course I promise.”

Keith sat back and sighed, the girls and the games long forgotten. “You know I’ve been trying really hard to get sober, right? Cold turkey and everything?”

“Yeah?”

“Pete, I’ve really been trying, please trust me.”

“Of course I trust you. What happened?”

“I caved in the other day, dude. I tried to phone my parents and apologize for everything but we kept fighting, and I felt so goddamn awful about things and my head was annoying me so I went over to Mike’s like I usually do. I got super high and I felt great. I never want to stop doing this stuff. It’s fun and it makes me feel good and it helps me deal with all these problems.” He paused, frowning at his own words and looking away. “Anyways, when I got home I totally hid from John. I felt so guilty, and I was paranoid that he’d find out and stop talking to me.”

“Oh, jeez,” I frowned too, but I really didn’t know what to say. None of my advice would ever work because I would never know what was going on in Keith’s head that made him think that way. Luckily, he took no prompting to go on.

“Anyways, John’s always really patient with me, and he tells me to keep forgiving myself and stuff. And he keeps finding free places I can go for help to talk to counsellors or whatever, and I promised him I’d go one day. That way I can figure out exactly what’s wrong with me and then try to fix it. John’s always real gentle with me about it, too.” Keith avoided my eye, fiddling with the button on the sleeve of his jacket. “Anyways, um, I just wanted to keep you updated and stuff. I guess now you’re roped into all my shit now after that one night, eh?”

He cracked a smile, and so did I. A rather cool breeze rolled through our square, giving me shivers and making one of the American girls squeal as she tried to prevent her dress from flying up. I always knew it, but I guess now I finally realized that I would never be to Keith what John is, and that’s just the way it is. I might not be Keith’s first choice but I’m still important to him, just like how John can love both Keith and I at the same time for different reasons. And I was no longer Roger’s priority, even though I could have potentially come close if things were different and I was different. Now he had two people to take care of before anything else. Sam had Max and Max had Sam, and Chris would have just favoured his work anyways. And Summer was just a bitch. If we weren’t including my naive and loving little brothers, I wasn’t really anyone’s priority. It kind of sucked, but I know I’m loved anyways. One day I’ll crash into someone randomly and they might just be the one, but for now I’ll just have to be patient. Plus, the future of rock and roll needed me right now. I couldn’t get too distracted by anything other than my guitar and my pen.

It looked like it might rain soon, so Keith and I left our bench behind and walked shoulder to shoulder for a few blocks before catching a bus home. We didn’t need to talk much. He let me see the worst of him as well as his best, and that was trust I valued. I let Keith take one of my
headphones and I used the other, and I played the music he liked from my phone.

When we got home, John and Jackie were playing a card game at the kitchen table. John had his favourite Miles Davis CD playing, and Jackie was laughing triumphantly as she cleverly beat John and won the game. John threw his cards down with a laugh, the way that you do when you let your little sibling win on purpose. Something about the whole scene made me feel warm and fuzzy, and I think Keith felt the same way. He had a big dumb smile on his face before he ran in to join them for another round where he declared the loser has to clean up after dinner.

Roger came home from work early so we could rehearse the new song. I texted him all day to keep him updated on our progress. Jackie was fine with leaving us behind to work, going upstairs to Skype her friends. We got set up in the basement quickly and got right to work.

I told everyone to recreate a fun pop tune like in Substitute, but explained how the song would have a tinge of sadness to it. We played around with a few different tunes before mixing two of our favourites together. It ended up being very drum-heavy, but I think it sounded good that way. As usual, Roger sang very serious and stoic, and John and I harmonized. I don’t know if Roger picked up that the song was about him. I hoped he wouldn’t be offended in any way. I sort of considered it to be my plea to him, to stick with us and not with her. We needed him more than we knew it. I certainly needed him more than I wanted to admit to myself.

We managed to record a scrappy demo on my laptop before John had to leave for his ridiculous swim class. I came with him again even though I didn’t have any work to bring along with me. I just wanted some time alone with him. I had a sense of fear creeping up on me. Roger would need to move out eventually and Keith seemed to be moving forward with his own things and being more independent. It would be a matter of time before John got back on with school and maybe another relationship with another girl, and we would all drift apart as we grew into proper adults, no longer free to our days of languid boyhood of smoking and watching movies and sharing beds innocently.

The subway was full tonight because of construction delays, but John and I managed to snag some seats facing each other. I made a point of being genuine and asking how John was doing. There was nothing more private and intimate than your own corner of a crowded subway train.

“I thought I was doing okay for a bit. Like, things with the band are going well, Keith and I are hanging out all the time, and I felt pretty good. Almost like I was getting back on track, you know?” John sighed, running a hand through his hair. “But promise me you won’t tell Keith this, alright? I don’t want him to know.”

I nodded. “Of course, I won’t say anything. What happened?”

“Um,” John fidgeted, which was unusual for him. “Alison actually rang me the other day. It was over the silliest thing—I got her a book club subscription for her birthday last year and it’s just about to run out, and she wanted to let me know so I could take my card off of the account so it wouldn’t renew without me knowing it, right? And without even thinking I told her not to worry, I’d pay for another year if she wanted. She devoured all those books because they weren’t the dumb wine mom book club books, but actual academic and influential books you know? She really liked the books and they made her happy, so I wanted to keep buying them for her. And then I heard her getting all choked up and I thought I did something wrong so I got choked up too. I dunno, I guess we just got really swept up in things for a moment.”

“Oh dear,” was all I could say.

“We didn’t have much time to catch up or anything because she had to get back to her shift at work, but I was so damn happy to hear she was doing well, and I told her about the concert and everything.
Pete, it was so fucking great to hear her voice again,” John got quiet, toying with the rubber corner of his phone case. “I caved in. I feel like all that progress I made had been lost, and I’m right back to being in love with her.”

“Oh dear,” I said again. I had no idea what to say. I’ve never been in real love, I don’t know how John felt or what he was thinking. No advice I could give him would ever work. Plus, I didn’t see why he didn’t want Keith to know.

“So now I have all that to think about. But my boss has some work I can catch up on at home this week before I go back. It seems like I’ll still have my job for another few months, at least. But Carol keeps calling me. And then I’ve got Keith to take care of…” John trailed off. He looked away from me and out the window instead as we watched the subway platforms whiz past us. “I just want to love someone, that’s not wrong of me, is it?”

I don’t know what prompted that, and I also don’t think we were quite on the same thought anymore. “I mean, I don’t think that’s a bad thing.”

“I don’t know how I can pick just one person,” I watched as John grabbed his bag and stood up. I followed him to the door as the subway slowed down to our stop. When he turned back to face me, he was laughing. “God, I need to get my shit together.”

In the lobby of the recreation centre, we were greeted by the gaggle of old ladies who all adored John, always thanking him for helping fix their computers and reminding him that their daughters or nieces were single. This week, a few of them even remembered my name.

John changed in front of me in the locker room and we joked about how, in hindsight, this was the dumbest thing he’s ever signed up to do, but we had a whole new goldmine of inside jokes about it now. As usual, I sat on the bleachers while those horrible song remixes played over the crackly speakers, and John danced like an idiot in the pool with his old lady friends.

I tried to write a love poem about how John might be feeling, hoping it would maybe inspire a new song somewhere along the line, but I think it ended up being about Chris instead. I got lost in thoughts about my friends, and my music, and my London, and myself. I really liked to write, but my inherent nature of being a performer definitely reflected in all my short stories and songs that I wrote. I could use a lot of superfluous words and weave them into an impressive collection of sentences that sounded smart and snappy, putting you in a mood or setting up a new world. I felt more like a con or a magician, tricking people into thinking I was a writer when really, I could just convince people I knew what I was doing. What I really wanted was to be more of a poet, writing directly from my own pains and experiences, but truly making every word count. I didn’t want to be hasty, I wanted to be like a tragic young Sylvia Plath poring over a thesaurus and spending weeks constructing the world’s most beautiful sentence.

But more importantly, when would I ever stop comparing myself to others and who I wanted to be, and figure out who the fuck I am?

So, I turned to a fresh page in my notebook and titled the top of the page: WHO ARE YOU?

Underneath, I made a list of things I could, one-hundred percent, without a doubt, say I definitely was:

- A bit lonely
- A bit lost
- A bit frustrated
- Always angry
- Scared
- Did I mention lonely?
- Kind of ugly
- Frustrated
- Very frustrated
- Blocked up
- A very desperate man/boy/child/???
- Full of love
- 19 years old
- English
- An artist
- A writer
- A guitar player
- Boy????????????
- Probably gay or bisexual or pansexual or whatever the fuck, but let’s leave that for another time

Looking at the list actually made me laugh out loud, but one of the lifeguards looked over at me so I smothered it pretty quickly. God, what a mess this was. At least I could be content ignoring my own existence and just being some weird autonomous vessel where I listen to stories and tell stories and simply have a good time.

At the end of the night, Carol was waiting for us as John and I walked out of the men’s locker room.

“Can I offer you boys a ride home?” she smiled an artificially whitened smile. John graciously accepted.

Once more I was squished in the back of her fancy car while she and John flirted, but this time they actually included me in their conversation. Carol turned out to be pretty funny, which I appreciated. When she pulled into our driveway, she came in with us through the front door so we could return her colour printer she let us borrow the other day.

I helped stuff all the extra cables and wires back into the box and sealed it up, and John carried it out to Carol’s car because he was nice and muscular whereas I had the physique of a weak teenaged girl, but whatever. I wasn’t the one trying to impress Carol.

While I stood barefoot on the doorstep, Carol leaned back against her car and tried once more to woo John. Keith noticed Carol was here and hid in the doorway behind me, eavesdropping.

“John, why don’t you come over for dinner?” she smiled at him. “I’m starving. I’ll cook your favourite.”

But John just stuffed his hands in his jean pockets. “No thanks. I’ve got other plans.” Which was something I rarely heard John say.

Carol cocked a neatly manicured eyebrow. “Oh, really? Another girl, eh?”

“I promised Keith I’d hang out with him tonight,” John just shrugged, always horribly nonchalant in such serious situations. I looked over my shoulder at Keith. He didn’t look snarky or triumphant, but relieved.

I watched as Carol shrugged, equally nonchalant. She straightened and went back to the driver’s seat. “Well, maybe next week, then.”

“Get home safely,” was all John said. He turned around to head back inside, and Keith fled before John saw him. I didn’t say a word.
Downstairs, we found Jackie fast asleep on our couch under a pile of blankets and some extra pillows, so we went back upstairs to leave her be. I found it peculiar that she wasn’t sleeping in Roger’s room, and I shouldn’t have felt so pleased.

Upstairs, Roger was putting away some freshly washed sheets back into the linen closet. He gave us a tired smile. “How was it tonight, John?”

“Superb,” John jokingly flexed his muscles.

Keith casually came out of his room as if he was seeing us for the first time. “Oh, you’re back.”

“Say, John,” I teased. “It’s been a few weeks. How have your fitness goals been coming along?”

“I told Roger I wanted to lose one pound by the end of the month,” John deadpanned.

“Hey, did you hear about the guy who lost fifteen pounds in one week?” Keith said. “All it took him was one hour in a British casino!”

Roger bent down to find the scale at the bottom of the linen closet, and I wasn’t subtle about looking. Roger set the scale down in front of John’s feet. “Go ahead, then.”

So, John stepped on. We all crowded around and watched the digital number spin and spin out a triple digit sum. John bent over to look closer. “It’s exactly the same as when I started.”

We all cheered for our best friend, because John was perfect and didn’t need to change anyways. We even jokingly went in for a group hug and only made a few gay jokes afterwards, which was a giant step forward for us. There was something pretty damn funny about this moment right here; how it’s in nature for some things to change, and others things stay the same forever.
We spent all day cooped up in the basement rehearsing. Once more I skipped my classes, and Roger phoned into work sick. The stakes were high, and we needed to be serious and focused.

It wasn’t like we had never performed together or anything, but this felt different. Maybe it was because it was all new—we certainly weren’t the same people who formed The Detours. All of us have grown significantly, and now we were closer than ever, although there were more secrets and acting between us. Nevertheless, we were a new band, and we had a chance to do things differently. This time, we would get it right.

I could definitely tell a difference in Keith’s behaviour. Somehow he had an even harder time focusing, and I suspected it was because he was newly sober and had nothing to get his thoughts in order. Still, his heart was in the right place and I could tell he was really trying to focus. John was more at ease now that we were listening to his input and including him in the decision making processes, which made him more agreeable to work with. Roger was a new kind of focused too. There was no room for him to slack off or mess up in the slightest. He was still anxious about the heavy weight on his shoulders, but somehow had matured even more. And me? I had found my direction again, and I was going to go full steam ahead.

We rehearsed our set, and how Roger would introduce us and each song. Then, a mandatory plug on where to find us online for more news and pictures and all that. I coached Roger on how to act, too. I knew he felt better when he knew what to say and had time to practice his lines. I was the exact opposite, and even though I didn’t understand, I would have to toss it aside and help him anyways.

To the others, I said that we already had pretty distinct personalities as it was, and we should put that into our work. It was the honest thing to do. Why would we try and convince our audience otherwise? So, Roger would be our stoic and heroic leader, John would be cool and charming, Keith would be puzzling and lovable, and I would just move around as much as I could onstage to get some attention.

We ran through the whole thing a few times, but we only had four songs and we didn’t want to exhaust our love for them so early. After the fifth time, it was John who had the brilliant idea to film ourselves performing. It would serve as practice for us knowing that we only had one shot, but we could also look back at it later and see how we could improve. Then, we could upload the video online to serve as a teaser and get more people to come to the show on Saturday. We needed all the extra advertising we could get now that our old brand as the Detours was long gone.

John had a pretty professional camera, and the goofy candid videos we took to test proved that the quality was pretty damn good. We used my microphone to record an even better version of the sound, placing the mic on the middle of the floor to pick up equal sound from both amps. Roger tidied the basement quickly so we didn’t look too slobbish on camera, and Keith and I brought a lamp down from the living room to give us more light.

We finally got everything all set up and stood in our spots on our makeshift stage. John hit the timer and ran back to his place, and we watched the flash on the camera count us down before starting to record. The second we were cued, Roger froze.
We stood in incredibly awkward silence, waiting for Roger to say something, anything. I glanced over at John, who looked frustrated. Roger stared at the camera, shied into silence.


“I-I don’t know what to say,” he said, unable to stop staring at the camera as if it were going to devour him whole.

“Let’s just start again,” Keith sighed.

“It’s okay, I can just edit this out later,” John told us. “Go on, Rog. Just like we rehearsed.”

“Remember, just introduce the band name, then us, then the song. Then I’ll cue us in,” I reminded him gently.

Roger swallowed quickly and nodded. “Okay. Um. That’s Pete on guitar, and John on bass. And Keith Moon on the drums. And this is our band The Who—“

“You forgot to introduce yourself,” John whispered.

“F-fuck, um, I’m Roger Daltrey, and this is our band The Who, and this is our song My Generation, and this is us starting the song. Fuck. One, two three, four—“

John nodded at me, and I started playing anyways. The other three of us plowed through the intro with a wall of sound that I prayed the little microphone would pick up. Roger missed his intro by two beats, and tried to sing smooth and cool like in our other songs. ”P-people try to put us down…”

”Talkin’ bout my generation…” John and I joined him in harmony, but Roger was already waving his hands, getting us to stop. He marched up to the camera and turned it off.

“We have to restart. I stuttered,” Roger looked incredibly frustrated and we had only reached the second line.

John and I exchanged a look, then agreed to let him try again.

The timer ticked down, and Roger cleared his throat. “Hello. I am Roger Daltrey, and this is my band, The Who. And this is our song, My Generation.”

John cleared his throat.

“Oh. Um, in our band, we have John and Pete on the guitar—well, John on the bass to be specific, and Keith on percussion, and I’m Roger Daltrey and I’m on vocals. And this is My Generation by the Who.”

Keith, John, and I plowed through the intro, and Roger came in late again but with no stutter.

”The things they do look awful c-cold…” Roger sang much too pretty for a rock song, and less pretty was his reaction to another nervous stutter. “Fuck this.”

“It’s okay,” John reassured him. “We’ll try again. It’s okay.”

John restarted the camera while Roger ignored me and took some deep breaths. Keith sat at the back, looking bored and fidgeting.

The timer hadn’t finished counting down when Roger started talking. “This is My Generation by The Who. You can find us on YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook. I’m Roger, that’s John and Keith
and Pete, and this is My Generation. By the Who.”

Keith, John, and I plowed through the intro. Roger came in on time, and we got up to the chorus. "This is my generation, this is my generation, baby…”

Now that we were really getting into it, I tried to kick my leg up dramatically but I accidentally hit the coffee table pushed up against the wall, and that startled Roger and threw off his count.

"Why don’t you all fade away…” he sang, his face immediately scrunching up with frustration.

“Talkin’ bout my g—“ John and I tried to move past it anyways, but Roger kicked his mic stand over in anger.

“Motherfucker!” Roger yelled. “Why can’t I fucking say the goddamn fucking piece of shit lyrics—“

Keith was howling with laughter, and Roger swung around and tried to pummel Keith, but I pulled him back by the arm while John quickly turned off the camera. Before I found the words to console Roger, an idea popped into my head, and it was such a delicious idea that I couldn’t possibly ignore it. I looked at John and nodded at him, silently instructing him to turn the camera back on. John looked confused, but complied.

“Pete, I can’t fucking do this, I don’t care about this stupid ass song, I don’t want to do it anymore —“ I could practically see the steam coming out of his ears. I pushed his shoulder, taunting him.

“What, and just give up like that? Like a fucking pussy?”

Roger glared. “I’m not a fucking—“

I pushed his shoulder again, harder. “Yeah you are. A real man would just power through with it, own up to his mistakes.”

Keith hid behind his drum kit. Roger was seething. “Fuck you, Pete, you don’t know a single—“

“What? I don’t know a single what?” I pushed him again, and he pushed me back. “If you think you’re so fucking good, just sing already. Just sing, damnit. Stutter as much as you can because you’re fucking angry, because you have something to say, and you’re not a pussy and you’re not gonna get all embarrassed.”

“Fuck you—“ Roger spat out again, confused and offended.

“Fuck you!” I shouted back, then looked at John and Keith and nodded. “One, two, three, four!”

The three of us played for our lives. I shouted at Roger over the roar of my guitar. “Sing, you bastard, sing!”

Out of sheer spite for me alone, Roger picked up his fallen mic stand and gripped it hard, roaring into the microphone three counts too early with the sheer intensity the song finally needed. "People try to put us d-down!"

"Talkin’ bout my generation…” John and I sang a bit too fast, but he was looking at me, amazed at what I had created.

"Just because we get around!” Something had broken in Roger’s voice, like we had ripped away the smooth and clear plastic coating keeping him good and clean.

"Talkin’ bout my generation…”
"The things they do look awful c-c-old!" Roger now sang with a growl in his voice that even made me blush.

"Talkin’ ‘bout my generation…”

Roger sang viciously: "I hope I die before I get old."

Through our new burst of anger-fueled energy, we tore through the song in half the time, skipping over the instrumental solo because we were too damn excited. When we reached the end, I couldn’t help but cheer in triumph. The song finally fucking made sense.

“That was fucking great!” John said, amazed, after he turned off the camera. Keith cheered from behind his kit.

Beside me, Roger caught his breath. “Did you do that on purpose, Pete?”

I felt meek. “Yeah. Sorry about that.”

“It sure fucking worked. I don’t know why I got so upset after disappointing you like that,” Roger rolled his eyes, making it a joke. But truly, it was so gay I almost fainted. This was one of the best moments of my life. “Don’t you ever dare try that again, Townshend.”

“I won’t,” I grinned, planning fully well to do it again.

We all squished in together on the couch and watched that last take again, and it gave me shivers. We were truly in our element. Roger looked gorgeous and passionate, John’s fingers moved at lightning speed, and at some parts it was impossible to take your eyes off of Keith to admire how crazy he worked behind that kit, always performing as if it were the real thing. I didn’t even bother looking at myself on the video because I didn’t want to dent my self-esteem anymore as it is.

“I think I can do that again for the concert, no problem. I’ve got a lot of anger stored away,” Roger told us. “But I don’t think I can recreate that again tonight on video. I’m exhausted.”

We decided not to upload that take, mainly because I was harassing Roger in the beginning and I felt bad about it. Later on, though, I would save it on a hard drive for years to come, keeping it as a Who relic.

“Let’s do it one last time now that Roger’s finally got it,” I instructed. “But keep the stutter.”

“What? It sounds awful,” Roger protested. “It’s like I don’t even know my own song.”

Keith gave me a funny look. “Yeah, I kinda have to agree with him on that one. It sounds weird.”

“Wouldn’t we get in trouble for mocking people with speech impediments anyways?” John asked.

“But get this,” I turned to everyone. “It works. We’re young, we’re angry, we can’t even speak properly without stuttering. I think it represents everything the song is going for. We’re unprepared and childish and foolishly brave, angrily protesting that we deserve respect. The stutter just ties that character all together.”

“It sounds like when I got too high and stuttered all over the damn place,” Keith rolled his eyes.

“And that’s another thing teenagers do. We get frustrated and do drugs and get drunk for fun because there’s nothing else to do. The stutter is a nod to all of that,” I was triumphant that it was all coming together.
Keith was looking at me like when he knew I was being pretentious, but John nodded. “I hate to admit, but that’s kind of clever.”

Roger had stayed quiet, looking thoughtful. “Yeah, I guess I can do it. But do you think people will get it?”

“That’s why we do the video now, and really push everyone to see it tonight and tomorrow. We’ll see what kind of comments people leave, and if they don’t get it, we’ll scrap it,” I was getting excited. “Come on, let’s try it.”

Roger chewed at his bottom lip, which I found distracting. He reached over for my notebook and handed it to me so I could find the page with the lyrics. “Alright, Pete, I’ll give it a try. When should I put in the stutter? And how exaggerated?”

The four of us spoke the lyrics and chose when it would sound natural as well as when it would sound best. I think Keith started warming up to the idea now that we were forming a character for Roger to play in this song. The character would perfectly represent our generation: angry and uncoordinated, prone to messing up and looking like a fool, but trying damn hard anyways to get somewhere in this unfair world.

We rehearsed it again with the stutters, and Roger relaxed again now that he had a fun acting challenge to pull off. For the last time that night, we set up in front of the camera after John set the timer.

Roger cleared his throat, looked directly into the camera, and spoke, “This is My Generation, by John, Keith, Pete, and Roger. We’re The Who. One, two, one-two-three-four—“
THE WHO uploaded a new photo — with Pete Townshend.
27 April

Our lead guitarist and principal songwriter, Pete, hard at work!
Max St. Clair
That's my boy!
27 April · Like · 2
chapter 28

Friday, April 28th
1 day until the show

Last night after I went to bed, John edited the video and made it look all nice, and then Keith uploaded it to our YouTube channel. Even though it was late, Keith pushed it on all our social media as soon as possible. He even woke up early to send the link around, even asking our other musician friends to check it out and share it. By the time I woke up at noon, we had a whole PR station set up at the dining room table with laptops and phones everywhere. Judging by the triumphant look on Keith’s face, I safely assumed things were going well.

“We’re up to over four thousand views already,” John filled me in as I poured a cup of coffee.

“Pete, I have some good news, and I have some bad news,” Keith told me with a mischievous smile, and I knew I was screwed. “Good news? Your boyfriend Ray Davies retweeted our link this morning and we got a huge spike in followers.”

“Oh my god,” This was glorious. Ray Davies heard my song and liked it enough to share it with his fans. Maybe this was the start of the love story we’d tell at our wedding. “That’s incredible! But what’s the bad news?”

“I logged into your personal Twitter to send him the tweet because Ray likes you the best. I didn’t mess around or anything, don’t worry,” Keith assured me. “But you got a ton of new followers because of it, so watch what you say.”

“Oh my god,” I repeated. “Wait, how did you figure out my password?”

Keith took a bite of the toasted bagel John made him. “It took me, like, three tries to crack it. You’re the least subtle person in the world. Also, I’m totally judging you for setting that as your password, you naughty thing.”

I felt my face go red, and I immediately went into my phone to change my password.

Roger went to work today but phoned us on his lunch break, and we caught him up on all the news. Keith maintained all our accounts while we were red hot. He responded and thanked everyone personally for nice comments, deleted the ugly comments, and kept cracking jokes as all the attention poured in. We also got a lot of buzz by tagging everything with the name of the music festival, which was getting increasingly popular as the day of the concert approached. Keith was also monitoring the comments and said he would give us a full report in a few hours when Roger came home. I was quite proud of him for taking this so seriously, so I made sure to tell him. He glowed under the approval, and I think it was a good step forward for the both of us.

Jackie came down afterwards, and we tried not to be awkward around her. She had a funny way of approaching us as if she were an adult just like us, which I found ridiculous, but I had to commend her boldness. On the other hand, she was just like the people we were trying to make music for, right? She just wanted to be included and taken seriously. I would be a hypocrite if I treated her differently for that.

She sat down at the empty end of the table with us and a bowl of cereal. John cleared his throat and asked her kindly, “What’re you up to today, Jackie?”
She finished chewing. “I was just wondering if I could go out today? I wanted to go to the library, and mum said I could come by and pick up some things while dad’s at work, and my friend said I could stay round hers for the night so you guys can rehearse in peace…”

John, Keith, and I looked at each other. I turned to Jackie. “Um, you can do whatever you want. You don’t need to ask us or anything. It’s a, uh, free country or whatever.”

Jackie gave me a look I didn’t quite understand, then shook her head, embarrassed. “Right. Sorry, it’s habit.”

I briefly wondered if her parents monitored every aspect of her life to the point where she couldn’t leave the house without permission. Even worse, I wondered if Roger controlled her too, out of his self-conscious nature. I felt pretty bad for her. “So you and your mum are on speaking terms and stuff, then?”

Jackie smiled. “Yeah, thank god. She’s just worried about me. She’s taking me to all these appointments coming up, to get bloodwork and ultrasound scans and everything. It’s really overwhelming.”

Across the table, Keith cringed, looking ill. John kicked his leg under the table, and Keith’s face softened again.

“I’m, uh, happy to hear that,” I tried to sound genuine, but this was so goddamn awkward. I didn’t want to be thinking about her ultrasounds and all that personal uterus stuff.

Jackie didn’t get the hint and kept oversharing. “It’s weird to have her pass on all this advice to me and everything. I’m getting really sick in the mornings but I don’t tell Rog because he needs to sleep and I’d hate to wake him up. He’s been kind of weird lately. I guess he’s stressed because of the concert. But I’ll be happy when it’s all over with. He said we can start looking for flats soon. I’m so excited. We can finally live together, just like I always dreamed about, with a garden and a dog and all our kids running around in the yard. And we can be a proper husband and wife, and travel the world together, and he’ll bring me home flowers every day after work and I’ll spend all day cooking a lovely dinner for him, and…”

Jesus fucking Christ almighty. I stood up and gathered everyone’s breakfast dishes so I would have an excuse to leave the table and dodge the giant, monstrous elephant in the room and let John and Keith deal with her this time. The poor thing hardly knew Roger at all—he would never, ever, in a million years settle down and play the role of the perfect, monogamous husband. It was only a matter of time before little Jackie learned this the hard way and had her heart shattered into a million pieces, and eventually she would be raising their kid on her own. The thought of this made me angry at Jackie for being so naïve, and Roger for being so inherently selfish and inconsiderate, and angry at them both for pretending their relationship was going to work out and leaving us to deal with all the awkward in between bits.

It was only a short matter of time before John and Keith jumped ship and avoided the problem entirely just like I had. John even let Jackie borrow his Oyster card so she would get out of the house and leave us alone. We waited in the hallway as she laced up her fashionable trainers that she decorated with coloured markers, and grabbed her pink cell phone and reapplied her cheap lip gloss for a burst of adolescent confidence. We bid her hearty farewells as she left out the front door. The second the door was pulled shut, we all let out a desperate, disheartened sigh.

“This is so fucked up,” Keith shook his head. “I don’t want to be involved in this shit in any way.”

“Someone’s gotta tell her,” John looked chagrin. “She’s a sweet kid, but she’s trying to make the
perfect husband out of a slutty, brawling guy who’s lost in his own head. No offence to Roger, of course. I love him. He’s a bastard, but I love him.”

We all nodded in agreement.

“I’d be willing to play the whistleblower if you all help me flee the country and assume a new identity afterwards,” I joked.

“A whistleblower? You’d be a fucking kamikaze pilot, dude,” John was so fed up that he started to laugh. “This is so messy. But I gotta be on Roger’s side for this one, for the sake of my career.”

The three of us headed downstairs, figuring we’d rehearse the instrumental section of the songs for a bit. I could sing if we needed. As we went downstairs, Keith threw his hands up. “Look, all I’m saying is, this whole thing could be solved if she just popped the kid out and put it up for adoption. Don’t ask, don’t tell.”

“Keith!” I could hardly believe him sometimes. “That’s not how it works. There’s a thing called parental love, and biological loyalty….not that I’d know anything about having loving parents, but whatever.”

“You are such a fucking drama queen,” John threw his head back and laughed. He went right to his bass and started plucking some notes to warm up.

I grabbed my guitar from the stand and tuned it, already knowing how to do it by ear. “Maybe I am. But at least I have the capability for love and human compassion and nurturing. I have a feeling we should keep Keith away from kids until he has that.”

“Don’t worry about me,” Keith rolled his eyes, climbing behind the mess of boxes and other assorted junk to get to his drum stool. “Unlike Roger, I can put a fucking condom on. And my pull-out timing is impeccable.”


“Look, sometimes it’s just as great to cum all over her tits and—“

John threw a pillow from the couch back at Keith, clattering the cymbals and making a crash of noise and getting him to shut up. “You’re nasty.”

“No more talk about having sex with women, that’s disgusting,” I put the guitar strap on. “Let’s start with—“

“Wait, so you’re saying you find sex with women gross, or…?” John asked, a shit-eating grin on his face.

I rolled my eyes out of humiliation. “John, eat my d—“ I quickly stopped myself, clasping a hand over my mouth. “Oh god, everything is coming out really gay—“

“Coming out?” Keith howled from behind his drum kit.

Now John and I were laughing so hard that tears were threatening to stream out. Okay, it was actually really funny. And maybe I might be gayer than I initially knew. Maybe I didn’t have to be so self-conscious about it all the time. I should be able to ease into this territory with my friends. I’d rather be on the receiving end—fuck, poor phrasing— rather, I’d want be the punchline of one of Keith’s shitty and mildly homophobic jokes, because in a way that meant they’d hypothetically accept that about me enough to make a light-hearted joke about it. The worst case scenario would be
abandonment after a terrible outrage, but my friends weren’t those kinds of people. They really do love me.

We practiced solidly until Roger came home, interrupting us. Keith was already dragging him back upstairs to the kitchen table to show him the analytics for the YouTube video. Roger didn’t even ask where Jackie was until later.

We all crowded around Keith’s laptop. In a few hours, the view count had doubled to eight thousand hits in a few hours. It wasn’t astronomical, but it was definitely going around quicker than I expected.

“Now, it’s almost time for people to be getting home from work and school, they’re tired, they just want to sit down and relax and be fed tailored content directly to their brains, right?” Keith asked us. We all stared back at the weird, weird kid. “So share the link to your own Facebook feeds, then maybe send out another tweet with the link. Oh, and Pete, make sure you share the video to your gay-ass poetry blog thing, yeah?”

“It’s called prose, you dick,” I defended myself. John just snorted. “Fine, then you have to put it on your wannabe edgy comedy blog too. Don’t think I don’t know about it.”

“My fans don’t know my true identity,” Keith looked at me as if I were an idiot. “That would be giving them the biggest hint, they’d find me out.”

“Then reblog it from me so it’s less suspicious,” I shrugged, but really I just wanted more followers. I also posted my photography too, and personally I think I should be more popular. My content is great.

“I only do text-posts, I would ruin years’ worth of legacy—” Keith wailed dramatically, but Roger quickly shushed him.

“What about the comments people have been leaving?” Roger asked. Keith waved us all away from him.

“Yeah, yeah, I was getting to that. Go away, I’ll read them to you. I don’t want anyone to read something mean and then cry themselves to sleep tonight, that’s fucking weird,” Keith announced. We all moved our chairs back to our regular spots. Keith cleared his throat and cracked his knuckles. “Okay. McLennonShipper447 says that this song is a jam. We’re off to a good start, then. Most people can agree that My Generation is a banger, and luckily not all of these people have weird Beatles usernames.”

He continued. “This guy says that the mic clipped a few times because we were so loud, and he thinks that it’s ‘fucking epic’.”

John and I grinned, since kept trying to be louder than the other.

“There’s a lot of buzz about the line ‘I hope I die before I get old’. Some people think it’s distasteful but most people think it’s pretty rock and roll. A lot of people just left a comment quoting that line too.”

“Pete, make a note somewhere. We need to put that on a t-shirt or something. That’ll be our thing,” Roger suggested. He had a good point, so I wrote a note on my phone.

Keith kept reading. “You’d be surprised at how many people are attempting to analyse your lyrics, Pete. Good for you. There was even a bit of a debate over some meanings.”
I felt a wave of excitement after hearing that. People were actually taking my work seriously!

John saw my face light up, and wagged a finger. “Don’t go correcting them, now. Leave them guessing for years.”

“Is there anything about me?” Roger asked quietly.

“Oh yeah, I wrote it down,” Keith was even taking notes in an actual notebook. He was really taking this seriously, wasn’t he?

“There were, I shit you not, seven instances of people saying they wanted to have your babies. I puked a little, but I thought you’d like to know. I counted over fifteen comments on how, I quote, ‘sexy’ you are, and various iterations of how much people wanted to fuck you.”

Roger grinned.

“But for the most part, they really like your voice. People like the rough edge to it. The guitar gets mentioned a lot. Pete, they think you look like a noodle when you try and dance, but in a good way. A lot of people liked the solo. John got a few honorable mentions, and, not to brag, but I’m quite popular, too.”

“Honorable mentions?” John cried. “Come on, what did they say?”

“There was one comment saying you were sexy, but I was the one that left it out of pity,” Keith told him, a cocky grin on his face, trying to rile John up. That moment there became a long, never-ending inside joke between the two of them after that.

“What about the stutter?” I asked. Now that the vanity was out of the way, we actually had to know if it worked, which was the main reason we put up the video in the first place.

“Yeah, about that,” Keith sat back in his chair. Roger looked worried. “People didn’t really get it at first. Don’t get too freaked out. Eventually some comments started rolling in about what it could possibly mean. No one was really offended which is good. For the most part, people figured it represented something but they just didn’t know what. It seemed pretty novel.”

Overall, the majority of comments and responses were positive, and we were slowly but steadily gaining more followers and subscriptions on all our accounts. Things seemed to be going well, all thanks to Keith. John and I, even Roger, complimented him again and again, praising his hard work. And, like a little misguided and perverted flower, he blossomed knowing that we all trusted and valued him. Learning this early on would save us later on down the road in more ways than one.

We rehearsed more downstairs, now fully inspired. We practiced where the stutter should be, making sure Roger got it perfectly, down to the number of times he repeated the sound of the tic. After, I coached him on the different emotions he could draw out from each song, which I felt would really show his range and depth, as well as accentuate my own songwriting skills. After a while we got carried away with talking, planning, hoping, wishing. We were back to being a gaggle of nervous, excited teenagers.

“I hope all my enemies are at the concert and they see how fantastic and talented I am and they’ll regret all the shit they used to make fun of me about,” Keith twirled his drumstick expertly around his fingers. I noticed John frown as if the pain were his own.

“I just hope they understand my songs,” I adjusted my guitar strap. “Like, really understand what I’m trying to say, you know?”
“I hope some bass guitar worshipper cult shows up and they make me their new idol,” John yawned.

“I just hope they like me,” Roger sat on the arm of the couch.

I didn’t like all the vulnerable worry in the room—I was the one who was supposed to worry, because I would write good songs about insecurity. But none of my friends were allowed to think of themselves that poorly. “Enough of that. We’re experienced performers, and we’re only getting better. We have four killer songs so far. Tomorrow, everyone’s going to see us up there, they’re going to love us. They’re going to think you guys are hot and talented and they’re going to think I can write good songs. And we can’t forget the responsibility on our shoulders. We’re reviving rock and roll, remember? We’ll be dirty, rough, angry guys who are here to fuck things up and make some good music. So, uh, yeah.”

“Amen!” Keith threw his sticks in the air. They fell on the cymbals and startled Roger.

“You’re right, you’re right,” Roger sighed and ran a hand through his hair, distracting me terribly.

“Come on, at least one person will find you hot, Pete,” John tried to reassure me.

“Yeah, totally,” Keith joined in, climbing out from behind his kit to retrieve a stick. “Someone lovely will want to sit on your nose one day.”

“You’re such a romantic, Keith,” I rolled my eyes. John laughed.

There was a lull, and we just stood there with our instruments. We were so excited that we didn’t know what to do with ourselves. Finally, our eloquent and fearless leader spoke up. “I want some fucking spaghetti.”

“Me too. I’m starved,” John agreed, and put his bass back on the stand.

“I’m always down for pasta, that’s why they call me the Pasta Man,” Keith said.

“Keith, literally no one calls you that,” I reminded him, putting my guitar back in the case.

“I’m trying to make it catch on, just you wait,” he reminded me.

The four of us lumbered upstairs and we threw an impromptu party. John grabbed a case of beer from the garage, and we all toasted ourselves for good luck. Roger and I started pulling out pots and pans together, and Keith was already hooking up his phone to the speakers in the living room.

Seconds later, old school Red Hot Chili Peppers blasted on the maximum volume, the heavy bassline rumbling the table and chairs. John recognized the song right away and laughed.

Keith jumped through the doorway back into the kitchen just in time for the singer to come into the song. He started rapping the lyrics in a ridiculous Californian accent. “Shoulda been, coulda been, woulda been dead if I didn’t get the message goin’ to my head!”

Roger tossed him a wooden spoon and Keith caught it, using it as a microphone. “I am what I am, most motherfuckers don’t give a damn!” As a joke, he sang to me. “Oh baby, think you can, be my girl? I’ll be your man!”

I watched Roger’s mop of curls bob along to the song as he started cutting vegetables and making his own sauce. Little things like how the man made his damn pasta sauce with so much care and love nearly made me swoon. How gay.
Of course John knew all the lyrics and joined in too. I only knew bits of the song from when Keith went through a hardcore Chili Peppers phase and blasted this song every time we went out driving. At least with this song you had the chance to put on a ridiculous voice and pretend to be very serious. “Beware, take care, most motherfuckers have a cold ass stare!”

Keith draped a dish towel on his head like a wig and sang to Roger, trying to make him laugh and succeeding. “Aw, baby please be there! Suck my kiss, cut me my share!”

John and Keith headbanged like they were at a concert, Keith’s makeshift wig falling off right away. Then of course all four of us shouted the chorus, because it was the best part.

“Hit me! You can't hurt me! Suck my kiss!”

Keith danced like a stripper, making John howl with laughter. “Kiss me, please pervert me! Stick with this!”

“Is she talking dirty?” Roger did a terrible American accent while handing me the cutting board to put in the sink.

I clutched my chest and sang dramatically up to the heavens as if my life depended on it. “Give to me sweet sacred bliss!”

John and Keith screamed the words in each other’s faces. “That mouth was made to suck! My! Kiss!”

John and I played overzealous air guitar while Roger took over all the cooking since I got distracted. He tried to seem casually interested, as if he was above the suggestive lyrics, but I caught him dancing when he thought no one was looking. Keith, on the other hand, was performing more dramatically than a sultry drag queen who needed tips to survive. He sprawled himself backwards on the table in front of John, trying to get his attention. “Oh baby, do me now! Do me here, I do allow!”

Just good, filthy fun between four friends. Things wouldn’t be this good forever. It’s a good thing we’re enjoying it while it lasts.

We were starved after giving a passionate performance, and soon Roger was handing us bowls and sitting us down to eat. Keith agreed to turn down the music, while Roger did some last minute fretting over small details like who’ll hold the rented van keys while we’re performing, should we bring lunch or buy it, are you sure seventy t-shirts are enough to sell? The rest of us did ritualistic last-minute reassuring until Roger felt better.

Once he calmed down, Roger went back to getting us in order because it made him feel better. “Alright, everyone better rest up. We need to get up pretty fucking early. Tomorrow’s going to make The Who, or totally break us.”

We all went off to our rooms to settle down for the night, forcing ourselves calm like eager children on the night before Christmas. The tedious gap of time only made us antsy while we waited for tomorrow and a new reason to live. Roger went to phone Jackie and say goodnight. John knocked on Keith’s door and let himself in, probably to pass the rest of the idle night by hanging out. After I washed up, I slid under the covers in my pyjamas, pulling the blankets up to my ears. I was so excited, I was shaking like I was freezing. I was so giddy, I had to listen to relaxing music to make me sleepy. Behind closed eyes I envisioned every note I had to play, rehearsing in my head, preparing every possibility and every potential action, constructing every move to be that of the pure rock and roll sex god I dreamed of someday becoming.
I was finally going through with something. I wasn’t chickening out. With new direction, and people that wanted me, my life finally had purpose again. Hopefully, by the time I go back to sleep in this bed tomorrow night, I’ll be a brand new person.

keeef
@moontheloon

can everyone comment on the video and say the bassist is hot, my friend needs the self esteem boost

11:21 PM · 28 April 17

john
@johnnybgoode

@moontheloon | LITERALLY HATE YOU

11:27 PM · 28 April 17
@johnnybgoode no you don’t 😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍 Ronaldo 😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😘😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊olvable
My eyes sprang open at the first sound of the alarm, and it felt like I hadn’t slept at all. The excitement running through me was enough to keep me going all day. I quickly got changed into what would be my costume for the day—we decided at the last minute to wear our own band t-shirts, since most of the crowd still thought we were The Detours and we needed all the extra advertising we could get. Keith was bartering politely with the director of the show, but all the banners and posters had already been printed with The Detours on it so there wasn’t much we could do.

I put on the light blue shirt I nabbed from the merchandise box last night, because the light colour would help me be seen from far away. I slid on my lucky jeans (extra skinny), grabbed my phone, and after washing up I went to meet everyone downstairs.

Roger had woken up even earlier than us to go pick up the van, and now he and John, the muscular ones of the group, were loading our equipment into the back. Roger made a very organized list, colour coded, and labelled all the boxes. My guitar went in, and John’s bass, and Keith’s kit. Microphones could at least be provided, so Roger was covered. We had two cardboard boxes of cables and backup cables and more backup cables. We had tuners and capos, water bottles, paper, and the merchandise. We even brought along John’s laptop just in case, probably because the extra insurance made Roger feel better.

Someone trusted Keith enough to make breakfast (probably John), but I kept a close eye on him to make sure he didn’t burn the eggs since they were the last we had. I was in charge of the last minute phone calls and confirmations and paperwork to submit today.

When John and Roger had the van all loaded up, they came inside starving and sweaty. John changed into his Who shirt but Roger said he’d do it later. He said he didn’t want to look like a roadie even though he was his own roadie. While he ate, Keith multitasked. He took his shirt off in front of everyone and started viciously cutting the sleeves off so they’d look all jagged like he’d ripped them off. I winced, watching my precious, one of a kind shirt be destroyed, but ultimately it helped our tough guy brand, right?

“Should I cut little holes out for my nips, or…?” Keith suggested. John nearly snorted his orange juice out of his nose. Roger rolled his eyes, and I could already tell his stress was building.

“At nine o’clock on the dot, we had the dishes washed up, full stomachs, coffee in our bloodstream, and Roger was ushering us out the door and into the van. He drove, of course, and I sat in the passenger seat with three printed maps giving us three different routes to get there. We didn’t even live that far away from the park to begin with, but if being early made Roger feel better, we needed to do it.

We arrived about twenty minutes later, and check in was at 9:30. Roger told us to wait by the van and he would deal with everything else as acting band manager, so we let him. John and I agreed that we would take over if he started to look distressed.

Luckily, we seemed to be doing things like everyone else. Other groups started rolling in with vans like ours, the lucky solo artists needing only to show up with their guitar. A lot of people knew each
other already and started hugging and greeting one another while their partners and friends hung around and watched. I recognized most people already, since most of the bands were local to London, or played here enough to seem so. We didn’t interact with a lot of artists except for online, so I just hung around awkwardly. Keith seemed to know everyone that walked by us in the car park, and John encouraged me to say hi and introduce myself too. It was like being at school, where everyone around you had the same goals and dreams you used to think you were unique for. I felt doubtful of my own abilities, which also made me get too competitive, but I tried to push it down. After all, this was going to be a big deal. This was the first time a big festival of the sorts was being held for teenagers and young adults, by young adults and teenagers themselves. The festival was getting a lot of buzz and everyone who was anyone was going. They were all here to see us, which was immense.

Roger came back with a huge wad of paper, saying we would all have to sign a form ensuring we would be on our best behaviour, sober, respectful, etc. We all signed it knowing fully well no one else would adhere to the rules. Then, Roger explained that we had to be backstage two acts ahead of our own call time. We were placed on the band shell stage, originally intended for more classical music, but I thought our sound would be amazing up there. On the other side of the park was a smaller stage built up, and the performers would alternate using the stages while the next group set up. On either side of the band shell, giant banners were hung, advertising the bands playing and at what time. Near the bottom, in a tinier font, was us. THE DETOURS.

We were free to walk around and explore with all our free time. The four of us wandered around the park while food vendors set up, people with equipment rushed around, and musicians jammed out together on the grass. The public wouldn’t be let in for another few hours. Already the four streets surrounding the rectangle of the park were getting busy and coming alive just like us. The morning was overcast and still a bit damp from last night’s rain, but there would be some sun this afternoon in every forecast I checked. We were having a mild spring so far, but I hope and prayed that we wouldn’t get rained on in the rainiest cities in the middle of the rainiest seasons of the year. I don’t think a small, independent festival could afford to pull this off in the middle of the summer in a park that was in such high demand as it was.

Each minute dragged by slowly, until finally they opened the doors to the public at around 11:30 before the first group at 1 p.m. We didn’t want to look silly and wait by the gate for our friends, so we went back to the van for a bit until the park filled up a little more. Roger changed into his shirt, shamelessly showing off in front of everyone. I casually peeked, of course. I was interrupted by my phone vibrating like crazy in my jeans pocket. It was a call from my mum, and I prayed nothing was wrong.

“Hullo?” I held my phone up to my ear and plugged the other one to try and hear her.

“Hi, Pete!” it wasn’t my mother, but the cheery chorus of my little brothers greeting me. Then my mum spoke from behind the phone, as if she was holding it for them. “Good morning, sweetheart. The boys wanted to tell you something.”

There was rustling and I assumed it was Paul grabbing the phone from her. He shouted into the microphone, his voice blasting right into my ear. “Good luck!”

Beside him, I heard Simon whine until the phone was handed to him. “Have fun playing your guitar!”

Roger caught me smiling like an idiot. I spoke back to them. “Thank you so much, guys.”

“You'll do great,” my mother said warmly, and I felt so much affection for her that I forgave her saltiness the last time I went over.
“Thank you,” I looked back at the park behind us. “It’s filling up pretty quickly. The first band is already setting up onstage. I can’t believe today’s the day.”

“You’re gonna win!” Paul shouted, and my mother handed him back the phone. “Tell everyone to buy your music.”

“That’s the plan,” I chuckled.

Simon, of course, demanded more speaking time too. “Um, tell, um… tell the audience to clap for you,” was his brilliant advice. God, he was adorable.

“I will Simon, don’t worry,” I told him.

“I’ll let you go now, Paul has his swimming lesson soon,” my mum took the phone back and told me. Paul cheered because swimming was his favourite.

“We’ll drive past you and wave,” Paul said. Beside him, Simon agreed. “Yeah!”

“Thanks so much for calling, that made me happy,” I told them. I said my goodbyes and told them I love them all very much before we ended the call. I felt at ease again. I was going to be okay today.

The four of us meandered back to the audience area in the field, eager for the first act to start. Sam was already texting me, asking where we could meet up. Jackie phoned Roger, and Roger ignored her call, saying she’d spot us eventually since we all matched in our light blue shirts, anyways.

“Pete!” I heard Sam shout my name as she and Max ran up to me like we hadn’t seen each other in decades. After they both hugged me they started fussing over me—Sam combing and recombing my hair, and Max covering a small stress pimple on my chin with some concealer gunk, dabbing at it with her pinky finger.

I’m so happy they came fully prepared. Max lay out a few blankets for us to sit on near the front of the bandshell stage, saving our spots for the whole day. Sam brought a cooler bag full of picnic food. The two of them even wore The Who shirts to match us, since we let everyone who helped us make the shirts keep one. I was so happy to see them, and even happier when they told us all the people from school they had invited along.

Around us were a lot of teenagers, mostly a bit younger than us, all dressed as if we were at some hip summer festival that they always have in the U.S. No one behaved recklessly without adult supervision, nor competitively with other teenagers. Rather, there was a sense of ease amongst the crowd. Everyone came with the freedom to dress how they wanted; short skirts, or leather jackets, or preppy, or like a hipster, or with a face full of makeup, or tons of jewelry, or some soft grunge hybrid of styles. I saw boys in dresses and makeup, and girls in boy’s clothes with their hair cropped short. People wearing Beatles shirts, or Rolling Stones shirts, or homemade versions representing their other favourite bands. Everyone came with their friends just to relax and enjoy some music and for a moment, be free. These were my people, the people I make music for. Somehow I fell in love with a whole entity of people sitting on the grass with me.

A young woman took the bandshell stage, and everyone eagerly turned to her, knowing the performances were due to begin. She looked like she could have been a professional woman in a suit but instead she was dressed like us, in plain jeans and Converse too. She introduced herself as the concert director and thanked everyone for coming to the very first of these events they’ve hosted. “We want you to just sit back and enjoy the music made by people like you, for you. This is the rock and roll renaissance. And the future of rock is that it means what the kids want it to mean.” That was a sentence that stuck with me for a long time. Later on down the road, that became a sort of motto I
would always look back on to guide me.

She finished by introducing The Hollies as the first act of the day, and everyone cheered, their yellow festival entry wristbands waving around in the air. The crowd got even louder when The Hollies filed on and got their instruments ready. The five musicians took up the whole stage, which was reassuring since we only had four people, so we wouldn’t drown in all that dead space. The band looked pretty small even from our good view of the stage, so I noted that I would have to move around a lot to be noticed. The sound was great on the band shell stage, though. And The Hollies sounded great with the three-part harmony they were most known for perfecting. The crowd knew all their songs, and we were off to a fun start.

When they were done playing, the bowed and thanked everyone and introduced the next band. We turned in our spots to watch Herman’s Hermits play next on the smaller stage behind us a few minutes later, keeping the pace of the day going. We had played with the Hermits a few times at other gigs, and I made sure to cheer extra loud for them. Max was already taking photos on her professional camera, and even candids of the four of us just hanging out and watching the show. I took photos to tweet, documenting the day for me and congratulating our contemporaries. Keith was still handling our social media at the same time, telling people to come and find us and say hi. He also advertised the shirts we were wearing, telling people how much we’d be selling them for after our set. Keith managed to get Roger to do a silly model pose in his shirt for a picture, which thankfully made Roger laugh and lighten up a little.

After the Hollies, a small, funny looking guy with huge glasses came onto the bandshell and sat at the electronic keyboard from the act before. A few members of his band came onstage with him, all equally dorky and unassuming looking. The guy at the keyboard spoke awkwardly into the mic. “Hello everyone, I’m Reggie Dwight, but you may also know me as Elton John. This is my band, Tony, Roger, and Don. We’ve been working on our first album, *Empty Sky*, and a few singles are available to buy on my website. Uh, I hope you guys like it.” The crowd cheered politely, but like me, no one had heard of him before this.

Their songs were shit, trying way too hard to be experimental and psychedelic. I felt like this really wasn’t the genre they were supposed to be doing. Actually, scratch that. The other guys on stage were good, but the Elton guy knew how to perform. He was good at singing but his piano skills were even better. I watched the small flurry of fat white fingers dance along the keyboard, fast and clever like John on his bass. I’d rather just watch that guy and his piano all day. I hope something good comes along for him.

Cream kicked off on the smaller stage with a few of their hits from their first album they released online, ‘Fresh Cream’. Then, they played some new songs they were working on from an experimental album that Jack Bruce introduced as *Disraeli Gears*. I always liked their music, and I thought Eric Clapton was really cool. I made a note to myself to talk to him after the show. Ginger Baker was a treat to watch on the drums. All their new songs sounded like I was relaxing on a hazy summer afternoon, with some weird cocktail of blues and psychedelia. I loved it.

Near the end of their act, my friends and I were all getting antsy. Max had already dug into their food stash, and Sam had left to stretch her legs and find their friends who were somehow lost trying to find us. I felt an excited nervousness in the pit of my stomach. The second the Yardbirds came out onstage next, we were due to meet backstage and get ready. I could hardly contain my excitement.

I would have liked to see the Yardbirds, since they were getting a lot of attention lately. Eric Clapton randomly left the group before he teamed up with the other guys for Cream, and they brought in Jeff Beck who was supposed to be something neat. I wondered if it was awkward for them to play one after another. Just as the weedy, fluffy haired Jimmy Page introduced themselves onstage, Roger was
nudging us to get up and go. Max and Sam hugged me again before we left. Max quickly kissed my cheek and whispered, “Break a leg, babe.”

People watched us as we walked through the crowd to get to the backstage area under the bandshell, and I started to feel a little famous. Roger and some backstage crew had already loaded our equipment backstage, ready to bring up onstage in a moment’s notice. A few other bands were hanging out there as well, all deep in focus while talking or rehearsing quietly. I saw the infamous Rolling Stones in an empty storage room off to the side, and my heart skipped a beat as if I had accidentally seen the Queen or something. There they were, in the flesh, in the same building as me, playing the same stage as me. I lingered just a moment longer to check them out. Mick looked drop dead gorgeous in person, and he was dressed impeccably. He wore loose pyjama style trousers which left little to the imagination, lucky for me. Behind him, Keith Richards was already doing warm ups. He was exercising his shoulders and arms to loosen up. I even saw him swing his strumming arm around in circles, and I thought it would be a powerful looking move onstage.

John caught me staring and tugged me along to the corner where our instruments were resting safely. We could hear the Yardbirds playing even from down here. John and I tuned our guitars one last time using an electric tuner, and we reviewed what we would set our amps to, co-ordinate who would get a mini solo where, and when to watch for my cues. Roger nervously crunched his empty plastic water bottle, doing vocal warm ups. Keith did some stretches for a few minutes before getting bored and finding the snack table.

There was a commotion as Johnny Kidd and the Pirates were guided through the door by a stage manager. Johnny saw me and waved, and I felt famous. He gave me a quick hug, the older man always notoriously over-friendly.

“Good luck up there, man,” I told him as the rest of his band was talking to the stage manager with the clipboard.

“Thanks so much, mate,” Johnny grinned at me. “You’re going to do great too, we’ll warm the audience up for you.”

He clapped me on the shoulder and went to join his band, even though I meant to tell him about how Simon liked to sing to his music. Oh well, there’d always be another time. Soon enough, Johnny slipped on his signature eye patch and the band was guided onstage. We heard the audience go wild as they started with ‘Shakin’ All Over’.

For the brief moment that the stage manager was occupied, John called us all over, and we huddled to the side of the room near all our instruments. The four of us were trying really hard not to show that we were nervous.

“Cheers to us, we’re gonna kick ass out there,” John said. He lifted up the bottom of his shirt and pulled a hip flask out of his waistband. He unscrewed the cap and passed it around. “We’re better than any of these guys by a landslide.”

Everyone took a swig of John’s foul tasting whiskey before he quickly hid the flask again so we didn’t get caught. Stage hands came to move Keith’s kit for him, and I felt a cool rush of excitement run through me. Something in the back of my mind wished that Mick Jagger would see how good we were and fall in love with me.

“How are you feeling, Roger?” Keith asked, genuinely concerned.

Roger nodded. “You know? I’m getting worried but I’m not letting it take over this time. I’m pretending the little anxious voice inside my head is some annoying little kid that I have to babysit for
a few hours.”

I smiled. “We’ve got this, guys.”

It was Keith who pulled us all in for a group hug again, and this time we just let it happen. Keith’s face got smushed against my chest and I heard his muffled voice say something similar to “I love you guys.”

Outside, the audience cheered over and over for Johnny’s band, and before I knew it, the stage manager was telling us to get ready. I flushed. This was it, this was it, this was it.

I grabbed my guitar and put the strap on. I looked at my friends one last time and gave them a smile. Johnny Kidd introduced us, and my feet carried me upstairs and onto the bandshell stage like I was on autopilot. This was it.

God, there were so many people. I fell into a trance looking at the sea of young faces, all waiting for me. I chanted my mantra in my head. These are my people. I represent them. They’re just like me.

They cheered for us more than I thought they would, and for some reason I was surprised that they remembered us even after a somewhat successful song we put out a year ago. A group of girls near the front of the stage shouted Keith’s name, already declaring to be his biggest fans. As he got to his drum kit, he blew them a kiss.

I clued back in when I heard Roger speak into the mic, his voice was familiar and reassuring to me. John and I plugged in our guitars and strummed a few notes to test the sound between Roger’s introductions.

“You may know us and our sound as The Detours, but those days are long gone,” Roger told the crowd. He seemed comfortable talking to them with the practiced ease of a natural performer, like we were all friends. “We go by The Who now, and we’re even better than before.”

The crowd cheered. John and I had microphones too, and I didn’t want to stall us any longer but we needed a chance to test the microphone sound out first. I leaned in and spoke, too. “We made some Who shirts by hand, you can find us after the show and buy one. They’re all one of a kind. Right, John?”

“You know it,” John answered into the mic, and now that his sound was good too, we could start. He plucked a little bassline. “Are we ready?”

“I think we’re ready.” Roger concluded. “Without further ado, we’d like to thank the concert director one last time for our chance to play the wild card spot. I’m Roger – “ a loud cheer, and some guy shouting ‘you’re hot!’ , “That’s Pete Townshend on guitar – “ applause, and Max screaming my name, “John Entwistle’s on the bass – “ more cheering, “And Keith Moon on the drums – “ the loudest round of cheering, “And we’re The Who. Let’s rock and roll.”

I jumped right into the opening of ‘I Can’t Explain’, and there was even more cheering since everyone recognized the song. I stayed relatively still and smooth while I played. My hands were sweating and I had to be extra careful that my fingers didn’t accidentally slide on the strings. I sang the harmonies with John, the backup coming naturally to me now because of how many times we’ve practiced it. Roger sang with ease since it was a familiar song to him too, but his voice was still in that practiced smoothness that he always fought to maintain. That’s okay, though. He only needed to get rough in our last song. Even the audience sang along with us in the chorus, everyone already loosened up and having fun. Keith kept us all in perfect timing, the sound of his drums were a million times louder than what I was used to already now that we weren’t playing in our basement or a crowded pub.
We finished the song in perfect time, already off to a good start. Everyone cheered, and I felt a really good energy coming from the audience. Because of them, I felt nice and light. I was doing well so far, now I’d have to start moving around a little more.

John took a drink from his water bottle while Roger introduced the next song. “We’re so glad you liked that one. Our audience has the best singing voices!” More cheering. “Pete here wrote us all the songs in our set. The next three are all brand new, and this is the first time we’re playing them all for you. Up next is a little one called ‘The Kids are Alright’.”

While he spoke, the audience laughed in little bursts, and a quick peek over my shoulder confirmed that Keith was pulling silly faces or miming something profane just to entertain the crowd. Only Keith could pull stuff off like that and still be lovable in that unique Keith Moon way.

I went over to the amp and nudged up my sound a little. I still didn’t think we were loud enough. I checked to see that everyone was ready, and I strummed our first chord. John, Roger, and I entered into the harmony perfectly, just like we had rehearsed a thousand times before. Keith’s steady drumming kept me rigid and in time. I had to sing even more harmonies with this song, but I tried to move more in my spot in front of the mic. I messed up on my fingering once but it didn’t throw anyone else off, which I was grateful for.

“Sometimes, I feel I’ve gotta get away...” Roger crooned into the mic, just like the old blues songs we used to play. God, he has the most beautiful voice I’ve ever heard. He carried us through the song gracefully, and I couldn’t believe half our act was already over. We’ve been practicing for what felt like years just for this moment.

I let my last note ring out while the crowd applauded us again. Roger drank from John’s water bottle too, and Keith kept a loose tempo playing in the background to keep the audience on the ball. I noticed John go to his amp and turn his up louder than mine. He nodded at me across the stage, a mischievous look on his face, and I played right into ‘Substitute’ without any further ado.

“Sub-sti-tute, your lies for fact, I see right through your plastic mack…” Roger sang, finally having fun with the whole thing. This song was easier to groove to, in my opinion, and I moved and danced a bit more while I played. I started to get worried, because these were all fun pop songs, but I knew we had more to unleash. What if we didn’t get as loud and wild as we could be? No one in the audience would know what we were capable of. The Who wasn’t pop music, we were rougher and angrier than that. We were louder, too.

John’s bass was twanging louder than my guitar because of his last minute adjustment, the sneaky bastard. I wasn’t angry because I thought the rigid bass in the background sounded much better. The lyrics dwindled away into a fake ending as I finished the guitar rift, and behind me, I heard Keith scream through his difficult fill. Roger picked up with full intensity, and I felt we were really getting somewhere. ”I was born with a plastic spoon in my mouth!”

The audience was cheering, even shouting “sub-sti-tute” with us every time at the end, which made Roger smile. He even pointed at the audience when it was their cue to sing it with us. We finished with a lot of energy, and with our My Generation, I knew this was our last chance to prove to the audience who we really are.

I made eye contact with Roger, silently asking for his approval to introduce the next song. With a nod from him, I addressed our young audience looking up at us, exciting and expecting.

“You guys are all lovely, thank you so much for having us,” they applauded. Sam screamed my name again, waving like crazy from her spot which seemed like miles away. I smiled at her. “This is going to be our last song.” Around me, the guys started to get really hyped for it. Keith stretched his
fingers out, and Roger jumped around a bit to keep his energy going. John was staring at someone in
the audience. I tried to be brief to keep the energy flowing. “I wrote this song about you guys. Each
and every one of you specifically. This one goes out to every single teenager in all of Britain. All the
lost kids, all the confused kids, all the angry kids, the queer kids, the kids who are having a tough
time with finding out who they are. We’re right behind you with this one. This is our anthem.
Ready? One, two, one-two-three-four!”

I dove right into My Generation with all the anger and intensity I could muster, the rest of the band
following with me just as powerfully.

"People try to put d-down!” Roger roared into the mic. Behind him, John and I shouted, "Talkin’
‘bout my generation!”

"Just because we, g-get around….” Roger was doing the stutters perfectly. He assumed this cocky
sneer as he sang, exactly like I had coached him on. We sounded great.

"The things they do look awful c-cold…” Roger pumped his fist into the air in a rush of masculine
defiance as he shouted the line that would make us famous. "I hope I die before I get old!”

There was a shift in the energy in the audience after we dropped that bomb, but surprisingly, in a
good way. The crowd turned from eager and pleased to shocked and delighted that we had
shamelessly pulled such a stunt. That was good, I wanted them to know that we don’t take any shit.
We say what we want. I felt a rush of rebellious power run through me, and I felt something in me
completely take over the old me as I performed on stage, turning into Pete Townshend, the rough,
tough rock star.

“Talkin’ ‘bout my generation!” I shouted, then I stood back from the mic stand. I swung my arm
around just like I had saw Keith Richards do, and somehow still managed to get my arm around
in time to hit the notes. I moved around my third of the stage, jumping with my cheap guitar. I must
have lost my direction, because I ended up a superstar. In the back of my brain I heard the audience
cheering us on louder than they had before, and it didn’t register until later that they fucking loved it.

John, equally cocky and smooth as Roger, played his bass solos perfectly with those lightning fast
fingers and his own unique technique, and the audience cheered for him. Roger picked up the lyrics
again, howling to the teenaged wasteland in front of us. Keith was beating the shit out of his drums,
his arms working front and back like a skier and unlike any other drummer I’ve ever seen in my life.
Sweat dripped from his forehead as he pulled flourishes and dramatic flairs. I was jumping around
and I playing so hard my fingers were in blistering pain, and I felt something stronger than I’ve ever
felt before in my life. The intensity, the audience, the power—how could I measure up to anyone
now after such a love as this?

We were gliding into the end of the song. I looked at my band, and the audience, and in a brief
moment, all the possibilities played out before me like my life was flashing before my eyes: rock and
roll and concerts and screeching guitars and girls and sex and scandal and drugs and breakthroughs
and awards and money and sold out stadiums and worldwide tours and movies and summer festivals
and parties and overdoses and breakdowns and hard work and redemption; becoming a martyr, a
loyal and allegiant citizen under the institution of rock and roll, even dying for it if I had to, living
only for the destructive and redemptive power of rock music. This is my life, this is what I want, this
is who I am.

We always practiced a tidy, cumulative ending to this song, but we were playing with such the sheer
force of a hurtling steam train that it was entirely out of the question. I made eye contact with the
guys, and silently we agreed: we were going to unleash everything. We were going to make them
remember us.
Like a beautiful piece of auto-destructive art, we let the song crumble and disintegrate. Our harmonies faded away and the instrumentals took over Roger’s last shrieking of the chorus. I started jumping and kicking my legs, and I accidentally knocked my mic stand over. It fell with a horrible crash but made the best noise. Keith’s drumming rolled like a machine gun fire, John’s bass like the low rumble of an oncoming storm, and Roger howled. We sounded like warfare. I played until I ruptured blisters on my fingers and they bled. I picked up my mic and ran it along the chords because I liked the sound it made. I don’t know where I got the stupid idea, but it turned into an even stupider idea in my head.

By some twist of evil fate, between my playing and the mic scratching over the neck of my guitar, two of my fucking strings broke. They snapped and whipped my hand and I accidentally cried out in pain, letting the mic fall again and clatter to the stage floor. I meant to be destructive, but not like this. I’ve never had my strings break on me before. Down at the lip of the stage, a group of guys snickering pulled me out of my trance. I felt embarrassed and lost again, about to drown in it. They thought I was a fucking joke. But I’m not, I’m not, I’m not. Some idiotic voice in my head convinced me to do something even more destructive than this to prove to them that maybe I did it on purpose. Something inside of me snapped, too. I took the guitar strap off and held it by the neck above my head.

This one’s for you, Gustav Metzger.

I saw Roger’s jaw drop out of the corner of my eye along with the thousands of people in the audience as I swung my one and only, loved and treasured, beautiful and expensive guitar down in front of me like a sledgehammer. Those guys in front me stopped laughing pretty quickly. I smashed my guitar again. And again. And again. The body chipped away in chunks until it snapped at the neck. All this anger poured out of me—anger from being made fun of, teased, left out, dumped, used, pushed away, fucked and left behind, excluded, hated. I destroyed my fucking guitar in the name of art and rock and roll. And for some reason, the people absolutely loved it.

Behind me, Keith cheered and kicked a set of his cymbals over. Roger followed my lead and swung his mic into the set of cymbals that remained. The audience roared, they were even on their feet. Were they happy? Angry? I had absolutely no clue. I was busy in this moment right here.

This moment right here? It was the epic, glorious moment of my finale. I wielded the broken neck of my six stringed weapon above my head. I am a giant, I am invincible, washed in the light of the sun setting in the sky above us, feeling the surreal sensation of floating skyward and anchored down only by the demanding love from my audience’s cheers. I have electrified them, changed them, with one note, pure and easy. We are all now bound together because of my song.
chapter 30- epilogue

Epilogue

I felt like I had been baptized, purified, cleansed. I was a whole new person. I was finally a man. I was—

“You’re a fucking idiot!” Roger was shaking me by the shoulders, and I came to reality again in the dingy backstage area. “You’re a genius, but you’re an idiot. They loved it, Pete. They loved you. You brilliant goddamned idiot.” He was yelling and laughing and cheering and pulling me in and hugging me. We fucking did it.

I was now aware of all the people around us, watching, staring in awe. I don’t remember getting off stage. I don’t know how much time passed since we performed, but Ray Davies and his band were walking past us and onto the stage, saying something positive to us but it didn’t register. Two stagehands were bringing down the remnants of my guitar and angrily dumped it at my feet. I thought Keith Richards was nearby saying I did something ‘fucking brilliant’, but I was somewhat convinced I was dreaming it.

Roger sat me down while the stage manager bandaged my hand, and Roger was talking and pleading with her with words about cost of damage, cheques, apologies, so sorry, you didn’t technically say anything about that in the contract, one phone call from our lawyers will set everything straight so don’t make a fuss, blah blah blah.

Eventually we found ourselves back at the food table, helping ourselves to endless bottles of water and snacks. We all got swept up in congratulating each other.

“Dude, you should have seen the crowd,” John told me, grinning. “They were losing their goddamn minds.”

“I dented one of my cymbals, but it was so worth it,” Keith was smiling anyways. “That was pure rock and fucking roll! Did you plan that?”

“I’m way too exhilarated to think about anything responsible right now,” Roger was dabbing the sweat from his forehead with a paper napkin. “Guys, they loved it. They actually loved it. Everything we did, we need to keep doing it.”

“This is the best day of my life,” was all I managed to say. I couldn’t stop smiling.

We were being ushered out from backstage to make more room for the next bands. We made our way back onto the field while the Kinks played, but I wasn’t even paying attention. There was so much on my mind right now. Our friends were right where we left them, waiting for us. Sam, Max, Jackie, people from my classes, Mike the drug dealer, Roger’s sister, Audrey, even Summer and Karen. There was a huge wave of congratulations, exclamations of ‘I can’t believe you fucking did that Pete you genius’, hugs and compliments and food being given to us. People who were sitting around us even turned to congratulate us and gush too. John and Keith were already collecting money and handing out t-shirts from the cardboard box we brought. Roger was signing things for a group of teenaged girls with hearts in their eyes, and I vaguely recall signing the shoulder of some
After some of the fuss died down, the four of us broke off to talk to more avid fans, answer questions, tell people more about us, and receive endless praise which I soaked up gratefully. Keith and John were talking to a group of guys avidly. Roger hovered around Jackie for a bit, but ultimately got distracted talking to another group of girls more his age. Sam distracted Jackie so she wouldn’t be too upset.

Max showed me some pictures that she took right near the bottom of the stage. I was amazed with how good she made us look—Roger singing soulfully into the mic, and later screaming into it, still somehow looking radiant and sexy; John always looking sly and cool, never phased by a difficult part in the song, only occasionally raising an eyebrow to break his neutral composure; Keith moving like a hurricane but every shot of his contorted face captured the intensity he played with. There was one shot of me that I fell in love with where I was swinging my arm like a windmill. I looked intense and powerful, even manly.

I was pulled away from the pictures with a commotion beside us. To our shock and surprise, Alison Wise walked up to our blanketed area. John saw her and stood up slowly.

“Alison?” he stared at her in disbelief, for a moment looking vulnerable, as if she were a ghost in front of him. We all watched as John straightened himself up, crossing his arms, putting up that familiar defensive wall around himself again. “Alison. What do you want?”

“I just wanted to congratulate the band,” she spoke slowly and simply, also void of any emotion or vulnerability. Like John, she also put on a strong front. She looked great as usual, although a little off, as if she were lost. “Let’s talk, John.”

“Let me buy you a drink,” John said back, slowly and simply just like her. The whole exchange ran very carefully, like a precise tango. Alison nodded like it were a professional business exchange. And just like that, without looking back, John and Alison walked away and left us behind. They went across the park to a busier area with food vendors. It looked natural to see them side by side again, although unusual after all this time. I felt some sort of poetic justice in that surprising turn of events. After all, Alison approached John first to try and reconnect. Maybe they were on their way to reconciling again after their little hiatus. I thought everyone shared my pleased sentiment until I heard Keith muttering beside me.

“I don’t know what I fucking expected,” he said simply, shaking his head. I couldn’t decipher the meaning behind the dejected, angry look on his face. While Max was distracted with showing everyone else her photos, I was the only one who watched Keith slip a small baggie out of his jeans pocket. He let two orange pills slip out into his palm. He swallowed it back, hid the baggie again, and stood up. “I’m going to go talk to people. See ya later.”

I watched Keith walk away in the opposite direction all on his own. Inevitably people stopped him to say hi and even take pictures, and I watched him slip into the character of the goofy, cocky drummer again. He even let people buy him drinks, and I watched until he disappeared into the crowd.

That reminded me—I got up and joined my other school friends on the other blanket, saying hi and thanking everyone for being there.

“You did great, Pete,” Summer smiled. “I’m actually being totally honest with you—you’re even better than the Kinks. That up there? That was real rock and roll.”

I smiled back at her. She wasn’t angry at me, and I couldn’t be bothered to keep being angry at her. Those words were her silent apology and I silent forgave her. “Thanks, Summer. That means a lot.”
Beside her, Karen spoke up. She was wearing the thick eyeliner again, and she was only dressed simply in high-waisted shorts and a flowing white t-shirt but I thought she looked incredibly beautiful. She gave me a teasing look. “Alright, I made it all the way out here and cheered and everything. Don’t you owe me something now?”

I laughed. “Yeah, you’re right. A deal’s a deal. Come on, I’ll buy you a drink.” I unknowingly echoed John’s line, but maybe I’d have just as much luck.

I stood up and offered my hand to help Karen up, and when she touched me, I briefly heard a symphony explode in my head until she slowly let go again. Summer gave me a look, and I hoped she was jealous. Max and Sam gave me a thumbs up. Side by side, Karen and I walked in Alison and John’s path to the vendors. We waited in line together in a comfortable silence.

“So,” she said.

“So,” I said, too.

“I hardly know anything about you,” she smiled. This time, in private, she was genuine and not teasing me. “Who are you?”

“Oh,” Now, there was a lot of ways I could answer that question. I’m a whole mess of personalities. I’m not a classical musician like my parents, but I’m not a pop star either. I’m not an amazing student but I’m not a shitty student either. I’m not quite a man, and I’m not quite a woman. I’m not gay but I’m not straight. I’m accomplished but I’m not satisfied. I’m so ambitious that I thought I lost my direction. It’s all so complex, maybe I don’t have to decide who I am just yet. I smiled at Karen, who was giving me a curious look, waiting for my answer. “You know, right now I’m just Pete Townshend, and I play the guitar, and I write. And that’s it for the moment.”

“Simple enough,” she chuckled. “Alright, I’m just Karen Astley, I study fashion design, and I’m an illustrator. I also just discovered I like rock and roll. And that’s it for the moment.”

I paid for two bottles of beer and we clinked the glass together. “To rock and roll,” I toasted. Just as we were starting to walk away, two guys walked past us but one stopped, calling to his friend. “Holy shit, Kit, it’s him!”

I froze in my spot, utterly confused. The second guy conspired with the first guy quickly, and then walked up to me.

I was taken aback by how, for a man only slightly older than me, he was dressed impeccably and fashionably like an older millionaire. He had a cigarette dangling elegantly off of his lips, and I thought he was incredibly handsome. He extended a hand for me to shake, and spoke with a very posh drawl. “Pete Townshend, right? Pleasure to meet you.”

“Oh, hi, nice to meet you too,” I shook his hand. “And you are?”

Karen politely waited behind me, but she had an amused look on her face. The guy turned back to wave his friend closer. “I’m Kit, Kit Lambert. And this is my friend Chris Stamp.”

“I’m just Karen Astley, I study fashion design, and I’m an illustrator. I also just discovered I like rock and roll. And that’s it for the moment.”

Hey, nice to meet you,” An entirely different Chris from the one I already knew gave me an overexcited, very enthusiastic handshake. He was dressed the complete opposite of Kit, with longer and shaggier hair. He had big nerdy square glasses and a flannel with a t-shirt under it that had some campy sci-fi movie poster on it. I couldn’t help but notice the giant bulky camera handing from a strap around his neck. “We were looking for you all night. I got some really good video of your band’s performance, even the ending.”
Kit took over quickly. “We’d be delighted to let you use the footage, free of charge, of course. Or even, Chris and I could make a promotional video of sorts for you, eh?”

“Yeah, it would be no problem at all,” Chris said. “I studied film in college, you’re in good hands.”

“If you’d be interested…” Kit toyed. “We could discuss some more business matters over coffee sometime. Chris and I are making a movie, you see.”

Chris nodded enthusiastically. “Yeah, we’ve been looking for a band to make the movie about, sort of like a documentary. We took one look at you guys tonight and knew you were the one.”

“Oh, absolutely,” Kit agreed. “I said to Chris, they’ve got the look we want, the sound we want, the gorgeous faces we want. And I think the audience fell in love with your band just as much as we did tonight.”

“Now, if I’m not mistaken, you don’t have a band manager, do you?” Chris asked me, turning sly.

“Oh no, dear boy. I’ve already done my research, their website says nothing of the sort,” Kit answered, and Karen laughed quietly behind me. “That’s my area of speciality. I can even help clean up that website for you, and really make it real. What do you say, Pete?”

“Holy shit,” I said quietly. That wasn’t very professional of me, but then again, I was also holding a beer this whole time. “That would be amazing.”

“I know it’s a lot to take in, dear,” Kit gave me a lovely smile and I felt my cheeks go hot. His slender fingers slipped into his jacket pocket to pull out his wallet, and from there he pulled out a business card to hand to me. God, this guy really knew his stuff. “Give me a call later. We’ll let you enjoy the rest of your night, you’ve earned it. But do think about our offer. We could even help you get some more money out of it.”

“And contact me about getting the video footage, we’ll talk,” Chris handed me a card too, identically printed to Kit’s. I guess they were actually serious business partners. Well, actually, the way Kit looked and spoke, I wouldn’t be surprised if it was only that.

I remembered how to act professional, and I shook their hands again. “Of course. Thank you so much again. We’ll be in contact.” Kit and Chris said goodbye to Karen and I, and continued on their way.

“Can you believe that?” I laughed, exchanging an amazed look with Karen. I stored the business cards away safely. I’d tell the other guys when we got home, saving it for a special surprise.

Karen and I made our way back to our friends just as the Kinks finished, and the big headlining act started. The Rolling Stones, live in the flesh, came onto the bandshell stage. Everyone started screaming and cheering for them, including me and all my friends. John appeared beside me, with Alison next to him as if nothing had ever happened between the two of them. Everyone was up on their feet, dancing and singing as the Stones blew us away with all their greatest hits. Everyone knew every word to every song, and I danced like a goof with Karen and the other girls, even the random people around us.

Mick Jagger was stunning onstage, dancing and prancing and cracking jokes between songs. He even took off his sweaty shirt and threw it into the crowd, causing a minor panic as everyone fought to keep the shirt. He moved provocatively half naked now, stealing the whole show.

John came up behind me, leaning in to murmur in my ear. “This may be the alcohol talking, but I would totally fuck Mick Jagger if he keeps doing that nasty thing with his microphone.”
I looked over at John, and he was giving me that goddamn annoying look again. This time, I wasn’t afraid. “This may be my repressed bisexuality talking, but I would fuck Mick Jagger any and every moment of the day.”

“You too, eh?” John winked. We shared an understanding smile, before he pat my shoulder and went back to entertain the girls.

The massive Rolling Stones set came to a finish just as the sun set completely, and we were feeling young and free in the blue dusk of an otherwise nicely weathered day. People cheered and applauded for what felt like forever. They were the band everyone came to see, and some younger teenagers started to leave after that. An older crowd stayed behind for the last two acts as we sank into the night peacefully.

A groovy sounding band called Pink Floyd took over and played psychedelic music to cool everyone down after we were all mildly aroused by Mick Jagger. I thought one of the guys, introduced as Syd Barrett, dressed so cool and looked mysterious and sexy. During a trippy experimental song, we heard Keith screaming at the top of his lungs near the stage. “Let’s open up this fucking pit!”

And our dear, dear friend Keith Moon started a mosh pit during the most relaxed song of the night. The audience laughed, and even the lead singer was slightly thrown off by it. A whole bunch of rowdy guys joined Keith, and then more people joined just for shits and giggles. John and I were equal parts mortified while we also laughed our asses off. Roger ran up to us, breathless. “Jesus Christ, I can’t keep up with you guys. We need to stop him before we get in any more trouble with the people here.”

So, the three of us abandoned our girls and Mike the drug dealer, and ran into the thrashing pit. I managed to grab Keith around the waist and pull him out of the sea of people. We ran from the scene just as security came to break everyone up. I lead us to the patch of grass behind the bandshell, unoccupied save for a few smokers. Laughing and breathless, we collapsed into a heap on our backs.

“I cannot fucking believe…” I started, but laughter overcame me again. It took us awhile for us all to settle down again, but the ambient music and darkening sky above us lulled us into a meditative trance. Pink Floyd finished, and someone took the smaller stage, which we could somewhat see from our hideout. A girl with long brown hair came onstage with a few other guys, and one had an electronic keyboard.

The girl tapped the mic and spoke. “Good evening, everyone. I’m honored to be the last guest of the night. I go by the name David Bowie—‘whoops, scratch that. ‘—and I’m just finishing my first album. It’s self-titled, and hopefully I’ll have the money to release it soon. Here are a few tracks you can expect to hear on the album soon…”

He played some mediocre hippie songs, but I was utterly enamoured with the last song he played, sweet and sad and gorgeous. He called it an ode to the beautiful day we all just shared together. “Perhaps I should announce it? ‘Memory of a Free Festival’…”

"The Children of the summer's end gathered in the dampened grass. We played our songs and felt the London sky resting on our hands, it was God's land. It was ragged and naïve, it was Heaven.”

“Oh shit, I almost forgot,” Keith reached into his pocket and pulled out a blunt from a pack of cigarettes someone must have given him today. “Look what I scored!”

I used my lighter to help him light it, and he took a long drag. We passed it around between the four of us. Even Roger tried, but it made him cough too much and he didn’t take any more. That David
Bowie guy filled the park with his song, and I was lost in thought again.

"The sun machine is coming down, and we’re gonna have a party..." He encouraged everyone to sing that line with him, over and over and over in perfect unison.

The four of us walked back to our group, everyone’s faces lit by the lights of the stage and around the park. In that moment, I looked at my friends all around me, smiling and laughing with each other, singing skywards, drinking and smoking to heighten the good feelings all around. For some reason, I was suddenly aware of our friendly little planet spinning around nonstop, and instead of being frightened, I felt everything shift into place. It’s a big world. It’s chaotic and nothing makes sense. But there are so many people out there, all inherently good, all a little lost in our own cozy corner of the universe. I want to get to know all of them. I want to sing songs for them, and have everyone join together with our little band in precious moments like these, night after night. Maybe we would actually make it. Maybe we wouldn’t last longer than this night. But as for right now, in my own private moment of reflection, I realized that maybe I can conquer the world after all, there wasn’t anything stopping me.

I gave my friends a sleepy smile, and lay back on the grass, my arms behind my head. A playful breeze ran past us, and the grass tickled my bare arms. John lay down beside me, and Keith beside him, and Roger on my other side; all of us were staring up at the night sky, dreaming of what we could accomplish after this, and who we might become. And who will I be? I’ve got a whole lifetime to grow and change and redefine myself, and that isn’t a scary idea anymore. Rather, the freedom to create myself is a powerful and liberating tool. I’m so excited to figure it out and find my direction and try doing everything I’ve always wanted to do. But for now, I think I’ll stick with rock and roll.

*

Chapter End Notes

and so, our long journey comes to an end!

i'd like to thank my dear friends marty and kona for all their support and encouragement through this whole long process. it takes a lot of love to put up with my constant bitching when i get frustrated.

i'd also like to thank all my loyal readers, i appreciate every one of you who have offered support and encouragement and wonderful comments! i hope you enjoyed this read. i’d love to hear what you thought in the comments! we can also continue the discussion with any questions or anything afterwards at http://my-g-g-g-generation.tumblr.com. Keep an eye on that space as well for my next project coming very soon....

thank you all again for everything! rock on!

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