Mouse Dog Bird

by Helsabot, rabbit_in_the_moon

Summary

In the summer of 1995, Radiohead were asked to open for R.E.M. on their Monster Tour.

This is the way it could have gone.

--- this story has been completed.
So, we (aerofish and a-menage-a-trois-is-fine on tumblr) started this back in May, after finding these two recently-posted-for-the-first-time videos on youtube:

https://youtu.be/OTKBi32qX7I

https://youtu.be/LIIsy7GLgM4

Thom was in such rare form! Such a spitfire; there's no other videos with him in *quite* the same state. So we started coming up with entertaining theories why. Most involving Michael Stipe. Before we knew it, we started doing something neither of us had done in nearly a decade: write fanfiction.
The events of 1995 make it all too easy. This classic interview, the Thom's "tour diary" piece from the October 1995 issue of Q, was the core of the piece:

https://citizeninsane.eu/media/uk/q/02/pt_1995-10_q.htm

We had known about the series of pictures associated with that piece:

https://i.pinimg.com/564x/97/78/33/97783332f43d44300e3a57b71a3b892d.jpg


...and then we ran across R.E.M.'s performance of Crush with Eyeliner on Letterman (which is really fucking good, watch the whole thing, damn!)

https://youtu.be/xA3H6czr9Ms

We noted Michael was wearing the exact same sunglasses in that performance that would later appear on Thom in the above pictures. Ooooo!

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So here we are. Consider this is Alternative Reality fic, with our reality bent just slightly into the world of the story. It's the story of Radiohead over the course of the summer of 1995. It covers everything from character study to angst, comedy to explicit NC-17.

This story clocks in at over 100,000 words, spread out over 20+ chapters. It is nearly completed - we didn't want to fall into the trap of starting a piece and then letting it fall away when real life took center stage. Either you'd get all or none of it. We will be posting a chapter or two a week.

We weren't kidding about the research: we spent time on everything from what it's like to ride a tour bus for a month, to what laptop Thom might have had at the time, to if it was raining in Helsinki on August 29, 1995 (it was). Dialogue is sometimes direct quotes. We went back and read every old interview we could find and scoured youtube. The timeline follows the actual locations and tour schedule. We just really like researching shit, ok? Basically, if you ever have any questions about Radiohead in 1995, we're your go-to girls.

Disclaimer: we in NO WAY believe anything in this fanfiction actually happened, outside the things culled from dates/videos/interviews. It's all in good fun; all 'real' people depicted are to be seen as strawmen, as completely fictionalized archetypes to fit a narrative. They are simply projections of ourselves (as all characters are) and how it might have gone down in some parallel universe if a few important details were changed. We very much understand the line between fact
and fiction, and this is most certainly the latter.

Thank you, and we hope you enjoy our efforts. It was a blast to write.

:)
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 1 - Spin With a Grin

“So I guess this one is about love,” Michael says into the mic.

The audience roars in approval.

“Or,” Michael grins, “maybe it’s not. Maybe it’s about nothing at all. That’s for you to decide.”

He launches into the song.

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Some days, Thom believes he is actually dying. Today it’s because he’s kneeling in front of the toilet bowl like it’s an altar. He feels that if someone sprayed down the tile he’s collapsed upon, he’d just swirl away like watercolours. He was far too sober last night, so yes, he is surely dying this time for real.

Jonny’s got his hands clamped over his ears, terrified of vomit ever since the unfortunate incident at Abingdon when Anthony Gleeson retched during an oral presentation and started a chain reaction. He rushes out of the room like he’s just witnessed a murder.

Colin is rubbing Thom’s back, but it’s just making it worse somehow. Thom is on fire and shivering at once, and Colin’s hand feels like a giant, heavy spider.
“Stop… just. Don’ touch.”

“Sorry, sorry.” The rubbery pressure of Colin’s hand drifts away. “We’ll cancel.”

Thom shakes his head, moaning over the bowl. “We can’t…”

“Yes, we can. We must.”

“This is evil,” Thom spits through strings of saliva. “What the fuck is this.”

“Probably that petrol station sandwich.”

“S’not funny…”

“It’s not meant to be funny. You don’t buy sandwiches at petrol stations, Thom. And you definitely do not buy egg mayonnaise sandwiches at petrol stations.”

“M’gonna die.”

“You’re not going to die, Thom.”

Which is the moment Thom’s stomach decides it’s time for another round of hell.

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“I’m dying,” laments Jonny.

“You’re not dying.”

Colin is struggling with the childproof cap on a bottle of Nurofen. “This is impossible. This is so impossible, it would actually kill a child who happened to attempt to open it.”

He sighs, taking a break to inspect his left palm. “I’m going to blister.”

“Thom can’t do another show alone. And we can’t cancel again!”

“Then he won’t do it alone. I’ll do it.”

Jonny gives Colin a dubious look. “You are not,” he croaks.

“Hey. Have a bit of faith, baby brother.” The cap of the bottle pops off, and Colin turns and grins as though he’s performed a magic trick. “Hah! Look at that! See? I always come through.”

Jonny stares one of those scathingly unimpressed stares he’s gotten so good at lately. Colin makes a mental note to tell him to stop giving him that look. When he’s feeling better, of course. For now he drops two white caplets into his sulking brother’s hand and pushes a tall glass of water on him.

“Bottoms up.”
Jonny blinks down at the caplets. “I can’t swallow pills.”

…that’s it.

Colin is up off the edge of the bed in record time. “You are twenty-three years old. You don’t get to take cherry shots anymore. You are going to swallow those pills. Or your brain is going to fry, I guess.”

He doesn’t slam doors, but this one definitely gets a little abuse. Thom’s own motel door squeaks open as Colin stomps past and zips up his coat. It’s one of those dismal two-story affairs that open onto a carpark and a couple of poorly-stocked vending machines. Haven’t they risen above this yet?

“Where’re you going?”

“For a walk.”

“It’s fucking cold.”

“Yes, it is.”

He can still feel Thom’s gaze on the back of his head as he treads down the icy stairs.

“Well you’d better fucking be back before four!” Thom shouts.

As though it was Colin who’d made them late for the on-air set yesterday. Definitely not Thom, who had to make certain his hair was in perfect form for the radio.

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“So, in a supermarket, where would I find Radiohead? Would I look in the coffee section? Or would I look in the canned food section?”

“Uh, next to the skimmed milk.” Jonny blinks at the Scandinavian journalist with horror.

Ed is radiating the haggard aura of a man who’s answered this question—all questions—a million times. Colin is fiddling with his pack of cigarettes, a sure sign he’s deliberating on if he can use one as an excuse to step away. Thom mutters quietly and carefully lowers his head onto the table. Phil is staring vaguely in the direction of the muted telly over the bar. The friendly, irrepressible young hack they’ve been sat down with nods knowingly at their stock responses, metaphorically rubbing his hands in inquisitive glee as he prepares to launch his next rapier-like thrust into their collective psyche.

“So what would you say is the area that the band has grown in most over the years?”

Silence. Mild bewilderment. Weary expressions. Thom raises his head. The rest of the band slumps in relief that he’s taking this one.
"Pubic hair,” he whispers.

He drops his head back onto the table.

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They’re in the middle of “Fake Plastic Trees” when Thom begins to feel like a cavern has opened up beneath him. Reality suddenly feels louder and brighter than it should be, and he can feel his heart begin to pound. He sings without hearing his own words, and fleetingly wonders if they even belong to him. He needs out. Out of this record shop, out of Toronto, out of Canada, off into outer space and right out of his skin.

Once the last lyrics have trickled out of him, he drops his guitar to the floor with a hollow and reverberating thunk. The applause halts. Jonny’s looking at him wide-eyed, cradling his own acoustic as though Thom might come for it next.

Thom walks without seeing where he’s going. It doesn’t matter. All that matters is that he’s going. He sticks his fingers in his mouth and worries each nail in turn, chewing away every chord they’ve just played.

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Vancouver is so fucking grey and dire-looking. They’re in a box in the sky; it was someone’s idea to do the interview in a cable car as well as the outlook it disembarks at. No one paused to ask if Colin or Thom is afraid of heights.

Colin doesn’t say much the entire ride. He stares out of the window as the old-growth trees far below them slip slowly by. His face is doing a thing that Thom associates with when they were fourteen, or maybe fifteen, and trying really hard to act older. Colin couldn’t school his face to save his life then and still can’t, apparently. Thom doesn’t know why he’s making that face now. They’re ten years older now. They’re great now. Thom feels great.

He’s backed himself up as close to Colin as he dares. He’s twisting the sweat-slick handrail compulsively. When “Creep” is brought up he just natters on, some self-deprecating thing about how people like the new album too and sometimes don’t even bring up that song. When he glances over the shoulder of the guy interviewing him and sees more empty space—when he glances anywhere, really—he has to giggle and answer faster to camouflage the shiver that click-clacks up
his spine. To bury the thoughts about what would happen if he suddenly pushed past all the tourists and opened the little car door and just stepped casually out into that dreary grey sky. Thom doesn’t want to. But he can’t help imagining every movement needed to make it happen, can’t help but conjure the horror of not being able to control his body and just watching it carry him to his death. He knows the moment his feet dropped him into nothingness that motor control would rebound into his limbs. He would scream and claw until he crashed into the picturesque pine trees below.

At least when a train arrives at the station he can look down at the tiles or behind himself at a wall until this feeling passes.

After their group reaches the top of the cable and they wander to a quiet corner of the nature outlook, the interview continues. Thom thinks it’s going well. Colin doesn’t say anything much; he just fiddles with his sunglasses while Thom talks about how they started as friends, just school friends on a lark.

Thom must remember to tell Colin to cheer up or take a nap later. He doesn’t know why Colin looks so tired, why he’s wearing his face like dirty clothing. He’s pretty sure he didn’t go out last night and just stayed in his hotel room. He didn’t have to perform that horrible in-store that already feels so distant. Thom feels great now and very carefully doesn’t think about the cable car ride back down over the tree-lined chasm they’ll have to undertake soon.

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Thom’s feeling pretty queasy and he thinks the grey of his lap belt—always that same exact dingy shade, no matter what airplane—is the ugliest colour known to man. He leans his face up against the window and tries to do breathing exercises except that the sky is considerable and boundless and the clouds look strange and soft and warm which is odd because they’re full of freezing water and every single person is looking out their window because it is all unbearably beautiful and then for a moment Thom sorta feels fine but he can’t get his breathing right, so maybe not?

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"I’m glad all that acoustic stuff is done with, to be honest. It’s vile, the very thought…”

The four of them have become skilled at tuning Jonny out. They’ve had to, else they’d all be institutionalised by now. Though Thom can’t help a drawn-out, cartoonish eye-roll. He tries to catch Ed’s gaze, share a cathartic, unspoken moment of commiseration—but Ed is too busy pulling the laces off his shoes.

They’re too tired for conversation tonight. But Jonny is unusually chatty, and he keeps tossing quips from his bunk. He’s supposedly reading Albert Camus, “in the original French,” but unless Ol’ Bert posthumously wrote a really annoying script just for Jonny, Thom doubts he’s absorbing
“I’ve heard the food is better than in China, you know. It’s actually more authentic…” Jonny’s voice drifts through the bus and Thom sees Phil’s shoulders jerk once, twice, with silent laughter as he hunches over the book he’s reading in the communal seating nearer the front. Thom knows that in about thirty seconds Colin is going to chastise Jonny, remind him of one of the unspoken rules of the tour bus: Shut the fuck up when people are getting ready to sleep. Well, not so unspoken, then.

San Francisco twinkles into view. Thom tries not to think about fault lines and 1989 as their bus bumbles over the bridge he’s seen in films.

“Wow,” says Colin.

Thom self-consciously touches his hair and smiles ruefully. “I dunno, I thought a change, I thought… I don’t know what I thought.” He shrugs and turns to the sink, flips the tap on to fill the kettle. Acts busy.

“No, I like it, ginger works.” Colin drops his duffle on Thom’s counter and comes to stand next to him as Thom prepares them tea. He can tell it’s one of those days, an ugly day, a day that fits askew and rubs at Thom like a scratchy cheap shirt tag. Colin considers his words. Lightly, lightly. “It’s very John Lydon. You’re going to have to smash some hotel rooms to live up to that hair, I reckon.”

Thom giggles.

And then Thom is crying, animal-ugly, his face mottled and red. His mouth opens wide into a wet black hole but no sounds emerge. Thom cries with the prerogative of a child; his entire body curls inwards, lending itself completely in expressing his misery. His anguish suggests a catastrophe so large and present that it has filled every nook of his small frame, crushing out the ability to express it through audible sobs.

“Ah shit, Thom—” Colin reaches out, tries to hold on to those thin shoulders. It’s like clenching a live wire.

“Colin, I don’t want to go back out there.” Thom chokes the words out.

Oh.

Colin wishes he could say something that would change Thom. Change them all, maybe. But he doesn’t know any such words and he’s too old to believe in fairytales, besides.

And besides. Besides that there’s a flare of exhaustion, to be quickly joined by a twin flame of anger. They’ve had less than a month off but it’s more time than they’ve had in longer than Colin cares to think about. This isn’t my problem. This isn’t fair. Between him and Jonathon I’m going to
“Look, it’s going to be okay,” Colin lies to Thom. Thom takes a steadying breath and nods, snuffling back snot and tears. He accepts the lie, surely aware of what it is even as he offers Colin an abased, shattered smile. It’s a beautiful smile, for all of that.

“Back the fuck off to America, then? Yeah? Show the Yanks how it’s done?”

“Someone has to, Thom.”

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Rest stops off of highways. Ponds and lakes in suburban neighbourhoods. The inside of a cabinet sitting at the back of a resale shop. Bowling alleys. Gallery rooms in art museums that are empty but for you. Toilets at cramped concert venues while the show is taking place. The hollow inside of rolled-up carpets.

Airports at night.

Airports at night exist outside of reality more than nearly any other place. They are liminal spaces where the veil is thin and they lay within the crevices of what everyone accepts as absolute and tangible. All the fairy rings have been paved over, but transient spaces will always need to exist to bridge the Here with There and so they carve out new paths. They’re not unnatural, exactly, but they’re not happy when you notice them, either. So you have to pretend you don’t.

The shops are all closed, metal grates down their faces, and the sound of a lonely Hoover bounces off the walls, masking its exact location. Nearly all of the people sporadically scattered are asleep, and the few still awake have given up on trying to talk quietly with each other. They hunch down and play-act normalcy against the backdrop of the airport’s counterfeit reality and busy themselves with books and crosswords. Each person’s isolation feels absolute and irreversible and Thom reckons that’s what the airport wants.

Thom checks his watch, which tells him it is half two in the morning in the real world. Fog hangs about the sodium lights outside and the barren runways twinkle blue and patient. He drags himself away from the oppressive black slick of the window, feeling small and vulnerable.

He can’t understand how the rest have managed to fall asleep. Ed is stretched out as well as he can manage along a rare string of chairs that aren’t divided up by metal armrests, and Phil has passed out vertical to his book-on-tape, neck lolling into a painful-looking position. Thom thinks about taking a picture to send to Phil’s Japanese fan club. Thom doesn’t have a fan club.

Thom pads over towards Colin and Jonny and settles himself on the floor beside them. Colin is using his duffel as a pillow, and Jonny is using Colin’s leg. Their chests rise and fall out of sync.

Thom pokes at Jonny’s shoulder.

When there’s no response, he shakes it gently. He gets a small sound of protest.

“Jonny…”

“Hm.”
“Jonny?”

Jonny’s eyes open stickily, and he whines. “What.”

“Did you and Colin ever go camping?”

“…What?”

“When you were younger. Did you ever go camping?”

“No.”

“Me neither. We should go camping.”

Jonny scoffs and comes to a bit more. “What are you talking about…”

“This is a bit like camping, innit?” Thom wriggles himself underneath a nearby bench, and Jonny stares at him in the quiet of the lounge. His hair is a big, black mess, and his cheek is smashed where it meets his brother’s thigh. Thom smiles. He looks completely silly, and a little bit adorable.

“This carpet is disgusting,” Jonny hisses. “You’re going to catch some plague.”

“You’re lying on it, too.”

“Yes, but I’m not rolling in it. Lick the thing, why don’t you.”

Thom thinks about the truly awful Stephen King adaptation they showed on the last plane they’d been on. A group of B actors found themselves in a kind of purgatory inside an abandoned airport. Not really the type of thing they should be showing on an airplane. What’s next? That Twilight Zone episode with the wooly creature on the wing?

This isn’t the first time he’s thought about that stupid film tonight. Perhaps one of them will start going mad, turn out to be an alien in an ill-fitting human suit. Perhaps that person will be him.

“What do you suppose is in New York?”

“We’ve been to New York.”

“No, I mean really in New York. Besides venues and hotels and radio studios and the lady with the torch.”

“We got to go to Central Park last time.”

“Yeah, for thirty minutes to take pictures. Driving past, mostly.”

“I am going to murder you both,” murmurs Colin. “Go to sleep.”

“I can’t,” replies Thom truthfully. He’s trying to make out the colours of the chewing gum stalactites hanging above his face.

“Then go run a marathon.”

A child yelps somewhere, and a mother hushes. There is a low, steady hum not unlike that of an airplane engine, and with Thom’s ears still thinking they’re up in the air, he really can’t tell the
difference between the ground and the sky anymore.

He relents and rolls out from under the seats like a stuntman.

He’s only been walking for a couple of minutes before he gets the sense he’s in a horror film again. Something is stalking him, and it’s closing in, ready to pounce—

Thom pivots on Jonny and gives him a face; little sneaky monsters wear the ugliest striped jumpers.

Jonny doesn’t jump, just looks back at Thom placidly. His face has a red crease where it was smushed against the denim of Colin’s leg. By some unremarked-upon understanding between them that has been quietly born of time and proximity, they turn and walk with each other in a mostly-comfortable silence. They discover more refugees, and a line of men in suits filing through an accordion tunnel. The smell of fuel seeps in from the tarmac.

“I don’t see why we don’t just drive to Boston. We could’ve been there hours ago.” He thinks, anyway. He doesn’t actually know where Boston is.

“What, and leave all our gear behind?”

Thom shrugs and stuffs his hands in his pockets. “We could go find it. Liberate it.”

Jonny snorts. “If that’s the way you intend to get in the papers… though a prison cell does sound a lot cosier, if I’m being honest.”

“Hey, at least you slept.”

“Hardly, you utter prat.”

They pass a shoe-shine booth for business men who think the next deal involves a lack of scuff-marks. There’s actually a person attending it, but he doesn’t look at them as they drift past. The man has a thousand-yard-stare and Thom finds him unsettling.

“Do you know what dromomania is?”

Jonny shakes his head.

“It’s people who wander. Not because they want to. They’re, ah, psychologically driven to, it’s a syndrome, see? They’ll just spontaneously leave home, fuck up their routine, travel long distances and take up different identities and occupations. And, like, months may pass before they return home and try to get it all back to normal. Isn’t that horrible?”

Jonny hums. “I sometimes have dreams that I own a house. I’m always tending a garden or chickens in the dreams. That’s all. I suppose it’s wanting to be tied to a space. Living things give you a sense of permanence.”

“But what if we’re making ourselves get dromomania…”

“I don’t think you can give yourself a condition, Thom.”

“When we get home after the road, at first I think, ‘This is so lovely!’ because it’s all I’ve been bloody wanting for weeks, for months. And then the hours start to pass. I get an adrenaline rush every night around nine; my body thinks it’s showtime. You’re telling me you don’t feel that? The
whole evening I just feel wrong, at least until midnight. I do. Don’t you?”

“That’s Pavlovian, not mental discord.” Jonny sniffs, but he doesn’t deny it, either.

Thom doesn’t know how to explain the idea he can’t shake, that what he’s really concerned about is the idea that Oxford has become the abnormality for him. That he has dromomania, but it’s backwards, maybe. His mania is a costume-party lifestyle of home and constancy and the local pub, one that he cries and cries for. But then it fits so awkwardly once he’s got it on. He’s terrified that these places, places like this airport avidly humming in his ears, are his actual norm now. Can a person not notice they’ve undergone a sea change that flip-flops their whole concept of home so completely? Has Thom been negligent?

He swerves into the toilets and Jonny follows. Thom sometimes reckons he’d follow him straight off a cliff. It annoyed him as a teenager, and stroked his ego in his early twenties. Now it’s simply the way things are, in the same way that Jonny’s long-limbed saunter somehow effortlessly syncs with Thom’s shorter tread. He doesn’t care, either way. If Jonny decides to flounce off elsewhere in one of his petulant pretenses, that’s his choice. But Thom knows that won’t happen (but he throws a glance over his shoulder now and then, though. Just to make sure).

Thom turns on the tap and splashes his face. The water isn’t hot enough or cold enough. He grips either side of the porcelain and lets his mouth hang open, breathing deep and wet.

When he’s finished, he finds Jonny watching him. He rubs at his eyes with the heels of his palms and Jonny quickly looks away.

“We’ll have to buy you a comb when the shops open,” says Thom. “You look as though you’ve survived a lightning strike.”

Jonny threads his fingers through his hair self-consciously and dares a glance in the mirror; he fusses with it a bit and pouts.

Thom thinks about badly-made scary films again. In the one starring Thom and Jonny, Jonny is the least-terrifying beast the screen has ever seen. He’s Dr. Caligari’s sleepwalker with a lisp and a weakness for the small dogs they pass in the street. Until he opens his mouth to cut you down to size, at least. He can be pretty fucking scary then, Thom supposes.

Thom himself is a shit-sorry excuse for a protagonist. He is forever haunted and doubts he makes it out alive. He’d probably be the one taken out at the end of the first act, in some hilariously convoluted and gruesome manner. A stock personality that the audience hasn’t formed a connection with. Maybe it’s for the best.

Dawn finds them laid up against a wall like ragdolls between gates C13 and C14. Their tour manager kicks Thom awake and shoves something under his nose.

“The fuck is this?”

“Coffee,” replies Tim. The rising sun is throwing his shadow against the terminal wall like paint. Thom grimaces as the light catches on Tim’s glasses, driving a flare straight into his brain. There’s a thumb mark on one lens. Tim flaps a hand behind himself. “Come on, Colin’s having kittens. We’ve been looking all over the place for you two.”

They stumble to their feet and Jonny takes the other cup when Tim offers it and mutters something about it being too creamy and sweet and weren’t there any other options, because Starbucks is just dreadful.
The sun’s been up several hours before they’re able to board a plane. Thom shoves himself up against a window and slams the plastic shade down. He’d be a scary ruler based on how drunk with power he becomes when in control of the window shade. Colin moves to sit next to him, but then Jonny’s tugging at his shoulder and mumbling something into his ear. Colin raises his eyebrows but steps back to the outside seat and lets Jonny sidle past to set himself gingerly next to Thom.

Jonny hates the middle seat.

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Half the audience is talking, and the other half probably came just to hear “Creep”. Well, then. They just won’t play it, will they?

The better part of the rest of the night is spent hiding in a stairwell.

Stairwells are also in-between places, and more dangerous than airports, because there’s all those metal doors that might not be reality doors and there’s echoes that whisper to you, strong as any siren, to come explore the lost places. There’s probably no coming back if you do. Thom’s saving them as a last resort.

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Thom shakes the expensive little bottle of ear drops they gave him; they had to pay a small fortune to get him into a doctor here. Thom feels thankful for the NHS for the first time in his life. He wonders what the drops would taste like.

How are these supposed to help, if the problem’s behind his eardrums? The doctor said something about people needing “tubes” in their ears to drain them. What sorts of tubes? How do they put them in there? Would it hurt? It sounds fucking disgusting.

Thom tries again the strange-sounding manoeuvre the doctor taught him: He pinches his nose, closes his eyes, and blows as hard as he can. All it does is make him red-faced and dizzy. The pressure shifts a bit, and his right ear makes one of those strange, high-pitched squeaking noises. Those are air bubbles, the doctor had explained. Thom wonders if people outside his head can hear them. They’re going to start calling him “Squeaky.” Wasn’t there a serial killer named Squeaky? One of those Manson girls?

He stares himself down in the mirror. He used to avoid anything reflective at all costs; catching himself in a shop window could send him into a cold panic for hours. Now, when he’s feeling uncomfortable in his own skin, he forces himself to face it. He just needs to work on the panic.
What will he do. What will he do?

He signs at himself in the mirror:

What will you do...you idiot?

His hands fling out the last words venomously, as an afterthought. He frowns at himself and tries to relax his muscles. He lets his shoulders drop, cracks his neck. Get it together, man.

He remembers himself with Hannah in the attic. A pang of guilt hits him hard in the stomach. It’s been, what...twelve years since he’s seen his cousin? They were kids. Maybe that’s the only way Thom and Hannah will ever exist together: As kids, in the attic. Hannah laughing her funny laugh at Thom signing the word “pickle” when he’d thought he was signing something else entirely. They’d giggle till she could gather back her composure, and then she’d patiently correct his hands.

She made up ghost stories, ones about Granddad. Thom would watch in horror as her fingers flitted about:

He lives up here. I’ve seen him.

“You have not!”

She’d grin and press a finger to her lips: no talking. She could lip-read perfectly well, but Thom would never learn that way.

It’s okay. He likes it up here. This is where all his things are.

He here now? Thom’s hands were clumsy back then.

Yes. He’s always here.

That’s what Mum had said, too.

Their grandfather had passed away that year and left them their first true taste of death. Thom had neglected a few goldfish in his time, and Hannah had found that fox in the street that one winter—but this was different. Maybe it was because they hadn’t seen him. Hannah had seen the fox; she’d said its insides looked like strawberry jam. And Thom had watched as Mum flushed the fish down the toilet. But they didn’t get to see Granddad. One day he was there, and the next there was a box in his place. How could that box be him? Mum and Dad and Aunt Clara and Gran got to see the box open the night before, but Thom and Hannah were left with a neighbour. He felt as though they’d been left out of some big secret.

Thom had sat next to his cousin in the pews and felt misplaced in his formal clothes. Hannah was crying, and Thom felt guilty for his dry face. Hannah was older and closer to their grandfather; Thom had always felt jealous when they signed to each other. Now that she’d taught him, he wished he could go back and understand.

That was it, mainly. He didn’t understand a thing about it all.

Except for this: The difference between the fish down the pipes and Granddad in the ground was that Mum didn’t pretend with the fish. You know someone’s dead—really dead—when adults pretend they aren’t. Grandfathers go to Heaven, and goldfish bob in the sewers.

The absence of their grandfather brought Thom and Hannah closer. They would sit facing each other, cross-legged among the Christmas decorations and mouldering cardboard boxes. She’d sign
out old nursery rhymes, ones Thom knew, and he’d follow along. Repetitive ones that drilled the motions into his memory. Good! she’d sign when he’d get to a verse before her. It became a game, to see who could sign the rhyme the fastest. Looking back, she’d probably let him win.

“What are you saying?”

Thom jumps, a surge of adrenaline snapping him back to reality. He’d be embarrassed at being caught performing this strange, private ritual—but his heart is beating too fast. He tries to act like he hasn’t just leapt ten feet into the air.

“I always forget you can do that…”

Jonny closes the door behind him and perches himself on the settee at the end of the bed. Odd place to put a sofa. There are lots of odd things in this place, like large vases without any purpose. Thom put an umbrella in one, and Colin retrieved it with a disapproving click of his tongue. They’ve got a suite this time, a posh one—and Thom won’t admit how important it makes him feel. It’s got several separate rooms, and even a kitchen. Though all its drawers are empty.

Thom laughs, a plosive closed-mouth giggle.

“What?” asks Jonny.

“It’s silly.”

Thom expects Jonny to make some sort of flippant comment, but for once he is blessedly silent. He looks sheepish. Ah. This is the way it used to be, Thom remembers. Before he dropped out of university. Before the second album. Before he started being a mouthy little tit full-time. Suddenly he’s thirteen again and in awe of Thom. There isn’t much Jonny can’t do, so the unconquerable things frustrate and fascinate him in equal measure.

Colin says he used to sing when he was little. “Like a goat, mind, but he sang anyway. I haven’t heard him sing once since the first time I brought you ‘round. I expect he’s intimidated. He’s trying to compensate on that guitar.” Colin had paused thoughtfully, munching on a wine gum. “You know, it’s working.”

Thom has the curious side of Jonny’s attention for the first time in forever. His smile widens into a grin, and he turns back to the mirror. He meets Jonny’s eyes in it and picks up where he’d left off:

“This is the man, all tattered and torn,” he translates. His hands dance, and Jonny’s eyes track them raptly. Thom makes sure to go slowly.

“…that kissed the maiden all forlorn. That milked the cow with the crumpled horn. That tossed the dog, that worried the cat… that killed the rat that ate the malt…”

He finishes with a flourish:

“…that lay in the house that Jack built.”

He sniggers again, and lets his hands plop into his lap. “It goes on and fucking on from there.”

He looks down at his fingers and worries at his nails. His smile wilts. He wonders how his brain makes his hands move. They look like small, nervous creatures. Hairless, gormless, newborn animal hands. What if he simply lost control of them?

“Are you practising?” Jonny’s voice sounds like it’s coming to Thom from under a brittle pane of
ice.

Thom shrugs, a little flinch of his shoulders and he reminds himself not to poke and rub at his ears. It won’t help.

They sit in silence for a while. Thom graduates from picking at his cuticles to scratching at an imperfection in the wood of the dressing table.

“You’re going to be fine, you know,” Jonny surmises, finally. “I know it’s in your family, but that’s…that’s not what this is. It’s just the bloody…planes.”

Thom feels his face screw up and his spine go defensive. At the same time, he is taken aback by what appears to be Jonny taking a stab at… reassurance? “No, I know.”

“Okay, well, just—” Jonny falters. He motions with his hands, trying to express his thoughts, then traps them back between his knees. Maybe their movements look ugly to him.

“Yeah,” says Thom dumbly.

Jonny rises and heads back towards the door.

“Colin says this tour’s going to be the death of us.”

Thom looks up, frowns. “Coz says that?”

“Yes, but not when you’re around.” Jonny fiddles with the doorknob and bites at his lip. Thom can see the thickly painted façade slipping back in place, as Jonny finally offers up an unconcerned shrug and says, “You should prove him wrong.”

The door opens and snicks back shut.

Jonny’s words leave him feeling like he wants to bawl, and he has no idea why. Maybe that’s just what he does now in lieu of normal emotion. Cries. Aren’t the ears connected to the sinuses somehow? Isn’t everything in the skull like a snarl of interconnected tunnels? If he cries too much will the fluid just build, will the earaches get worst, until finally his eardrums burst or he jams something in (the ice pick the ice pick it’d slide in so smooth) to relieve himself of the pressure?

Thom starts to sign to his reflection in the mirror, his hands moving fluidly.

A man of words and not of deeds
Is like a garden full of weeds

And when the weeds begin to grow
It's like a garden full of snow

And when the snow begins to fall
It's like a bird upon the wall

And when the bird away does fly
It's like an eagle in the sky

And when the sky begins to roar
It's like a lion at the door

And when the door begins to crack
It's like a stick across your back
And when your back begins to smart
It's like a penknife in your heart
And when your heart begins to bleed
You're dead, and dead, and dead indeed.

“You need to be concerned for Thom.”

Ed runs a hand through his hair and sits back sharply in his chair. He addresses his words towards the generic nautical print in the small hotel conference room instead of Tim, and Colin knows he’s angry. He can’t look anyone in the face when he’s angry.

“Do you think we’re not?”

Tim clears his throat and straightens his shoulders. Colin knows it’s difficult for him to set aside their friendship and don the hat of moderator; he’s a quiet man, and one who does not relish confrontation. He clears his throat again and pushes at the bridge of his glasses. Colin can see from his angle they are smudged and need to be wiped down. “I think you need to be aware of how serious matters are—”

“—Oh, I think we’re perfectly fucking aware, Tim.”

Colin massages the back of his neck and glances over at Jonny, who looks utterly disinterested. He’s swiveling back and forth in his chair, his crane-like legs loose and carefree. Jonny sees he has an audience in Colin and sighs dramatically.

“He’s just being a sad twat,” he says.

Colin lowers his eyebrows at his brother but Jonny just raises his in counterpoint and insists, “It’s true though...”

Tim has the decency to ignore Jonny and continues to address Ed. “He came to me last night. He begged me to send him home on the next flight.”

Everyone makes a show of sitting up straighter and making sounds of concern, but really, how shocked can they possibly be, deep down?

“I talked him out of it. I told him to talk to you all about what he’s feeling. He says you’re his best mates. All of you. And called himself a ‘sad piece of shit’ with no one else in the world.” Tim sighs and scratches awkwardly at the side of his nose. “He lost it, okay? Complete collapse. Literally-on-the-floor collapse. I couldn’t even understand half of what he was saying, he was that upset, but he was literally begging. Do you understand? And listen to my words closely – I’m saying this as someone who cares about him and not as your tour manager – if you want to make it through this summer, let alone into next year as a functioning band, you’ll close ranks around him. You have to
take better care of him.”

Colin ruffles a little at that, and he isn’t able to hide it. How much more can he do for Thom?

“How’d you talk him down? I can’t imagine he saw anything you said as much other than keeping him in line and functioning to the label’s level of satisfaction, if he was in such a state.” Phil’s tone doesn’t suggest that he himself finds the theory far-fetched.

Tim picks up on Phil’s meaning. “Look, I’m not the enemy here! Fucking hell! I am not trying to run Thom to pieces and into a hospital!”

“Maybe we just don’t like your tone, Tim!” Ed mimics him: “‘You need to take better care of him.’ Where do you get bloody well off telling us how to act? Thom’s an adult, and—”

Tim’s face flushes. “Ed—”

“No, fucking listen, he’s an adult and he’s not daft, he’s well aware that the label doesn’t give a shit about him so long as he can drag himself up on stage! So how dare you act like we’re the ones somehow responsible for this!”

“Is that what you think? That I’ve spent the last three years with you as...as some sort of evil corporate babysitter?” It suddenly becomes clear that the stress has changed Tim as well, because something combative has taken hold of him. The man generally has the patience of a primary school teacher. “You need to back up, mate.”

Tempers are rising and it’s getting unstable in the room. Even Jonny has dropped his ennui.

Oh, fine. For fuck’s sake.

“THAT’S ENOUGH.”

This is so terribly undignified.

Everyone turns to look at him, however, so Colin continues. “Tim, I am sure Ed doesn’t mean anything by it. We’re all just very...worried...for Thom and it’s just easy to lash out, yes? Ed, I think Tim’s just as worried as we are. He’s been with us for over three years now, he has to eat the same plane and petrol station swill as the rest of us and smell the driver’s farts for as many miles. Yes, of course we will talk to Thom. He’s a bit dramatic and I am sure he would not have actually flown away and left us behind with our thumbs up our arses. Jonny, brother mine, close your mouth. Phil, let’s not suggest that Tim threatened or bribed Thom into staying, shall we?”

“Well, I did. In a manner of speaking.”

“Excuse me?”

“That was the other part of why I called everyone together. I had another matter to discuss.”

Jonny archly intones, “Oh dear,” and smirks up at the ceiling from his slouch.

The redness is slowly fading from Tim’s face. He puts on a tight, hopeful smile and states, “R.E.M. has contacted your management. They want you to open for them this summer.”

Oh.
Tim visibly relaxes further as all eyes on him suddenly turn friendlier. He pushes his glasses back up his nose again and continues, more confident. “About two weeks in Europe at the end of July. We’ll pick back up with them in September, the whole month, eighteen dates I think that leg is. The East Coast and the South, mostly.”

…Oh.

Not even Jonny can play at apathy.

“What was Thom’s response?”

Colin is nearly holding his breath.

“Oh, well, said he was going to throw up.”

“That’s what he says in reaction to a great many things.”

“But then he actually went ahead and did.”

“Ah.”

“Then he cried a little.”

“Okay.”

“But it was a definite yes!” Tim goes serious once more. “I’m hoping that having the pressure taken off by not being the headliner will do Thom some good. You’ll get exposure, but no one gives an arse for the band opening up R.E.M. You’re just the blokes taking up time, keeping them from Everybody Hurts.”

Well, then. Well.

There are some quick verbal sketches of R.E.M.’s Monster Tour, and then they finally are all filing out of the room, after being told their booking agent will be in touch with them with the what and the where and the how of it. It feels like they’ve been in there for hours, though it couldn’t have been more than thirty minutes. Colin wonders if Thom is still napping.

Jonny passes Colin and languidly blocks his path. “You’re utterly wrong, big brother.”

“What?”

“Thom would have left us behind without any hesitation.”

“Jonny, no he wou—”

“—Oh don’t be barmy,” Jonny hisses. “He would have done. He’d have left us, and what then? Sometimes I quite loathe him.”

Jonny stalks off towards his room, leaving Colin to stand next to a vending machine and to ponder if maybe, just maybe, it might be better in the long run for them all if Thom had actually left (his soul folded up safely within the pages of the battered notepads in his rucksack, never looking back,
never regretting), leaving this current trajectory they’re all on as an un-plunged knife.

Chapter End Notes

- Thom can indeed sign. You can see him signing to Tim in this scene in Meeting People is Easy


- Colin DID stand in for a sick Jonny during one of their acoustic sets. Sadly, no video exists of this.

- Phil was the only member to have his own fan club.

- Thom famously begged Tim to send him back home. "And then we went on to do this tour...to get on and be a publicity machine again, it was just more than I could stomach. I was telling Tim {Radiohead's tour manager} to book me a flight home the day we arrived in New York. I had a complete breakdown that night."

- The Vancouver interview with Thom and Colin

  from the Alternative Press, 1995:

"Striding into the cave out of the glaring afternoon sun, Thom clutches the sides of his head as if the artillery fire of Phil Selway's drumcheck is too much for him, which it is. "I've got fluid in my ears," he explains, resting his book on a cocktail table, "and it makes me hypersensitive. I'm going to have to wear earplugs, I think, for soundcheck and the show."

"He has another reason to be concerned: backstage, pacing up and down, insisting on seeing 'one doctor in each city, if necessary,' Thom mutters that deafness runs in his family, and that this drowning of his hearing could be a first sign of trouble. And to look at him, in his much-pondered-upon pale, childlike frame, it does not seem impossible that one day, Thom Yorke could just wake up one morning, deaf as Beethoven."
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 2 - Dinosaurs and Champagne

"Hi, I'm Michael, I'm really glad you could do this. I'm a very big fan."

Thom can't feel his legs. Or his face. What is his face doing? Oh god, what if it's being weird at Mr. Stipe. He studies his shoes and tries to make his breathing slow and deep and impersonal. This is nothing. Nothing at all. This happens every day. Yep.

Mr. Stipe and Mr. Mills nod at them all, the official "greet the opening band" bit obviously ticked off the list. As they turn to leave the room, Mr. Stipe suddenly twists his head towards Thom, who is carefully indulging in what he thinks is a safe, inconspicuous level of scrutiny. Mr. Stipe's eyes find his before Thom can look away.

Thom flushes warm like he's been doused; his stomach is full of butterflies all bursting out of their cocoons at once. The moment stretches and narrows down into a shutter snapping in succession, containing nothing outside of Michael Stipe, looking at him, seeing him.

Then he's gone.

"Oh my god," Ed whispers. Everyone titters and shifts around, seemingly not knowing how to act now.

"D'ya think it's true," Thom hears himself say. "D'ya think Mr. Stipe really likes us?"

"Why would he lie!" Colin laughs, breaking the awed vibe of the room. He hooks an arm around Jonny and starts jostling and shaking him. "What do you think of that, Jonathan? Michael Stipe adores you!"

Jonny grimaces as he extricates himself from his brother's grasp. "He was just being polite; he didn't offer to blow us, Colin, oh my god. Americans are always effusive and friendly. That's all it was. And he wasn't that friendly, even."

"You're too suspicious. You think everyone is being bitchy."

"I think Michael Stipe is southern and southerners are polite and bitchy, yes. It's all the same to them. That's their whole thing."

"That's your whole thing; you want to be a southern debutante, don't you? Bless."
Thom lets the Greenwoods' bickering wash over him and fade out. He is trying to rubber cement every detail in his mind, shifting the bits and pieces around before the glue can dry. Thom is going to remember this forever. He wants to be able to flip his memories open and find Hi, I'm Michael without even having to search. I'm really glad you could do this will sit slightly to the left, for Tuesdays at 3:37 AM when Thom can't sleep and the electrical outlets are buzzing and the shadows undulate and his thoughts are a bad voodoo bag full of bones curled around the shape of his own name. And underneath it all, I'm a very big fan will be tucked into an envelope to protect the edges. That's for when Thom is in a good mood and wants to reward himself, because he already knows he doesn't want to make those words into a worry stone and risk rubbing them so thin they smudge away to nothing in his memory.

This changes things. Thom can literally feel his head stretching to contain this new reality. Five or six years ago he was just another fan in the audience watching R.E.M. on stage, and now Hi, I'm Michael exists in the same indefatigable way toothbrushes and accountants and Cadbury chocolate bars exist.

Any exhaustion he'd felt is gone. He cannot even remember what it's like to feel bland or to need sleep. Suddenly his hands are full of too much electricity and thoughts and gladness and he doesn't know where to put it all down and he's not even sure that he wants to. So he holds on, makes fists. Shortly he will unfurl his fingers onto his guitar and will set all of this free to fly, like birds.

---

"So we'll film your bits today, and here're some sketches for the next two days when we're filming the street scenes. It's too bad you can't be here."

Colin takes the A4 piece of paper from the guy - Thraves, was it? - directing the video for "Just", and reads it over.

"Wot's it say, wot's it say?" Thom is spinning around the set with his leather jacket dangling from his shoulders, remarkably avoiding the wires snaking across the floor. He's happy and soft and has been charming the crew since they arrived. There's a PA that Colin is pretty sure would go down on Thom right now, in front of God and man, if he asked her.

"It's about a character who collapses in the street and he draws a crowd...then all these captions appear on the screen as if the song's been translated. Here." He hands it off.

"It's about a character who collapses in the street and he draws a crowd...then all these captions appear on the screen as if the song's been translated. Here." He hands it off.

"Cheers." Thom takes the paper and dramatically flops into a chair, a shoelace on his trainer trailing. Colin notes his vague desire to approach Thom and tie it, like he did for Jonny growing up. Ugh. He never would have signed up for this rock n' roll gig if he'd known he'd end up being tour mum. It's not like people are even goading him into it; it's so sad, he's doing it on his own.
Ed comes back in; they made him smoke outside. "Are we ready to shed our affable schoolboy
disguises and rock the shit out of this? Look, they gave me sunglasses to wear. I get to be the
mysterious one."

He flashes a thousand-gigawatt smile at Colin as he strikes a pose.

Everyone is in a really good mood and it's just so...nice. Emotional muscles Colin didn't even know
were cramped have loosened up. Everyone in a good mood just means that Thom is in a good
mood. You're all prisoners. Of their own devices. Oh god, Thom's the bloody Hotel California.

Jonny wanders onto the set from god-knows. Thom scrunches his face up like a chipmunk and
giggles. "Oooooohhhh Jonny, you're so pretty. Do you have a boyyyyyyfriennnnnnd?"

Jonny rolls his eyes but looks pleased. Colin will concede his hair looks extra glossy today. Still,
for formality's sake he calls out, "Steady, steady! That's my brother!"

Jonny rolls his eyes again but preens just a little bit, all the same. Craftily, he stretches his back so
that the white button-up he's wearing slides tightly across his chest. The PA lusting after Thom
suddenly has something she needs to do near Jonny's stage marks. He notices and smirks slightly
behind the sleek wash of his hair. His posture shifts into something even more enticing as he
slowly looks at Thom out of the corner of his eye, but Thom is oblivious to the change in the PA's
sexual alliance (if he was aware in the first place, even) and is reading. Jonny turns his back on
both the PA and Thom with a haughty flip of his hair, his posture back to a bored quirk of dangling
limbs.

Tart, thinks Colin. That PA is barking up the wrong sort of tree when it comes to his brother,
anyway.

"Oh, this is brilliant, what's he say at the end?" Thom calls out, waving the paper with the plot
summary.

"I'll tell you later," Thraves says. "No one will ever figure it out, if we play it right."

Thom hops up and rewards him with that genuine, cracked-egg smile of his. "Right on. I think the
same thing every night we take the stage, too."

---

The amphitheatre they're playing tonight was built in the 1930s for the Olympics by a lot of not-
very-nice men. They've done boxing here since then, though. Thom will have to mention this to his
father the next time he rings home.

He takes in the tens of thousands of empty seats and thinks this might just be the biggest place he's
ever seen in his life. It's crouched down amongst a thicket of dark green trees and if he didn't know
better, he'd think he was deep inside an endless fairytale forest.

He lies down in the grass, because he doesn't think his legs can hold him anymore. There's this shaky grin he hasn't been able to hide since they left London, and he offers that grin to the sky right now. The wide expanse seems pretty happy in return; it's the vivid shade of blue that means summer has started to turn towards hot and lazy.

They hadn't seen much of R.E.M. at the first show. Well, they'd seen them, of course - from the wings of the stage, where the five of them had watched rapturously as Mr. Stipe and his band played what they later agreed was one of the best shows any of them had ever seen. There was a little conversation afterwards, mostly on the logistics of the next few shows. Thom hadn't said a whole lot, at least not a whole lot directly to Mr. Stipe. But his head was filled with bumblebees, and his heart was singing at simply standing beside him.

So Thom is grinning. Thom is grinning, and the sky is grinning, and then Michael Stipe is grinning, too.

Fuck!

It takes a full second for Thom's brain to register just who is peering down at him; he scrambles to gather himself up off the ground.

"No, no!" says Mr. Stipe, waving his hands. "Don't let me interrupt. Just wanted to make sure you were breathing."

Thom gets to his feet and wipes at the grass stains on the knees of his trousers. Oh, god—has he got green on his bum, too? His head has to override his hands as they reflexively swing back to check. He's just standing there, with his arms out at funny angles, like a cowboy ready to draw, and Mr. Stipe is still grinning, and, and—R.E.M. weren't supposed to be here for another hour!

"I was hoping to catch your soundcheck before we did ours, but it looks like I'm late to the party."

Thom finally commands his brain to drop his arms back down to his sides. He attempts to arrange himself into a position that makes him look like a normal human being. "Yeah. No! No—I mean, we actually started way early, you're not a problem. It's. It's not a problem, you're not late."

Then, clumsily, "I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry! I'll just have to come in extra, extra early next time, won't I?"

Thom opens his mouth, but Mr. Stipe keeps talking.

"Speaking of parties, there's one after the show tonight that I was hoping you guys could make it to. It's a record company thing, but it should be a good time anyway. No pressure, of course."

"Yeah!" Thom blurts, and he winces inwardly at how emphatically it leaps from his throat. He clears it, weakly. "Yeah, erm. That'd be great! Cool, yeah."

"Great!" Mr. Stipe is beaming, and Thom gets this funny feeling like he's done a good job at something. At what, he has no idea. But he did it right, and he made Mr. Stipe smile, more than once—and he wants to keep doing that. Making him smile. Making him glow like that. Making him glow at Thom like that.
Then Mr. Stipe is sliding a pair of white bug-like sunglasses on and meandering towards the stage, calling out to the stagehands in greeting and waving at Jonny, who looks about himself in confusion.

"D'you need to stop back at the hotel and change your pants?"

Thom remembers the grass stains with horror and grabs his arse in both hands.

"I'm kidding," laughs Colin. Then his face grows suddenly concerned, his voice lowering. "You haven't actually wet yourself, have you?"

Ed's hand claps itself on Thom's shoulder. "The big time, eh lads? This is proper! I mean, the Bowl was big, but this is proper proper."

"Ah, come on," says Thom, though that grin's taken hold of him again. "It probably won't even be half full when we start..."

"I wouldn't be so sure, Thom-boy. Things are changing. I can feel it. Can't you? It's in the air, it's..." Ed trails off, waggling his fingers. "Electric."

"That's the looming thunderstorm," says Jonny, who has caught up to them along with Phil.

"Ohh, don't be such a Henny Penny, Jonathan," tsks Colin. "It'll pass before tonight."

Thom turns his face back skyward and notices the distant clouds rolling thick into the blue.

Let them, he thinks. There is something warm and glittering radiating from his chest, and it is surrounding him like armour.

--

The storm blows through and they watch it from the shelter of a cheap pub. Thom's third pint arrives, and Tim intercepts it.

"Oi," complains Thom, and Tim raises his eyebrows.

"We need to get going."

It's watery stuff, for being in fucking Germany. Thom doesn't have nearly enough of it in his veins. It's not the sad, numbing need he gets alone with a bottle of Tesco vodka at night; it's something half celebratory and half preparatory. His nerves are dancing like mad. Good dancing. But still, they're nerves. His knees bounce rapidly under the table.

The sky is clear and starry by the time they take the stage. They play, and they play even better than they did in London, and Thom is over the bloody moon that has risen above the trees and is
flooding the theatre with silver.

Ed was right; he does feel it.

--

"There's this woman, her name was Hedwig. But everyone came to know her as Hedy Lamarr and I have to say, you reminded me of Ms. Lamarr the moment I laid eyes on you."

"I don't know who that is." The woman Colin is speaking to raises a precisely arched eyebrow. He thinks she has something to do with the presentation to R.E.M. later tonight; she's as sharp and beautiful as a pair of steel scissors.

"She was a scientist, really, but the world only now is really recognising her contributions. She had a hand in spread-spectrum radio, you see, to help the American army in World War II. It was for a secret communications system. I read this article, it described how her technology helped lead to mobile phones and personal tracking devices. Isn't that amazing?"

"Mobile phones."

"There's also an air of Rachael the Replicant about you, as well." Colin smiles, hoping that this tactic will yield better results. She opens her mouth, pauses. Quirks her lips at him dubiously. Oh dear.

"Don't mind him. It's a compliment, trust me." Ed meanders up to them and pulls out a chair.

The woman smiles at Ed and Colin throws his hands up (if only mentally). He's well aware of the intimations behind that sort of smile when it's directed towards Edward O'Brien.

"Well, I have to rush off. It was nice to meet you. Perhaps I shall see you at the party?" She looks at Ed as she speaks.

A murmur of assent and Colin's black-haired folly leaves them to it, alone in the hotel lobby. They're just killing time until everyone else is ready to take a car up the hills to the R.E.M. party.

Ed props his chin on a hand and looks at Colin, mirth barely contained. "So, it just didn't occur to you that perhaps the target of your affections might have responded better had you led with Ms. Lemarr's reputation—to some, at least—as being the most beautiful film star to ever exist?"

"Oh sure, let's mock young Colin Greenwood, mock his broken heart and thwarted libido." Colin grimaces at Ed's guffaw. "Destined to live his life with several cats and too much hand lotion in the bedside table..."

"Someday you will find a woman turned on by the thought of being an undercover communications scientist more than a silver screen starlet, don't you fret." Ed grins and adds, "But
in the future, just leave it at 'Sean Young in Blade Runner' because while that girl might have many charms, I can promise you that being a tech noir book fetishist isn't one of them."

"Oh fuck off," Colin says, albeit companionably. He lights a cigarette and gestures archly with it. "I won't coddle the culturally bankrupt. How does one not know Blade Runner? I lost interest in her immediately. I'm glad you came along and saved me from the desperate advances I was made witness to. The poor girl was embarrassing herself. It hurt to see."

"Mm, I could tell." Ed lights up a cigarette of his own and settles back. They smoke in companionable silence for a bit.

"Where's everyone else?"

"Hmmmm. Phil went ahead already with Tim. I assume Thom's primping."

They're terrible gossips and shameless, besides; Colin doubts either of them would even pretend to deny it if accused. So when Ed lowers his voice Colin immediately leans closer.

"Did you seen how Thom was acting earlier during their set?"

Colin laughs. "Oh my god, he was like a schoolgirl, wasn't he? And he claims he doesn't do hero worship! He was two steps from taking communion using Pete's pick as the wafer."

"Blasphemous."

"Verisimilitude."

"What about Jonny? Is he primping as well?"

Colin shrugs, not sure if he wants to gossip about this. Still, this is Ed, so: "I don't know half of what Jonny's doing, these days. He's probably practising in the mirror at being a terrible prat."

Whoops. Did he say that?

Ed nods in easy agreement. "He's been in rare form lately, though, hasn't he?" He visibly considers his next words and lightly offers, "He's just...working stuff out."

Colin can't stop himself. He laughs bitterly. "Working what out? How to isolate everyone? Except maybe Thom. I swear Thom encourages him, acting like he thinks it's funny. Like it's cute."

Ed doesn't respond, just shrugs and patiently waits for Colin to continue. They all know each others' unspoken signals for needing to let loose into a rant.

"Jonny's become so cavalier in his judgment of basically just everything. He's cruel, he's willful, he speaks without thinking, and he holds forth on opinions with breathtaking arrogance, like they're factual simply because they belong to him. Sometimes lately I don't even like him, Ed. Sometimes I think my little brother has become a person that I don't want to know."

"Jesus, Colin."

"I'm sorry. I don't mean that. I love Jonny." Colin reaches for another cigarette, embarrassed by his outburst. "My patience has just been tried of late."
"No, no...I mean...you know it's okay to be annoyed at your siblings, right? That's pretty normal? To even kinda hate them sometimes?"

Colin just blinks at Ed. "I don't understand."

Ed stares back, visibly bemused. "He's going to be fine. He just doesn't know who he is yet. He's trying on personas. We're just stuck with him while he's doing it."

"Yes, and I am particularly fond of his current persona," Colin sighs. "Irritating little shit."

Ed gawps silently for half a moment and suddenly he's laughing, giant earthquakes that roll over his entire body. Colin can't help but join in. It's ridiculous—they're just all so bloody dumb, aren't they?—but moments like this, talking to Ed, let him feel that it will all be okay and that nothing is all that serious.

They're still laughing and wiping tears when Thom and Jonny join them in the lobby. Thom smiles along with them, looking pleased to join in on any happiness he trips across tonight.

Jonny looks down at them silently for several seconds and then sniffs. "You can't go dressed like that, the both of you. You look like you're on your way to fish off of the Iffley Lock. We're going to a party for R.E.M., not for the wildlife in the Thames."

Ed and Colin are set back off into fresh cackles, leaning over to slap at each others' backs.

"I don't see what's so funny. Please do change. We don't want to be too late."

--

Berlin is a city of repurpose. The party roars down at them from an old army barracks atop a steep hill, and Thom suddenly feels very silly for the bottle of champagne in his hand that he had insisted Colin relinquish to his care.

"This was a stupid idea," he says, and pushes the bottle on Colin.

"It's not stupid! I think it's a very nice gesture. And that's an expensive bottle, that is."

"You give it to him."

"No," insists Colin, refusing to take the champagne. "You were right in the car. It should be you."

"...bloody stupid, they've probably got ten bars in there..."

"Not stupid. It's very nice, Thom."
Once they reach the top of the hill, they're greeted by a gaggle of attractive, well-dressed partygoers and a double line of inflatable dinosaurs leading them towards the entrance.

"Oh my god." Thom forgets his embarrassing bottle of expensive champagne and eyes the dinosaurs covetously. "This is wicked."

Colin peers at the nearest dinosaur while carefully angling his lit cigarette as far away as possible from its rubber skin, and finally begins to look a little intimidated. "Where do you suppose Tim and Phil are?"

"Swallowed alive," hazards Jonny, who for once isn't even pretending at being blasé. "Who are all these people?"

"Oh, I am getting rat-arsed tonight." With that, Ed abandons them and barges straight into the throng, leaving the line of dinosaurs swaying gently in his wake.

"Thom."

Thom is busy prodding at the neck of a particularly beautiful blue brachiosaurus. It's the same height as he is. The polka-dotted t-rex next to it is even bigger.

"Thom, come on." Colin grabs at his arm and drags him onward.

The music is nearly deafening. Like the few scattered outside, the sea of bodies inside are gorgeous and perfect. Thom rubs at his bad eye reflexively, feeling a level of self-consciousness he honestly hasn't felt in a long time. It's an unwelcome old chum to find as a guest at this party.

He lets Colin pull him into the swarm, feeling Jonny's sweaty hand bunching at the back of his shirt. The perfect people begin to notice them, start leaning into their friends' ears and yelling. Gradually, the sea parts and a winding path somehow clears for them.

Thom feels himself blush a deep red, but there's no way anyone could possibly tell in these throbbing Technicolor lights. He laughs something that's more of a violent hiccup, but they can't hear that, either. And now the familiar school shame is receding and he is making what is probably the absolute goofiest face. He doesn't care.

Thom's impression of the place is that of a mischievously haunted fun-house ride. Rooms seem to appear at adjacent angles that shouldn't be architecturally possible, slotting together into some sly joke of a path. Time appears to collude in this perception, seemingly knitting itself together in the happenstance (yet untroubled) way it does in dreams. One second they are pushing through the pretty throng, then instantaneously they are in a room filled with black beanbag chairs and a speaker playing droning, ambient Gregorian chant. Now they're halfway up a spiral staircase. Now they're on a large outdoor balcony, dodging a girl lazily spinning glow sticks on strings in complicated, serpentine maneuvers. This new room has candles that make it smell like the ocean. That next corridor is covered in graffiti that Thom is pretty sure are scenes from the book Watership Down. Now R.E.M.'s lawyer—a man who'd previously introduced himself as Bertis Downs, the Fourth—is shouting in Thom's face:

"Hey, man! You got the stuff!"

Thom is trying to make sense of that when suddenly the ride stops, dumping them out at the edge
of a circle that opens up to accommodate them. And there is Mr. Stipe. Mr. Stipe, talking animatedly. Mr. Stipe, gesturing elegantly with his hands. Mr. Stipe, laughing at an anecdote. Mr. Stipe, turning and giving Thom a brilliant smile.

"Radiohead!" he exclaims; his arms stretch out in welcome, palms upturned and open. Ed ambles forward (Where did he come from? thinks Thom, distractedly. Did the building take Ed on a different journey just to spit him out exactly when and where Mr. Stipe wanted?). The two clap each other on the back. Thom distantly wonders if he might clap Mr. Stipe on the back. Thom doesn't do back-claps, though. He's suddenly terribly envious of Ed.

Thom is still in Dreamland as they shuffle into the circle. Strangers are grinning at him and saying things with wide eyes. He is vaguely smiling and returning the eye contact. He thinks he is. Is he? That's what he's trying to do. Then there's a strange force, a tug at some heaviness in his right hand. He looks down. Ah. The champagne. There's a second hand on it, one that's not his. It's a big hand, and it's slipping the bottle from Thom's easily.

Mr. Stipe is making a pleased, cooing sound. "That is seriously sweet of you guys. This is way better than any of the damn grab-bags they've been throwing at us, I'm not even kidding. What am I gonna do with a gold money clip. Give it to Bertie, that's what."

He sips from the wide-rimmed wine glass in his other hand as he reads the bottle's label; thank fuck they got the expensive one.

Speaking of alcohol:

Alcohol.

Those two pints at the stormy pub seem decades in the past, and Thom needs to be drunk. No, he really, really needs to be drunk. Right now.

And, because Thom has decided this has a 50/50 shot of actually being a dream, he is not taken aback when a glass of something is placed in his hand. Not a plastic cup, but an actual, thick tumbler. He doesn't know who put it there or what it is. It's an enticing ruby red and it's already sliding sharp and prickly down his throat.

Has Thom said anything yet? He doesn't think he has. That's okay, right? He's taking great gulps of his drink and nodding at an American girl with olive skin and cropped white-blond hair. She's saying something about the show, and about what 1995 will mean in one hundred years. She changes the subject to Weimar cinema, or maybe it's toy dog breeds. Thom keeps nodding, his head on a coiled spring.

He realises the unassuming man standing beside him is Tim. Tim keeps pushing at his glasses, missing the rim and pressing shaky fingers directly to the lenses. Thom laughs and Tim laughs back with cognisance; they're all fucking terrified. He begins to feel looser. Phil appears out of nowhere and hands Thom a drink, faltering when he sees he's already got one. Thom shrugs and grabs it. Why not?

He's diving into this night double-fisted.
In one's life, Thom's mum had once said, there are very magical and very profound moments. But the universe is grudging and only feels disposed to offer you a handful of them so **pay attention**. As such, Thom knows when he's been gifted one, and he is shocked every time to learn it's not the way he'd imagined perfection.

For example, Thom almost keeps laughing at the absurdity of whatever is happening in front of him; the only thing keeping him under control is the fear that Mr. Stipe would think he was laughing at *him*. Some bigwigs with microphones are praising R.E.M. for being R.E.M., handing them a placard and more gifts. Bertie-the-Fourth is standing nearby, rocking back and forth on his heels, nodding at every new accolade as if he's weighing the presentation and worthiness of a dowry. Why the fuck does R.E.M. even have a lawyer with them on this tour? Is this what Radiohead has to look toward if they sell enough units? A lawyer-the-fourth of their very own, a lamprey on their bellies?

Maybe Thom's projecting...but does Mr. Stipe look unimpressed beneath his smile? And if so, how has that smile not cracked by now? Thom doesn't think he could ever be this nice for this long to so many bullshit strangers but he's realising that perhaps he might never get to decide, never be allowed to stop.

Thom is smashed and so is everyone else in this place. Everyone but these besuited execs, who probably have pockets full of cocaine they're saving for after they've dispensed with their licks spit. No one can possibly care for a word they're saying, but they're all cheering and clapping anyway. To disassociate himself from this inescapable din, Thom is using his time constructively, which means he is staring at Mr. Stipe. That's all they're *meant* to be doing right now, anyway. So he's taking full advantage of the opportunity.

This is the first time he's really looked at the man and taken his measure. He's only been stealing glances while studiously avoiding all eye contact since they've met. Now he allows himself the gluttonous freedom to commit every detail to memory, so different than any televised performances or the one R.E.M. show he saw as a teenager.

Michael Stipe is neither tall nor short. He moves like a cat that owns every space it occupies. Everything about his posture is fluid and infinitely at ease and though Thom searches carefully for the seams in his bearing that would reveal it as affectation, he can find none. He's wearing impossibly loud plaid trousers that would look ridiculous on anyone else and a coat that looks as though it is constructed from black-furred muppets that were too slow to get away. His eyes are big and blue and he's got eyelashes Thom's only seen before on girls. And there's that ever-present Mona Lisa smile, a gentle cupid's bow that charms as much as it disarms.

Thom takes all of this into consideration and fans these facts out like cards, along with his most treasured possession: the knowledge that this man *knows his name*.

The little presentation comes to a close with even more applause and hollering. The band shake a lot of hands and pose for several photos. The house music starts back up, somehow even louder than before, and the party disperses back into itself. It's not too late yet, at least not late enough that
people have gotten sloppy. But they're well on their way and Thom is along for the ride.

Despite that, it's too much suddenly, and Thom doesn't know how to parse the feelings burbling under his skin, making him tingle. Not too much in an oppressive way, but too much in a way that has Thom's heart about to burst. His senses are overloaded, and he thinks he needs just a little air.

Pushing out the doors and into the courtyard is like jumping into a cool swimming pool. The night is nippy, but Thom's bones are hot enough that he can't feel it. He's almost surprised his skin and clothing isn't steaming from the sudden change in temperature. The garden is lit with fairy lights and paper lanterns. Thom had once seen a photograph of a backyard party in New Orleans, and it'd boasted glowing strings of something similar. Though the scene before him was missing the Spanish moss that clung to the trees like lace.

Thom hadn't been too fond of America at first. But he found himself starting to delight in the brand of enthusiasm that was so specific to its audiences as he became more familiar with it. Back home, loudness meant rowdiness. Over there, in the States, it simply meant that people liked them. It's still the headiest feeling Thom has ever experienced.

They liked them. People like them.

R.E.M. likes them, too.

Thom's hyper amid it all. He wants to shout from the rooftops about things. He wants to swim fully clothed in the Sargasso Sea. He wants to kiss a bunch of girls he doesn't know. He wants to break something official-looking. He wants to paint something that has meaning. He wants to dance forever, and to do it harder than necessary on graves with ghosts still sleeping inside.

Instead, he settles on walking in circles, jumpy and happy beyond reason. Tiny vibrations like tectonic plates keep him moving and he wanders to the very back of the expansive garden, a place that is lit for purpose and not for the party. An apple lies perfect and pinkish near a tree, and he kicks at it. He wonders if there are more apple trees around here, and then he thinks that maybe someday he'll have an apple tree himself. Jonny dreams of chicken coops; it's not that mad, is it?

Thom doesn't admit—not often to himself, at least, and never to anyone else—that he wants to be famous. But he does. And here he is, at some unexpected level of it. It's less a stepping-stone and more a marble entrance. And Thom's shoes are so muddy.

He kicks the apple about like it's a football. He was actually quite good at football, he recalls. But the boys who were also good at football made it clear that Thom should not be. So he gave it up at a very young age. His father took him to a park where he was to kick a ball and be placed on a team; Thom took one look at the ball and burst into tears.

Fuck that. Fuck every last bit of that. This is where he is now, and he is happy. Happy like a fucking baby being tickled, and this changes things. This is life in the fast track. It feels like it is, anyway. And Thom refuses to believe it's just the drink that's made him fifty feet tall in a floodlit garden.

"I'm in love," calls Colin.

"Oh, yes? What's her name this time, then?" Thom kicks the apple so hard that it makes a sound like smush and takes flight, landing somewhere in the distance beyond the reach of the floodlights. He raises his arms to the stars. "Goal!"
"Well..." Colin rubs at his nose, laughing and walking a twisted line towards the soft floodlights illuminating Thom's small orchard. "There are two names for two beautiful women. But I haven't learnt them yet."

Mr. Stipe is jogging out from the shadows to catch up with Colin, something in his grasp.

"That happens," he says when he catches up to them, and the horseback sway of his voice is music even when it isn't singing. Thom hadn't been expecting him, and adrenaline floods his veins.

"Does it?" Colin sounds intrigued, like he has just learned something fascinating about physics and the way the world works.

"Oh, yeah. I lost my virginity to two people. A brother and sister. Both redheads. Easter Sunday, in a bathtub. Here in Germany, actually. I still have a thing for redheads."

The words hit Thom like a water balloon. They slap into his face and burst and trickle down his collar and pool at his stomach. His own ginger barnet instantly feels obscene.

"They're perfect," gushes Colin. "They know Wim Wenders."

Thom has to clue himself back into the conversation at hand. He works hard to pretend he hasn't just heard what Mr. Stipe said, and that he isn't desperately trying to work out if it's supposed to mean something. Examining if he wants it to mean something is so far beyond his capabilities to not even be a consideration right now. He forces himself to say something, something unaffected: "Everyone here bloody knows Wim Wenders, Coz. It's Berlin."

Colin sighs, dreamily. "Still."

"All right," announces Mr. Stipe, and he's twisting at the metal tie on Thom's embarrassingly expensive champagne; Thom didn't think his body had any more adrenaline to dish out. "Those fuckers in there don't deserve this, so let's just keep it between us."

Thom's ears ring like they did the first time he heard his Mum swear. Mr. Stipe presses at the cork with his thumbs until a loud pop! echoes throughout the garden and shimmering foam flows down his hands. It looks like diamonds.

"Where'd the rest go, anyway? Colin, go grab them."

"No!" Thom's heart leaps from his throat, his brain flashes static—this moment which belongs to me and I own it and it is mine!—and he panics. He knows he's being selfish; he even wishes Colin would fuck off. "They wouldn't fuckin' pitch in. Fuck 'em."

Mr. Stipe raises his eyebrows at this. "How much did this cost you, Thom?"

Thom doesn't want to say. Lots of Deutsche Marks. Too many Deutsche Marks. How many is A Whole Lot of Deutsche Marks in pounds? In dollars?

Mr. Stipe just laughs at Thom's silence. "Oh, I am gonna have to keep an eye on you...a real rockstar spender, huh?"

Mr. Stipe doesn't wait for an answer; he trusts the bottle aloft and declares, "To toast!" He takes a
big swig before the foam has finished falling. He moves his mouth about, sampling, froth dripping
down his chin. "It tastes like piss. *Sweet* piss, though, ‘cause you guys bought it."

He hands it to Thom, who feels stunned and numb. He raises the bottle to his lips and thinks, very
specifically, about saliva. He takes a long pull. He reels at the taste. And he laughs.

*It's awful.*

He laughs hard. He laughs so hard, he isn't even making any sound. He's just shaking at the
manicured grass with an open mouth. He feels Colin grab the bottle from his loose fingers.

"Oh my *god*, I have got to taste this." Colin throws his head back with the bottle and spits
theatrically; Thom and Mr. Stipe are in stitches.

"Je-sus," chuckles Colin. "You were right, Thom. We're buying the cheap slag next time."

Thom is trying to catch his breath. His stomach hurts, and he thinks he read that someone did
actually die from laughing once.

"No, no," Mr. Stipe reassures. "This is much better. Bad champagne would just be *bad*. This is bad
with class. I love it, thank you."

Thom lets those words sink in: *thank you.*

These are the words he'd pictured himself saying as a teenager. He'd fantasise about meeting
Michael Stipe in the streets. Maybe he'd be in London for a show. Maybe Thom would save up
enough money to fly to the States, follow them up the coast. Maybe he'd hang about after a gig,
and Mr. Stipe would just happen to appear around a corner. And Thom would say—because it'd
take days to express it all, and this is the best he could compress it into five seconds—"thank you."

But in this topsy-turvy funhouse dream, Thom's on the receiving end.

*I'm a big fan*, says Michael Stipe.

*Thank you*, says Michael Stipe.

Thom's not sure which way is down and which way is up. So he goes forward.

--

"*Jonathan Richard Guy-Fuckin'-Fawkes Greenwood!*"

Colin laughs at his brother's reaction: Jonny whips around as though a teacher has caught him red-
handed at something he hasn't even done. He's standing as defeatedly as a sunken soufflé,
bracketed by Phil and Tim and looking as though he'd rather be absolutely anywhere else than at
this party. Colin finds it highly amusing, seeing as Jonny was the one earlier who'd been railing at
them to put forth their best effort, at least in the sartorial sense.

Thom runs up to Jonny and tries to give him a noogie, but he's too short. Jonny swats him away like a fly. "Ugh, get off."

"Is that an invitation?" Thom waggles his eyebrows.

Jonny shoves him again, feebly. "You're embarrassing."

"Where's Ed? You lot are no fun at all."

"Holed away with a lady in some closet, I expect." Colin is scanning the room for the objects of his affections, whom are nowhere to be seen. He sighs at length. "Another typical Saturday night for our intrepid hero...different country, same old story."

"It's Tuesday," says Jonny.

"Ah come off it, Cozzer. There will be others. Other othersssss. Plural, you see. Maybe even three next time, maybe a dozen...you can build your own harem!"

"What's he on about?"

Colin sighs again and shakes a cigarette from his dwindling supply. "Nothing, brother dear."

"It's three-forty," says Tim. Phil nods, looking knackered. "We have a flight at nine. That's in about five hours."

"So come on our flight," suggests Michael Stipe, who has a way of being omniscient and swooping into existence when it strikes his fancy. He plucks a cigarette from Colin's pack. "We don't leave till late afternoon."

Tim looks put-upon. "Er...well, we don't have the means, the...the funds to just..."

Michael waves Tim's hesitations from the air. "Don't sweat it, we'll sort it out."

Thom is holding his hand out and making the universal sign for *gimme gimme!* at Colin, who is apparently the tree from which all cigarettes now grow. Thom used to smoke like a chimney when they were teenagers, finally quitting for good about a year ago. He now only blags one when he is extremely drunk and extremely happy: two requisites that rarely hold hands. Colin acquiesces with a roll of his eyes. Thom grins and bounces in place, clenching his ill-gotten prize.

"Well, I certainly wouldn't object." Colin lights Michael's cigarette and then his own.

He moves to light Thom's, which is hanging from his lips as an abstraction, but Michael gets there first. He snatches it from Thom's mouth and presses it to the tip of his own cigarette until it glows into life. He holds it back out with a flourish and Thom's bouncing comes to a quick halt so that he can take it back between his lips. Colin cannot tell for certain, but he thinks Thom might be blushing a little. He sets himself a little mental flag to tease Thom about his idol worship when they're both more sober.

Tim is clearly trying to remember how to be professional with one big gigantic cocktail sitting in his stomach. "...errr...well, if that's a, erm, possibility. I mean, if it's not a problem..."
"Well, it is a little, yes. You first have to sign here in blood, and promise your third-born child. Yes, third-born. We're tricky here." Michael laughs kindly when Tim freezes. "Seriously it is not even close to a problem. We'll get you extra legroom, too."

Colin chuckles around an exhalation of smoke, imagining what Ed's face would look like were he here. "Mm, Ed'll be forever in debt."

"Go on then, Tim!" Thom is bouncing again, jumping around their tour manager in a tight circle. "Let's do it!"

"Well...all right. I suppose. Thank you, that's incredibly kind."

"Yeah!" whoops Thom. "C'mon, Jon-Jon-let's finally corrupt you. I'm thinking something gross and fruity, a Fuzzy Navel or somesuch shit..."

"Not tonight, Yorke. I've a feeling Jonny would be happy to head back to the hotel with me." Colin smiles at Jonny, who looks terribly relieved. He can always tell when his younger brother is looking for an exit.

"Yeah, count me in," says Phil. "I could use the sleep."

It doesn't take a detective to know where Tim's allegiances lie; he keeps trying to hide yawns behind his hands, setting his glasses askew.

"Boring old geezers, all of you." Thom's puffing at his cigarette hyperactively and looks nowhere near tired. Michael is watching him with a smirk.

"I was born a geezer, love," says Colin. "It's what I do best. We'll see you in the morning, then? Do locate Ed, if you think of it."

"I'll get them back to you in one piece," Michael promises.

If Colin were a little—all right, a lot more sober—he would allow himself to be a touch concerned at leaving Thom behind. Because Thom hasn't let loose like this in a long time. But then, Thom also hasn't been this happy in a long time. And he's an adult, after all. And, well...Colin really needs a night off. It's hard being a mum. Ugh, fuck that.

The streets are empty and chilly. Colin wishes momentarily for a jacket but there's nothing for it; they descend back down the long driveway. The four of them wait for their cab in relative silence, listening to the distant din of the music and the wind in the trees.

"I'm not sure what I think of him," Jonny eventually drops. Phil and Tim pretend they haven't heard.

Colin raises an eyebrow. "I wouldn't let that slip around Thom."

Jonny crosses his arms, hugging himself in the cold. "I'm not sure what I think of either of them."
Chapter End Notes

- this chapter (and all the following European chapters) take a lot from Thom's Tour Diary

July 30 - "First gig with R.E.M. Mr Stipe comes in before the show to say hello. "Hi, I'm Michael. I'm really glad you could do this. I'm a very big fan." Wonder how many times I will run this through my brain after today. I've never believed in hero worship and so on, but I have to admit to myself that I'm fighting for breath. I've had moments in the past two years when time has completely curved and space became a Hitchcock camera trick. At these moments, barriers seem to break in my head and I never see anything in the same way again. And for days and days all I want to do is run around jumping into people's earshot waving my hands up and down like Bjork and pulling faces. This is one of those moments."

July 31 - "Video shoot for Just. It's being directed by a guy called Jamie Thraves. He's just sent us this idea on an A4 piece of paper. It's about a character who collapses in the street and then all these captions appear on the screen as if the song's been translated. Apparently. But, there are three days of shooting and we're only here for one so it's pretty much out of our hands. That's cool. Go stand on film set. Strut around like a peacock making faces. Not a pig in sight. Good therapy."

Filming the 'Just' video. We like how Jonny is looking at Thom.

August 1 - "We're playing in this beautiful amphitheatre built as part of the 1936 Olympic games for the boxing. I lie down in the sun. R.E.M. arrive. We say hello. I'm cool. This happens all the time. Bertis Downs, their lawyer, comes up and says, "Hey man, you got the stuff." I have no idea what he's talking about. After the show, R.E.M. have this record company thing in an old army barracks set in the hills. The entrance is lined with inflatable dinosaurs. They get awarded all these specially commissioned bonkers discs. Just for being R.E.M., basically. They all pose and smile and do the whole political bit and are extremely nice. I'm shocked. It seems you have to be nice to people forever. I may as well get used to my cracked smile now. I'm just completely hyper in the presence of all this. Find myself gurgling like a baby who is being tickled. Kick an apple around the floodlit garden until I can string a sentence together again. Feel 50 feet tall. Shit, shit, shit. This is R.E.M. and they really like us. No, I mean they REALLY like us. They're not just being nice. When someone you really admire gives you something like that, your shoulders get a little lighter, you feel a little stronger. Forever"

- Michael Stipe has told the story of losing his virginity to a pair of red-headed
siblings in interviews.
"I was first attracted to men actively when I was 13. I kind of had my first sexual awakening much earlier, with a brother/sister team with red hair in a bathtub on Easter Sunday. I still have a thing for redheads and freckles."
Extra legroom means very little in the grand scheme when your insides are trying to evict themselves.

Thom had drunkenly hoped last night when R.E.M.—no, Mr. Stipe—offered them space on their little chartered jet that he’d be sat next to Mr. Stipe (foolish, foolish), but today he is thanking whatever higher powers might be that he’s stuck with Ed.

Ed, who is groaning and cursing the empty water bottle before him. He’d downed the water in three impossible gulps. Like a horse, thinks Thom. A great, idiot horse.

“They may as well have given it to me in an eyedropper...”

“They didn’t you buy something—with, I don’t know, electrolytes—at the airport?” asks Phil, who is aggravatingly awake and chipper in a seat behind them.

“Because I’m stuuuuuuuupiiiiiiiiiiid.”

Thom sighs and reveals the extra large bottle of orange Gatorade he’d been concealing. When Ed moves to grab it, Thom pulls it quickly out of reach.

“If you drink more than half of this, I will kill you.” Thom pauses, swaying a little where he sits. It takes a moment for his eyes to refocus. “Once I’m able.”

Ed nods; Thom doesn’t make empty threats when it comes to his hangovers.

The plane jumps, and they both groan in perfect concert. Jonny sniggers somewhere. Thom will kill him, too.

Tim stumbles past them, grabbing every headrest as he bears himself along towards the toilets. He’s not wearing his eyeglasses and is muttering vague apologies to each seat he passes. He’s acting so exceedingly British in his panic and misery that Thom might be willing to take bets on if he’s even going to make it to the miniature toilet, if the thought didn’t make Thom’s own gag reflex start to twitch.

Ed eventually falls asleep against the shuttered window. Thom is trying to eat some pretzel sticks but they’re too dry and too salty. He presses hard on the little shiny bag and crushes them all to a fine powder. He enjoys the feel of the crumbs crunching and shifting under his index finder.
He looks about the cabin; the chartered plane is nice, but it’s not great. And not just because he’s hungover. Perhaps it’s underwhelming because it’s a small plane and a short flight. It just feels like a more private form of business class. His lap belt is the same expected and loathed shade of dull grey as it always is. He reckons transatlantic journeys must be far cushier. With champagne flutes and shit. He thinks he heard someone at the party say that R.E.M. is going to be taking the Stones’ personal jets at some point. Now that’s cool.

*Ugh.*

*Champagne.*

Thom pushes the very idea of alcohol from his brain and tries to focus on anything else. Planes. Flying. The low rumble of the engine. He starts to make a list of weird things he buried as a child.

There was the tube of his mum’s lipstick he placed under the corner of their shed. He’s thinking about how he didn’t like the way it made her mouth look all wet and red and hungry, when his eyes fall on Mike Mills. He’s peering down at a piece of paper with a knit brow. Mike is incredibly approachable, and Thom doesn’t feel nervous at all as he leans across the aisle to ask what’s up.

Mike seems to come slowly out of a trance. His cloud of strawberry blonde curls is a tangle, and his glossy eyes have clearly seen too much of the night before.

“Tell me,” he says. “What do you make of this?”

Thom takes the proffered paper and begins to read:

*Dear Mr. Mills,*

*It upset me to learn of your recent and unexpected surgery. I was happy to hear it was nothing serious. I hope you’ve recovered by now, and that all is well. The show must go on!*

*Sincerely,*

*Bill Clinton*

*President of the United States*

“What the fuck? Is this…real?”

Mike shakes his head, eyes still trained on the letter. “I don’t know. I guess so? They gave it to me at the front desk when we checked out. How did…how did he know where we were?”

Thom and Mike pass the letter back and forth in perplexed fascination for several minutes. Thom conjures up a universe wherein John Major sends his sympathies to Thom’s squeaky ears.

The remainder of the short flight passes about as well and as standardly as any they’ve ever taken. Ed farts in his sleep. A stewardess takes a clear disliking to Thom for reasons that aren’t entirely clear. Thom finally settles his Sennheiser cans over his ears and buries himself in the hole in his head where he’s free.

He watches the top of Mr. Stipe’s head until he passes out to the sultry sweat of Mingus’s *Goodbye Pork Pie Hat.*
There’s nothing to do that night in Oslo. The docket is clear.

Well, no, that’s not precisely true.

There are things to find and collate and codify. There are things to build and break down and build again. There are things to steal and disfigure. There are things to scratch and fuck. There are things to triangulate and avoid, like seriously avoid. There are sentences to puree and/or distort beyond recognition. There are vague declarations to be made. There is dust to be inhaled. There are wounds to pick open and dig at. There are things to forget about and pave over. There are moods to generate and modify. There are rhythms to inject. There are things to laugh at, with varying degrees of cruelty. There are things to polish and hide away. There are things to set on a table and watch. There is plenty to do. So OK. Order room service tonight and get on with them, squirt.

Fuck it; Thom’s going out and getting drunk, instead.

--

“Next!”

“We can work this one out, let’s tr—“

Jonny leans back down over his instrument.

“NEXT.”

Thom’s pacing about the stage. His mind is locked inside a tiny plexiglass cube, rage-breath steaming the surfaces so that a dirty fog is curling around the edges of things, blocking all reasonable thought from view. Why can’t they fucking get it right?

“No, we’re fucking moving on. Iron Lung! Now, now, NOW. NOW. NOW. NOW.”

He clomps over to Ed’s side and wrenches—none too gently—Ed’s Rickenbacker 360 off the rack. He can see Plank grimace from his corner. Tough. Thom whirls back and holds it out to Ed. Ed just eyes him back.

“Take it! Take it or I’m fucking dropping it, you cunt, count of five! One-two-three-f—“
“Jesus!” Ed snags the neck and pulls the guitar to safety.

Thom moves his thunder towards Phil’s kit to grab up a bottle of water sitting on the riser. He’s too aggressive and water spatters down his shirt when he tosses his head back. Great. Just great. Thom wants to cry. This is so stupid. He feels completely non-human in his skin, and maybe sort of non-animal in general. There are dark, wet streaks down the grey of his shirt that would not pass in a job interview.

He throws the bottle, truly out of control now, and water gurgles across the stage. Colin curses, bass banging against his knees as he crouches to retrieve it. Thom briefly thinks of sparks.

Phil tosses his sticks down next to him and leans forward, hands on knees, to talk quietly to Thom. “Take it easy? You’re hungover. You don’t need to pull this act with us.”

“Why should I? Why should I take it easy? I’m not going to make it easy for anyone, not when I know there are people—on this stage, no less!—who shouldn’t fucking need an explanation of how to play songs we’ve done fucking dozens of times!”

“We’ve not played it a dozen times, though. It’s bloody fresh from the womb,” mutters Colin, using his foot to rub a dropped towel over the wet stage around him and Phil.

“We’re all taking a break, guys. Back in fifteen.” Phil is already at the steps, leaving, leaving, gone.

“FUCK YOU!” Thom screams at the space Phil had just occupied.

He flings himself off the stage with the vague idea that he’s going to find Philip and drag him back by his hair. What little hair he has left. Thom’ll finish the job; he’s going to snatch him bald. He is going mash him like a mealworm, he’s going to make him cry, he’s going to—

“Detroit, 1982.”

Thom jumps and spins, heart clawing at his throat as he nearly loses his balance. He has to pinwheel. Normally when in a rage he’d be deaf and dumb but this unexpected voice cuts through the fire and douses him, knocks him loose from the inferno so that he bounces back down into reality. Hard.

Oh god. Oh fuck. It’s Mr. Stipe. He’s sitting on an equipment case behind stage right with a notebook in his lap and did he hear Thom going off like that, did he see all of that?

“We played for four people, and they were all tripping. Then we took them out to dinner at a Greek restaurant afterwards.” Mr. Stipe mock-grimaces and shakes his head fondly. “The worst show ever. But it’s kept all the rest of ‘em in perspective.”

“I…” Thom clears his throat, trails off. He has never been this mortified in his life. There’s no possible way Mr. Stipe didn’t hear him, hear him acting like a child, an infant dictator. The Oslo Spektrum has this immense sound and words just bounce around. He must be thinking that they made a mistake asking Radiohead to open. He must be thinking what an ugly specimen Thom is. He must be thinking he hates Thom. Loathes him, even. This is Thom’s comeuppance; the universe decisively and rightfully smacking him down. Thom’s teenaged R.E.M. poster surfaces in his memory.
He considers just running. Mr. Stipe will trot this tale out at dinner parties for years to come: The legend of the stupid frontman of the band Mr. Stipe had asked to open for them and who was such a fuck-up he ran from the venue and was never seen again, leaving R.E.M. in a lurch and putting them off of British rock forever. Whatever happened to that guy? Hope he never fucking shows his face ‘round here again. It was ugly, anyway.

“Sit down next to me, Thom. There’s something I’ve been wanting to discuss with you, a matter that needs addressing.”

Oh fuck, this is it, and it’s worse than Thom could have imagined. He can feel a ball of anguish clenching his throat, a sign that tears are surely on the horizon if he doesn’t get his emotions under control immediately. Yet…there’s also a sense of relief. The sort he felt that time a professor had sat him down at uni and told him he was failing printmaking. He no longer has to hide. Mr. Stipe now knows he’s an imposter, and Thom no longer has to pretend otherwise. Everyone will know now, and Thom can just let go and lay to rest that grasping, frantic part of himself.

Still. He takes a careful seat next to Mr. Stipe on the case, his feet dangling. He hunches into himself like a dog expecting a beating. Thom understands he has no choice but to take this dose of bitter medicine.

“Okay, Thom, here’s the thing. You need to stop calling me ‘Mister Stipe.’ You’re making me think you see me as a dirty old man, or your boss. I’m not sure which makes me feel worse.”

Thom gawps up at Mr. Stipe, confused and not grasping how the face looking down at his can be so kind when it should by rights be full of derision.

“What should I call you then?”

Mr. Stipe grins, continuing to look at him like Thom’s something interesting he’s reading in an obscure book. “I was hoping ‘Michael.’ Why, is there something else you had in mind?”

Thom blushes and stutters. Anger, he’d expected; pity, he could have borne. But this gentle ribbing has him wobbly as a colt. About as spindle-legged, too. He takes in a deep breath and decides to dive off this cliff: he owes Michael his honesty.

“I’m sorry. I’m…I’ve fucked this up. I’ve been trying so hard not to make a fool of myself. I don’t know why I get like this.”

“You’ve fucked up nothing as far as I’m concerned. Let go of that idea right now,” Michael says firmly. More gently, he adds, “I’ve noticed you’ve been avoiding me, though.”

Thom’s stomach twists itself anew. Oh. Oh, no. Does Michael think Thom doesn’t like him? But…if that’s the case, then why is he smiling? Why is he smiling that smile? Why is he being so very friendly?

“I…didn’t want you to think I was a…erm. A stalker.” The truth lifts something heavy off Thom’s shoulders and leaves him smiling wanly down at his lap. He rubs his snuffly nose into a sleeve. It’s ridiculous, really. “It’s, er, I just wanted to seem like I was…cool. With all of this. And I’m not.”

“Hey. Thom. Look at me.”

Thom stares at the bridge of Michael’s nose.
“No, really look at me.”

Thom goes very brave.

“There you are.”

Those eyes, on his. And that smile.

“I'm afraid of everything,” Michael says. The words ring in Thom’s ears. “I'm not a naturally courageous person. Pete always says that’s fine, and I can deal with it however I need to. But that there are very simple rules: You share all your publishing and you don't fight about petty things. And it's democratic. Everybody gets a veto vote, not just the singer.”

Thom frowns, digesting this information. He clears his throat. “We, uh. Do the first. Not so good on the rest, though. You know. You…heard.”

Michael nods. “Yeah, it’s fucking hard. Being the face. The problem is, you're catapulted into this position where your ego is blown up to the size of a major planet. And you have to constantly fight against that. Because it’s about the songs. Focus on the songs and not the bullshit, I keep telling myself. Sometimes I worry I’m forgetting that, but the other guys bring me back.”

Thom’s voice is suddenly heavy with the emotion he’s been trying very hard to keep inside. He licks his lips and blurts, “I don’t want to be a complete bastard. But I am. How did I get like this? I start out with good intentions…”

He trails off and shrugs. Pathetic, unsure as always. There’s nothing much to add. He knows how he sounds. If Michael notices the quiver in Thom’s voice, he doesn’t let on.

“When I get like that—and trust me, I do—I remember it’s really myself I’m frustrated with.” Thom’s breath catches. Yes. Yes, exactly. And then more taboo falls forth, as if shoved from his lips. His voice sounds unreal to his ears:

“Sometimes I wonder how much longer we can last,” he rushes. “I still get days when I want to clock in all my zillions of utterly useless air miles and fuck off forever to a shack in New Zealand or something. But then what?”

Michael lets out a long, closed-mouth sigh. “Peter and Bill made a pact to keep the band going until the year 2000. They’ve decided they want to break up at the millennium. There’s something poetic about that. I dig that idea. It makes it…comprehensible. Manageable. And hey, I can hang in with these guys for another few years.”

A death sentence above R.E.M.’s head makes Thom’s stomach plummet. But, more importantly:

“I don’t want my ego blown up. Like you said.”

“Then don’t let it! Though, my god—doesn’t it feel like the whole world just hungers for you to give in and be the little egotistical monster they’ve written you off to be?”

Thom blinks hard at that, like someone discovering he is not the last or first man on planet Earth. Okay. Okay, maybe whatever language he’s speaking isn’t that indiscernible. It may be crude, but at least the paint he’s smearing on the fucking walls of this venue isn’t completely cryptic.
“It makes me feel as if they’re preparing me for some sort of pagan sacrifice. The way they look at me. The way they pet me and coddle me. And,” Thom lowers his voice, scandalised at his own admission, “the way that sometimes I really like it.”

Michael laughs loud and long, obviously delighted. “Oh darling, of course you like it. I love it. But,” he winks at Thom, “it’s more fun to frustrate them all, keep them from pinning you down, isn’t it? Keep your humanity safe. Call them out. When the pile of shit is that big, pretending you don’t smell it looks silly and feels cheap.”

“Yes.” Thom smiles back, feeling the warm glow of something he’s never quite felt before. Not precisely like this, anyway. “Erm. I should get back out there. We need to finish up soundcheck. But, wow. Um. That helped. A lot. I thought you’d think I was, well…”

“A squalling little brat? He has no one to blame but himself; he was hoisted by his own petard.”

“Heh.” Thom is surprised that his huff of laughter is genuine, not conciliatory. “Yeah. Exactly.”

“I could never think that about you, Thom.” Michael looks affectionately at him. “See you afterwards, then?”

“Yes. Thank you…Michael.” Oh, he’s going to hell. The Bad Hell. He’s got no right, despite what Michael says, to assume such familiarity. But there’s nothing for it, so he nods shyly and hops down from his perch. As he walks back towards the stage, he hears Michael’s voice behind him:

“Every time we go to Detroit, we meet a hundred people who claim to be those four we took out for dinner.”

—

Colin is surprised when the new song, “Lucky”, shows up on the setlist, after everything that went on earlier. But he doesn’t comment, nor does anyone else.

It’s the best they’ve ever performed it.

Chapter End Notes

- July 11, 1995: Mike Mills went under the knife to remove an intestinal tumor which,
fortunately, was benign. President Clinton did indeed send him a get-well note.

- from Thom's tour diary:

August 2 - "Realise that I have seen nothing of Berlin except for the statue from Wim Wender's Wings Of Desire. And I only glimpsed that from the van window. Even the gig was surrounded by trees. Typical. On the flight to Oslo, Mike Mills shows me a note he's just received from Bill Clinton offering sympathy for his recent stomach troubles. Both of us are too hungover to know quite what to make of it."

August 3 - "See Kurt Cobain's suicide letter on the back of someone's T-shirt for the first time. Follow the girl around various shops trying to read it. Something about being moody. Everybody here is blond and good-looking. And they all wear orange, which is my favourite colour.

I'm really proud of the way we play tonight. There's a new song called Lucky and I think it's the best we've ever played it. The room has this immense sound and the words just bounce around it. I get the shivers virtually all the way through the song and just grin like an idiot.

Watching R.E.M. tonight makes me think how huge they are and how much they have gone through. Now, of course, Bill Clinton writes them letters and they play stadiums. Not that this is my definition of an idyllic future. Briefly consider just how long Radiohead can last. I still get days when I want to clock in all my billions of utterly useless executive air miles and fuck off forever to a shack in Kare Kare in New Zealand with its alien plant life. But then what?

The R.E.M. machine is astounding. How is it possible to redress the balance in your head between all this stuff and being some guys with drums and guitars and a couple of mikes? I guess the answer is with songs like Strange Currencies or a brand new one called The Undertow. Songs that would make me jam on the brakes in the middle of the motorway and veer into the hard shoulder until they had finished. What else is there to life except moments of honey like this? Listening to Finest Worksong makes me feel like I'm 10 feet tall and can crush anything in my path.

I play everyone a new song in the dressing room (which is a toilet). It's called No Surprises, Please. Colin goes nuts. Afterwards, I try not to get blind drunk but fail miserably. Go out dancing and locate my aggressive streak on encountering a couple of Nordic males who are flexing their impotence in tracksuits. Dance it out to the Beastie Boys' Root Down. Feel much better"
Chapter 4 - The Sunglasses

“I like your sunglasses.”

What a stupid thing to say, Thom thinks. But he does—Michael’s sporting these modern things with a chrome bar across the top and smoky grey-purple lenses that slightly wrap around the sides. They make him look cool. Thom’s never looked that cool. He has a horrifying flashback to his David Sylvian stage, all blow-dried blonde tousles. Well, he’s cooler now than that, surely.

“Thank you. I like your helicopter.”

Thom clutches it to his chest. It’s about forty-five centimetres long and has “Ambulance” and “Emergency Service” emblazoned across its sides; when Thom saw it in the Stockholm airport it reverberated in his head and he had to have it. He doesn’t know why he didn’t leave it in his room and instead has dragged it with him to the venue; there’s a vague idea hanging over him that he’ll look at it when the pre-show jitters hit. He hopes Michael isn’t teasing him.

“Yeah, well, I don’t really know what I was thinking…I’ll probably end up leaving it behind. A waste, really. Takes up too much space in my luggage.” He underplays his pleasure at the toy, just to be safe.

Stipe slips his glasses under his chin so that they hang down from his ears. “Hmmm. No, it’s fantastic. I love toys. You know what Kinder Eggs are?”

“Yeah, sure.”

“I only learned about them a couple years ago. We don’t have them in America. They’re illegal actually, due to some old FDA choking hazard law. But anyway, I bought a whole pile of ‘em. And at the airport, too! Maybe it’s just something about airports? You need something simple and pleasurable to deal with the horror of it, right?”

Well, fuck.

Michael reaches out at flicks at the propeller on the tail of the helicopter, setting it spinning. “Don’t toss it. Hell, give it to me if you decide you don’t want it. It’s really fucking cool. Anyway, gotta go talk to a guy, do a thing, an interview. See ya!”

It’s not just the helicopter that is reverberating in his head, now.
“Who’s that? What a remarkably ugly little man.”

Thom perks up from his book—something about the Paris Riots of 1968, he liked the cover, so he bought it—and slowly turns his head towards the voice.

Michael has meandered into the greenroom, a tragically stylish reporter at his side, to where Thom’s been slouched on a couch since soundcheck. The reporter is wearing an orange jacket, Thom’s favorite colour, which Thom thinks isn’t fair. He notices Thom looking at him and doesn’t even have the decency to feign chagrin at being caught out. He nods his aggressively goateed chin at Thom and instead of addressing him directly, asks Michael, “Ah! He’s the singer for the opening act, yes? Radiohead?”

“Yeah.” Michael’s looking at Thom, too.

Fuck you. The reporter knows exactly who he is. Thom tries to remember if he’s crossed paths with him before. Pissed him off. There’s always a more than slight chance that’s the case, and it doesn’t even matter, so Thom makes a show of dismissing him to return to his much more interesting book. Ugly is better than suicidal, at least.

Thom carefully ignores how he may or may not feel about being called ugly in front of Mr. Stipe—no, Michael—though. That doesn’t matter either, he firmly tells himself.

“Radiohead are so good it’s scary,” says Michael. “We asked them on tour because we think they’re making some of the best music we’ve heard in a really long time. Maybe ever. I watch them perform every night if I can. They’ve got this new one, ‘Lucky,’ it’s just remarkable.”

Warm, oozing shock is gumming his thoughts, slowing everything down to amber, and Thom can barely stand to look up. When he does, after a million billion years by his own reckoning, Michael is staring down at him placidly from behind his cool rockstar glasses. There’s barely the smallest quirk to his lips in response to what Thom is sure is the screaming, clumsy expression on his own face.

The reporter is making expressions behind Michael, too, but his are shut-down and sour. What a triad they make.

Michael pulls his sunglasses off. He saunters over and slips them onto Thom, who is frozen and unresisting and, oh. All right, then. Faint purple suddenly overlays everything he can see, infusing his senses, and he knows that there will always be two colours in his head now, orange and purple, representing all the overwhelming things he struggles to sing into existence. Colours that can mend the stars.

“I think Mr. Yorke’s remarkable, too. In all senses of the word.”

The reporter’s face transforms into a different unhappy expression, the type of face actors in old
black-and-white horror films made. Werewolf movies. *My god, I have hair in places I never had hair before!*

“Shall we?” Michael smiles easily at the reporter as he moves towards the greenroom door. Without looking back he calls out, “Hey Thom, find me afterwards tonight?”

Thom doesn’t answer and Michael’s gone, anyway. But the purple remains, a balm over the jolt and collapse of Thom’s thoughts.

--

Thom is anxious. He is trying to ignore how his heart is caught in a landslide as he dawdles his way towards Michael’s dressing room. For the first time, he is consciously considering if Michael Stipe might have been properly flirting with him. His immediate conclusion is that Michael most certainly was not, so *don’t be daft and precious*. Michael is American, and an American southerner at that; popular culture suggests that generalised flirtation is a born-and-bred trait.

*But what if he was flirting?*

Thom shakes his head and lets himself bump lightly into the wall as he slowly moves along the hallway, using it to prop himself up along one shoulder. A venue staff member is approaching him from the other direction, giving his weird antics a side-eye. Thom leans further into the wall and gives her side-eye back. He considers hissing at her if she says anything to him, but she passes by without incident. He starts moving again, the scrape of his shirt fabric like whispers against the wall.

*Mr. Yorke’s remarkable, he said.*

The back of Thom’s neck feels stupid and warm and shivery. This is so dumb, why is he thinking about this?

*In every way. He said.*

Does…Thom even *want* Mr. Stipe to think about him in *that* way? (He cannot think of him as *Michael* when entertaining this blasphemous train of thought. That’s a bridge too far, so it is).

*I’m not gay.*

Neither is Michael. He’s bisexual. He doesn’t like that term though, apparently. Thom had read the interviews when Michael Stipe had come out a year earlier. He knows that Michael has referred to himself as an “equal opportunity lech.” He’s *shameless*, Thom thinks, a little frisson spattering along his nerve-endings.

*You made out with Colin at that party.*

So the fuck what. *Everyone’s* made out with Colin.

Okay, that’s not precisely true. But it was *just* a party, and they were *just* drunk, and Colin was *just*
talking about how a good kiss is an art form people don’t take pride in anymore, and Thom started to take the piss, and. Well. Colin won that one, that’s for certain. But it was just a laugh.

_Michael Stipe wouldn’t do that for a laugh._

But maybe he is. Maybe he thinks Thom’s obvious worship is as cute as a puppy bumbling along behind him. Maybe he’s starting to find it annoying and is using it to gratify himself, at least up to the point where he tires of the subterfuge and smacks Thom’s nose with a proverbial newspaper.

_He really seems to like Radiohead. I mean, I really think he does!_

That doesn’t mean Michael doesn’t think Thom ought to know his place.

Thom isn’t experienced with men. He considers himself straight, for all intents and purposes. Maybe bicurious. At the most. He’s not even curious, though, is he? Maybe Thom is just flexible when _needs must_. Okay, so maybe he rubbed one out against Jack Dillies in the backfield shed, one desperately horny afternoon when he was fifteen. Hands rubbing too hard at the fabric over each other’s groins, studiously avoiding eye contact. The only focal point of the experience was the feeling of a hand _not their own_. Afterwards they had self-consciously shrugged it off, and there was no epilogue. It was an all-boys school. These things just happened.

And in his defense, at that age he existed in a perpetually turned-on cloud of hormones that could allow him to get off against a particularly shapely _pillow._

However…there was also that time, back in uni, when Thom may have watched a stoned guy wank at a house party, unaware that Thom was even in the room.

But whatever. It was just something he’d tripped across, so he watched. Anyone would have. Rubbernecking.

_(You touched yourself through your jeans watching him fist his cock, at least be honest, Thom, let’s not play-act at being innocent here, don’t be so rabbity…)_

Thom shrugs. He realises he’s not actually feeling all that rabbity. That’s probably the most surprising bit. He knows he’s dangerously close to something approximating a crush; this…_thing_…he’s feeling towards Michael is displaying all the correct markers. There’s a first for everything, he supposes, and it’s not like Michael’s the _normal_ sort of bloke. So he’s just _picky_ with what sort of guy might turn his head, okay, and, well, now Thom thinks maybe he’s being a bit rabbity after all.

Oh, for fuck’s sake—so what? He’s just pathetic when shown the least bit of attention or affection, and that’s all this is. Making out with Colin a few months ago was certainly the perfect example of that. Thom’s _lonely_. If Michael knew what Thom was weighing in his head right now, he’d be horrified. What’s worse, he’d be _disappointed_ that Thom took the hand held out to him in friendship and made something dirty of its intentions.

Thom shakes his head and pushes himself back away from the wall, feeling in better grips of himself. He is under the influence of cultish idealisation towards a man—_just a regular man!_—whose work he admires above all else’s. Michael is not responsible for anything Thom tries to read into it. Thom is aware of his own weakness in the face of being treated kindly, and can see where he misinterpreted Michael’s intentions both in the moment and even more so after. Thom just needs to get fucking laid, and these weird crossed-wire urges will untangle.
He’s already replayed Michael calling him remarkable through his mind so many times he cannot tell with any sureness which are the original, untouched clips and which ones his brain has filmed over, hoping to bend the narrative as to push some type of repressed agenda. Memory is a lazy editor renowned for shoddy workmanship.

And if he’s a bit more attracted to blokes, sometimes, than he was previously willing to acknowledge? That’s fine too, and maybe he’ll explore that. Maybe a threesome with a hot couple, met in a bar after a gig. Yeah. That’d work. That could be hot. And less intimidating, probably, with a girl there to focus on.

Bloody hell, stop it. Let’s focus on reality, he thinks, and reaches a fist out to knock at Michael Stipe’s dressing room door.

--

“Oh, here’re your sunglasses back.” Thom pulls them from his face and holds them out to Michael. But not before first desperately trying to staple down the exact shade of smoked-purple they paint everything, a colour he will surely try to remember precisely for the rest of his life.

“Oh, they’re yours. They look better on you.” Michael is moving about the room quickly, lightly, gathering odds and ends into a satchel. Within moments of being ushered in, Thom had found a beer placed—already opened—into his sweaty palm.

The next second he was standing awkwardly with it clasped in both hands, and in the second after that Michael had somehow maneuvered him into a chair.

“Not heading down to the afterparty, then?” Thom queries, for something to say.

“Nope. Did you want to? I was thinking we’d hang out here until the coast is clear and go find our own fun.”

“Oh. No, this is fine. Great.”

Michael raises his eyebrows but says nothing in reply to Thom’s mumbled assent, which sounded half-hearted even to his own ears. Apparently finished with packing his possessions away, he gracefully folds up to sit cross-legged on the floor several feet from Thom, his satchel at his side and a fresh beer in his own hand. That won’t do; maybe Thom just learned too much about the correlation between camera angles and power at university, but he slides down to mirror Michael all the same. His back rests as casually as it can against the front of the chair.

“Thom, is everything all right?”

“What?” Thom balks. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“I mean, with us. Between you and me. I thought we were cool the other day after we talked, but
“you’re acting like you’d rather be anywhere else than in the same room as me.”

“Everything is fine. I just was thinking about how shit this beer is, who decided to stock this?”
Thom darts a defiant glance at Michael’s face but he can’t keep it up; his eyes almost immediately skitter somewhere over Michael’s left shoulder.

“Riiiiight.” That drawl is not impressed with Thom. “I’d like to be your friend, if you’d let me. I’ve gone through a lot of this. Think of me as a time machine for where you are and where you’re headed.”

Thom barks unamused laughter. “That’s…I mean, I really, really appreciate that. But that’s not it.”

“I have to admit to being lost here, Thom.”

Thom sighs and glowers down at his hands. “It’s you. No, it’s—it’s me in relation to you. I can call you ‘Michael’ but you’re still ‘Mr. Stipe,’ you know? I don’t want to be like this, acting like a starstruck prat. I admire you…but it’s doing my head in.”

Michael laughs immediately. “Oh god, don't admire me, darlin’. My ego will start wanting out of its cage for walkies, and it'll only go downhill from there. I have to feed it a bucket of fish heads twice a week just to keep it from breaking its shackles and going on a rampage, as it is.”

Thom laughs too, but covers his face. His laughter isn’t nearly as attractive as Michael’s. “Christ, I just need to get a grip. I’m so sorry. I’m such a cow, aren’t I? Moaning like one, at least.”

“I had a hernia earlier this year.”

Thom looks up from his hands, nonplussed.

"It comes from singing. The doctors told me that. Hard singing. The force of singing is like the beginning stages of labour. It takes a lot to push the notes out."

 “…Oh. Yeah. Yeah, it does.”

“So, just a warning. You belt those notes out in a way that makes what I do look like I’m the cow moaning. Do you want a Kinder Egg?”

Michael reaches into his satchel and pulls out a white foil-wrapped egg. He rolls it across the floor to Thom.

“Now, let me tell you about when I met Patti Smith…”

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Michael first met Patti Smith in the autumn of 1975. Somebody had left a music magazine, Cream, under the desk he was sitting at. There was a haunting photograph of a young Smith, leaning against a wall, staring down the camera, all scary and beautiful. He tells Thom that twenty years
later—February fourteenth of the current year, to be exact—he had called her up to wish her a happy Valentine’s Day. That was the first time they spoke, and the last time they would be strangers. Michael needed those twenty years and a dashing overture before he could allow himself to meet her. It was the most humbling experience of his life.

Thom thinks that’s impossibly romantic and brave, and that he could never, ever do such a thing.

Michael says he could, and that he will, someday. What’s more, someday Thom will have learned how to be humble in return, to exhibit the grace needed in accepting the phone call from someone else.

Thom snaps the jaw onto his little Kinder shark and then makes it swim through the air.

“…but I got into music, because I naively thought that pop music was basically the only viable art form left, because the art world is run by a few very extremely, erm, privileged people and is ultimately corrupt and barren of any context. And I thought that the pop music industry was different, and I was fucking wrong, because I went to the Brits and I saw it everywhere, and it’s the same thing. It’s a lot of women who couldn't fit in their cocktail dresses and lots of men in black ties who essentially didn't want to be there, but were. And I was there, and we were all committing the same offence. All my favourite artists are people who never seem to be involved in the industry, and I found myself getting involved in it…and I felt really ashamed to be there.”

Michael has a little monkey as his prize. “It sounds to me like you're going around in ever-decreasing circles.”

Thom rattles on, his mouth curiously loose. “I don't know if anybody else has this feeling…you’re trapped in a funhouse clockwork machine and you’ve put yourself there, you’ve no one else to blame. So you take it all apart, separate it into its tiny, shiny components, get so familiar with them that you could put it back together in the fucking dark, or, more likely, get even more baffled and find yourself unable to reconstruct it, forcing the broken pieces back together, jerry-rigging a creaky solution so the thing never quite works the fucking same.”

“Oh, Thom. Everyone has that feeling. They usually just call it existential angst, I think.”

“Oh.”

They each start on their second Kinder Egg and third beer. Thom isn’t sure if the Kinder chocolate paired with the bitter hops are actually as good as his brain is telling him, or if it’s Michael and the warm glow of understanding lending these flavours such richness.
They move outdoors, once the hallways have cleared and they stand less a chance at being waylaid. They’re stretched out on their backs in a small park, a bag of beers between them, watching the moon rise slowly over the trees. Thom can feel the Kinder toys—his shark and a wee turntable with a disk that actually spins—as a comforting jab through the denim of his pocket.

“There were trees in our garden,” Thom is saying. “I badly wanted to believe in fairies even though I knew they weren’t real. The smell of grass from the neighbour’s garden, and the slant of sunlight through the leaves, and the swing-set that was too rusty to sit on…I remember those things so well. Also the hope that if I squinted…if I believed…if I just closed my eyes for a second…I’d hear some magical, light voice. I was on the edge of a moment with my toes curled in the earth—I still remember the feel of it, the damp still-cold spring mud—and suddenly…I was bored. I had a flash that ten was too bloody old for this. I wanted to believe but couldn’t, and so I went inside to watch Gilligan’s Island instead.”

Thom grimaces up at the night sky and says, “I feel like life is turning out to just be a series of such events. Everything is just me walking back inside to watch fucking Gilligan’s Island.”

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Michael says, “Mike had one girl show up on his porch. His girlfriend answered the door, and she came back and said, ‘There’s this really pretty girl on the porch but I don’t know her.’ Mike was like, ‘Oh, jeez, who could that be?’ He goes out there, and this girl says, ‘I understand it all now. The music and the numbers on the records: I understand it now.’”

Thom’s eyes are wide.

“And do you know what he did? He says, ‘You want the singer’s house. He’s around the corner.’”

“Bloody hell, did she show up? What’d y’do?” Thom rolls over in the grass, agog. He can imagine Colin doing such a thing to him, if Thom annoyed him enough. Maybe Jonny, just because.

“Oh, I made out with her because she was terrifying.”

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“It was so bloody good, you were plugged into the moment, weren’t you? You know what I mean?”
“I know what you mean, but no, no I wasn’t.”

“What! But you were so…present. The way you were acting…” Thom blushes a little in the dark. Michael had acted like a post-glam tart, teasing and seducing the audience from the opening notes to “Crush With Eyeliner” to when he had gracefully dropped his jacket to the ground from one outstretched hand like an exclamation of intent. It was electrifying.

It was, Thom admits to himself (ever the honest one when drunk), quite erotic. He covets that performance. He’s got it recorded on a VHS tape. He remembers the glasses perched atop his head with a thrill. Michael had been wearing these sunglasses during. Oh, god. They might now be his most prized possession.

Michael is absently pulling grass from the lawn, scattering it across his lap. Thom’s drunkenly mesmerised at the repetitive, strangely soothing motions. Michael shrugs and continues, ”Yeah, ‘acting’ is the right way to put it. That’s a persona. Theatrics. I choose exactly what I’m giving them, at all times. Working from a process of negation. We pretty much know what we don’t want to be. What we don’t want to do.”

“I don’t know if I could do that. I bleed for ‘em. I give them my truth.” He can’t help but wonder if Michael if fibbing, just a little, for Thom’s benefit. Thom simply cannot fathom that perfect synchronicity between band and audience and camera just being a deception, a distortion of self. Meaningful coincidences don’t exist by their very definition, he thinks. The thought has Colin’s voice when he thinks something is bullshit. You don’t get a performance like that without making a voodoo gris-gris of it, infusing everything with your heart’s desires and the resulting vulnerability.

But it’s charming bullshit, because it’s Michael’s.

“Have you tried?” Michael interrupts his thoughts, as if he’s fully aware that Thom is skeptical.

“No, not really.” But that’s not exactly true, is it? He thinks back to that awful set in Vancouver. “Well. Maybe I have, in a way. There was this one show back in spring this year, it was just me and Jonny—we’d been doing these acoustic things—and it was a Friday night, and the audience were just people who were coming from work and just a load of these…I dunno, people the record company had sent in, people who were probably getting paid to be there. To make it look good. ‘Vibey.’ That’s the word they used.”

“Wow. Encouraging.”

“Yeah. And they were terrible, just not interested and talking throughout the whole thing. But this one table in particular, one right down in the front, kept getting louder and louder. And it was making me feel smaller and smaller. And I was angry. I mean, I was definitely angry. But not enough to do what I did. I don’t know what came over me, I just turned into this…demon. It was like armour. Like a costume that made me feel bigger. And I shouted at them, I screamed at them. I said, ‘We’ve been all ‘round the world on this tour, and you are the rudest fuckers we’ve ever met.’”

Thom pauses and chews at his lip. He can feel Michael’s eyes on him in the dark. “There was this complete silence. And I felt…fucking powerful. But then they started talking again. And out of nowhere, the rest of the crowd moves in and just clobbers them. When they hadn’t been giving two shits just seconds ago. This huge fight broke out. And Jonny and I just carried on and played ‘Fake Plastic Trees’. Meanwhile there’s this fucking all-out brawl going on. And I…then I felt really
powerful.”

Thom turns to meet Michael’s eyes; there’s something twinkling in them.

“Because you’d affected them,” he says. “Emotionally. Viscerally.”

Thom gives a reluctant nod. “Is that terrible?”

Michael shrugs. “Whatever gets us through the show. Whatever you need to do to grab them, make them pay attention. Leave them shaking. The audience will eat you up, every last bit. If you give them everything, they’ll still come back asking for more. And then crucify you when you come up empty.”

“Trust me, I am bloody well aware of that. It’s one of my biggest concerns,” he waves off Michael’s admonishment. “One of the reasons I wanted to be in a band was actually to be on the high street. I don’t want to be in a cupboard. I write music to actually communicate things to people. Real things! So I have to be motivated, don’t I? Is that so bloody awful?”

“Every corpse on Everest was once an extremely motivated person.”

“Jesus Christ, Michael.”

The answering chuckle is dark and rich.

Thom joins in despite himself, his drunken cackle a couple octaves higher. “Fuck you too, then! God, though—I can’t believe you. It was too fucking good. And the end! When you sat down on the amp facing the audience and just completely ignored Letterman when he came ‘round for handshakes? What was that? That was mad brilliant!”

“Honestly, I was just thinking about how he purposely got the name of our song wrong and held the CD upside-down. If he’s going to employ affectations, so will I. Bastard.”

Thom is so excited at Michael’s admission that he can be precious—maybe as much as Thom can be, even—that he has to get up or self-immolate right then and there, his blood salting the earth with a perfect Thom-shaped brand.

He climbs a tree and won’t come down until Michael, giggling, playfully cajoles him with promises that he’ll sing him Blue Suede Shoes if he returns to Earth.

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Thom shows Michael his perfect cartwheels. Michael shows Thom his perfect Elvis impression. They play under an orange-fogged moon. Drinking beer, laughing out into the chilly, dew-damp night.
Childhood seems close enough to touch tonight, not as lost to the past as it usually is. Maybe it’s something to do with the way the air smells; Thom’s read that scent is the most powerful trigger of memories. He is tired in the weighty way that distorts reality, that makes it all cottony, soft, and muffled. He remembers being carried by his father, head lolling in and out of consciousness and catching snippets of the adult world, the one that existed past nine o’clock. Being buckled into the car. The sound of the tyres humming down the motorway.

He listens to the electric buzz of a streetlamp overhead and finds it similarly hypnotic. Comfortable. The yellow light seeps through his eyelids and warms his brain. He can hear birds starting to call to each other in the pre-dawn.

Michael laughs. Thom feels a hand on his shoulder, lightly steering him. “You’re going to fall head-first into a trashcan. Come on, let’s get you to back to your room.”

They’re staying at the same hotel this time. It’s within walking distance of the venue, and Michael sings a little as they shuffle along. Quiet, lilting singing. It’s nothing Thom recognises, and he can’t make out the words. But it sounds like a lullaby.

In the lift, Thom leans his head against the cool of the chrome and thinks that he feels safe.

“Come on,” murmurs Michael, and Thom must’ve actually fallen asleep on his feet. The doors are open and Michael is guiding him through them.

They arrive at room 488, and he distantly thinks that he doesn’t recall telling Michael where he was staying.

“You got your key?”

“Oh. Oh, yeah.” Thom fishes in his pocket, dodging sharks and turntables. He clicks the door open, and a column of light from the hallway illuminates Jonny’s sleeping figure. He turns to Michael, feeling like he’s supposed to say something, do something.

Michael smiles at him, eyes large and blue and awake. He taps at the sunglasses perched precariously atop Thom’s head, and they fall and catch themselves on Thom’s nose.

“Goodnight, Thom. Sweet dreams.”

Then the door snicks shut.

Thom trips over the edge of a suitcase in the dark and hisses. Jonny moves a little, a shuffle of sheets and a sleepy sigh. Thom strips down to his boxers and crawls into a twin bed identical to Jonny’s, snuggling deep under the blankets and slipping into sleep almost instantly.

He does dream, and it is sweet.
Days off are luxuries that are always over too soon. Thom had vowed not to spend this one asleep and he can’t help but groan when his alarm starts shouting at him. He hadn’t planned on staying out so late—well, *early*—with Michael last night, and maybe programming 7:00 into the clock had been a little too ambitious.

7:00. Thom can’t remember the last time he was awake at 7:00 AM in a mussed-up bed and not sleepwalking his way through security at an airport, or struggling with the key to his hotel room after a frenetic night of too much *everything* and ready to collapse. He rolls over onto his back, trying to decide if three hours sleep is enough to function on, or if today is to be yet another wasted span of daylight.

*God.* Remarkably, he doesn’t even feel hungover. He has the vaguest memory of a water bottle being pulled from an army satchel and held to his lips, with the order to *drink.* He thinks some aspirin might have been pressed into his palm, as well.

Light streams wanly through the slatted blinds, and Thom thinks back on how this used to be something he did every day. Up with the sun and off to that bloody clothes shop, or to the hospital. There was the year working at the pub; those hours had isolated him from the better part of humanity, though. He hadn’t thought he’d missed it, but when he went back to uni he’d found himself enjoying catching the sunrise again. Maybe in some alternate universe, Thom could’ve been a morning person. He laughs a little. Yeah, right.

“…whasso funny.”

“I dunno. I was thinking about jobs. *Real* jobs. And school.”

Jonny breathes deeply and turns over to face Thom, eyes too tired to open yet. “Ew.”

“Yeah, well. It wasn’t always ‘ew.’ Sometimes it was okay. Sometimes it was even good.”

“I seem to recall differently. I seem to recall you wanting to shove cheap suits up some bloke’s arse.”

Thom thinks back hard on a long-ago employer and laughs again. “Yeah, okay, fair enough. That job was the fucking worst.” He remembers the man’s twisted little mouth and virulent misanthropy.

“I wish I could go back and tell him to fuck off.”

“Didn’t you?”

“Nahhh…wanted to, though.” Maybe he’d lied, told Jonny he had. He can’t remember. Oh well, it’s not important anymore.

“I could never work for anybody,” Jonny mumbles into his pillow. “How dull.”

“You’ve never *had* to. And anyway, you kinda work for me.”
Jonny lets loose a single bark of laughter into his pillow, his eyes finally opening and finding Thom’s. “No, I don’t. None of us does. And you’re going to get yourself in a lot of trouble if you keep on thinking that.”

Thom suddenly feels very horrible. He remembers sitting beside Michael on the gear case.

*There are very simple rules: You share all your publishing. You don’t fight about petty things. It’s democratic. Everybody gets a veto vote, not just the singer.*

“I’m sorry. That—I guess that was sort of meant to be a joke, but it came out wrong. I don’t…”

I don’t want to be a boss, thinks Thom. *I don’t want to be a tyrant.*

“…I never want to be anything like that. And I know…I know that I can be, sometimes. A *lot* of the time, actually. But…I’m working on it.”

Jonny’s gaze has softened. “No, you’re not. Your very DNA is bossy.” His tone is gentle and not accusatory.

Thom holds the eye contact and smiles. His heart wells up with an incredible affection, one that makes his breath catch and stutter. It’s the feeling he gets when he is lost in live music. The same feeling he’d got when he saw Niagara Falls for the first time.

Jonny frowns. “Are you all right?”

“Yeah.” Thom moulds his mouth back into the smile; his face must’ve looked dumb and adrift for a moment there. “Yeah, I’m good. I’m just…thinking. Look, I…I know I’m a huge arse. But I want you to know…I mean. You know that…you’re important, right?”

Jonny just blinks, looking lost for words. That’s not a very common sight these days. It leaves his face as exposed and pale as an empty sheet of paper and in stark contrast to the inky hair spilling around its edges. Not for the first time, Thom wishes he could stroke Jonny’s hair. Just once. It always looks so soft and sleek; it would be so pleasing to twine a lock of it around a finger. But Thom’s not a child, and the childlike desire to thoughtlessly touch wouldn’t be welcomed. He’d probably lose the finger he dared bring that close to Jonathan Greenwood’s face.

“So, erm, yeah. I just. I don’t want you to get the wrong idea and think I don’t appreciate you, or whatever.” He feels abruptly embarrassed and tacks on some last minute words. “…and Colin, and Phil, and Ed. All of you. You’re all…er, yeah.”

Jonny looks strangely sad for a moment, but then his gaze is placid and pliable once more. He smiles, just a little, and it reaches his eyes. It’s the most honest Thom has seen his face in a year.

“Right. Er. Okay. I’m having a shower. I’ve no bloody idea why the universe hates me so much, but I’m wide awake. I only slept for like three hours. I reckon I have until about five this afternoon before I crash. Do you…you wanna see what they’ve got for breakfast in this place?”

Jonny nods, still-sleepy and uncharacteristically agreeable. Huh. Thom will have to start rooming with him more often, if this is how he is in the mornings. Besides, Ed snores.

“Brilliant. Get yourself out of that bed and dressed before you fall back to sleep on me.”

In the shower, Thom fights the good fight that one must when confronted with a set of unfamiliar taps. He turns knobs this way and that until the water goes from ice cold to blisteringly hot to mercifully warm and comfortable. The shower head isn’t as powerful as Thom would like, but he’s
experienced worse.

He thinks about uni as he taps some generic hotel shampoo into his palm. He briefly wonders what Stanley is doing right now. What time is it in Oxford? They can’t be more than an hour ahead of England. Then he thinks back further, to Abingdon. He thinks about Jonny’s first day there, and how silly he’d looked in his uniform. The poor boy had been scared out of his wits. Most first years were, of course, but Jonny’s terror was exceptional. When Colin’s mum picked up Thom and Andy, Jonny had looked frozen in place in the backseat. The brothers climbed in, Thom trying very hard not to laugh.

“Look at you!” he’d tittered. His teasing had to be kept to a minimum in Mrs. Greenwood’s presence. He nudged Jonny’s shoulder with his own, grinning and buckling himself in.

Colin twisted in the passenger seat to face them. “I told him he looks very smart.”

“Very smart,” agreed Mrs. Greenwood. “And don’t you look smart as well, Andy!”

Yeah, Thom had thought. Smart. Hah! Jonny looked like somebody had dressed a ventriloquist dummy for a funeral.

“Thank you!” Andy beamed. Andy’s suit was just as ill-fitting, but his excitement filled out the extra fabric. The first years would grow into and out of their uniforms in no time; Thom’s mother had complained of the cost Thom’s first two years, but worried when he was still able to fit into last year’s blazer. She’d insisted he needed to drink more milk. It was true that the other boys were all shooting up around Thom, even Colin—Thom pretended he didn’t notice, but stared at the topmost pencil mark on his doorway with ire when no one was watching.

Even Jonny was getting taller. He wasn’t even eleven yet, which would make him possibly the youngest student in first form. Poor kid. Thom knew he’d have to start taking it a little easier on him; he’d be getting his fill of torment at school. No need to torture him further. He told himself he should let up.

He hadn’t, though, had he? That was just the way it had always been with them. And as Jonny grew older, he’d learned to deflect. And when Thom finally let him in the band after much pressure from Colin, they grew friendly. But Thom never forgot he was Colin’s weird younger brother, and he never really stopped treating him as such. Jonny’s badly contained admiration—which had only finally let up once Thom was out of school—hadn’t done much in dissuading that perception, either.

Thom runs his head under the water and feels guilty for the second time this morning. They’re not children anymore. Maybe it’s time Thom started acting like a fucking adult. Maybe it’s time he started trying, anyway.

When he reenters the main room, Jonny is dressed in Thom’s blue-and-yellow jersey tee. It’s too small on him, and Thom laughs at the juxtaposition between this Jonny and the one that drowned in a school uniform in 1982.

“I need to do laundry,” Jonny explains, guarded.

Thom shrugs, eyebrows raised in amusement. “I didn’t say anything.”

The hotel halls are silent at this hour. They ride the lift down to the lobby and follow the smell of bacon. As always, Thom can’t fathom how his mouth still waters at the scent even as his gut squirms at the thought.
“I’m thinking of going vegan.”

“Well?”

“I dunno. I mean, I already don’t do meat. Seems kind of half-arsed, or hypocritical. Or something.”

“Cows are still going to get milked. Chickens are still going to lay eggs.”

“Yeah, but I won’t be a part of it. Guilt-free conscience and all that, y’know?”

“So you’re doing it for yourself, then. Not for the animals.” Jonny’s dismissive rejoinder sounds rote.

The thought of a whole day spent trying to balance on an impossible ledge of Jonny’s making leads Thom to slow his steps and mutter, “Shit Jonny, I’m just talking. Can’t say a word to you without it turning into a bloody debate…”

“Sorry,” says Jonny, which is a word Thom thought he’d unlearned. Jonny is in very rare form today. “You should do it.”

“Yeah,” says Thom, mollified, as they round the corner into the hotel’s restaurant. He spies some cheesy potatoes. “Not today, though.”

They pick and choose from the buffet and find a table in the corner beside a tall fireplace. Thom imagines what it must be like here in the winter, and decides it’s probably very cosy. He wishes it were winter now, and that they were just on holiday. Just holed up by the fire with something hot and sweet to drink and nowhere to be.

“It’d be nice if we could have a holiday once in a while. A real, proper holiday.” Thom carefully spears a cheesy potato from the top of his tottering pile. “If you could go anywhere in the world, where would you go?”

“Is this about camping again?”

“If you want it to be. If you could go anywhere, for an unlimited amount of time, and do anything.”

Jonny chews at a rasher and ruminates. When he doesn’t say anything, Thom jumps ahead:

“I’d go to Iceland, I think. To the place in the video for ‘Birthday.’ You know, where Björk’s in the blue water.”

Jonny huffs. “But with Björk there with you, yeah?”

“Well, okay, yeah,” laughs Thom. “If this is a fantasy. Why not? Björk and Yorke’s Excellent Adventure!” He mimes air guitar.

Jonny licks the grease from his fingers, thoughtful. “We could go to South America.”

“What, you and Björk?”

“No, you and me. Or,” Jonny stumbles over his words, “all of us, I mean. If we could all just have a big holiday.”

Thom nods. “Rainforests and beaches and shit. I could go for that. The snakes would be a concern, though.” Thom doesn’t like snakes.
Jonny stabs the yolk of his egg and frowns. Thom tries to imagine what it might be like to travel together and not worry about shows, not deal with the fucking stress and exhaustion of it all. How would they all be with each other? Would it be like the endless summers they spent together as teenagers?

Something suddenly strikes Thom. “When I picture myself somewhere far away, it’s always alone. What does that mean, d’you think?”

“You do?”

“Yeah. I didn’t even realise it till just now. It’s not a conscious thing. It’s just how it is, in my head. It’s the same when I think about when I’m an old man. It’s just, that’s how I picture it. Just, like, in a factual way. Not in a self-pitying way, or whatever. Like I said, I don’t think about it.”

“You don’t have to be alone.”

“I know I don’t.” He’s not explaining this well enough. He sees himself alone in the same abstract way that he sees the sun shining overhead; it’s just the way things are. The way the future will be. Thom thinks about what Michael had said, about becoming more humble in time. Maybe Thom doesn’t have the luxury of time. Maybe he’d better start shaping the fuck up now, or he will isolate the entire fucking planet.

“We could go camping, you know.”

“Pffft. Can you imagine Colin, camping?” Thom raises his voice, dresses it in something precious and posh: “Oh, dear. These trousers are ruined, I knew I should have bought two pairs. They probably don’t carry them anymore. Is that an ant? Ugh, why is there so much dirt here.”

“We could just go.”

Thom chokes a little on his tea. He eyes Jonny over the cup, probably looking incredulous. “You’re serious,” he says.

Jonny turns back to pushing his food about his plate, growing defensive. “You were the one who wanted to go. Never…-bloody-mind, then.”

“No, we could do that. I’m just…surprised, is all. I thought you couldn’t stand to be near me.”

Jonny meets his eyes again, looking shocked. “That’s not true.”

Oh. Okay. “Well…then why are you such a brat all the time?”

Jonny’s eyes narrow. Oops. Clearly Thom has miscalculated exactly how expansive the edges are on this new, amicable Jonny. Not that elastic, apparently.

“Why are you?”

They stare at each other, saying nothing. For hours, it seems. Longer. Galaxies are born, congeal, and then collapse, only to be born anew. And then Thom breaks out laughing.

Jonny looks irreparably insulted at first, but his face slowly softens. And then he’s smiling a little, and then he’s grinning, and now he’s actually laughing. Not sneering and snickering curtly, but giggling long and hard. He hides it all behind a hand, reflexively insecure over his crooked teeth. Thom hasn’t seen that particular quirk of his in so long. His chest is pierced with a shaft of overwhelming affection again.
They finish up their breakfast in an easy camaraderie they haven’t shared in ages, a level not even reached in their late-night airport ramblings. They’re still giggling on-and-off as they clear their table and bus their plates and cups to a rack of soiled china.

“What do you want to do, then? Besides camping,” Thom jokes. “I thought we could do a local record shop and then check out that museum, the one with the old ship. If you want to come, I mean. I was going to go by myself, but—”

Jonny is suddenly wrapped around Thom like an aggressive octopus; it takes Thom a few seconds to understand that this is a hug, and not some sort of an abrupt breakdown. He snakes his arms underneath Jonny’s and holds him tight, pushing up onto his toes. Jonny sags further into him in response, holds him more firmly as Thom rests his cheek against the warmth of his chest, breathing in the smell of his own shirt. Is that what Thom smells like? Or does Thom’s shirt smell like Jonny now? He finds himself considering that the last time Jonny hugged him, he was much smaller; a child. Thom fits so well into the nooks of this grown-up Jonny.

Thom can’t remember the last time he hugged anybody and had them hug him back like this, let alone where they initiated it. He feels like he could cry, maybe. But for the first time in a while, he is too happy.

When Jonny lets go, he doesn’t explain his sudden affectionate assault. He just smiles a small, shy smile and waits for Thom to lead them back into the lobby.

Thom comes to a halt when he recognises the man who is staring at him near the door. It’s Michael. He’s sat alone with a small cup of black coffee and a book, his legs crossed elegantly. He looks sharp and not remotely as if he’s operating on the same lack of sleep as Thom.

“Hey!” Thom beams, a little breathless. It seems that Michael’s unexpected presence will never fail to set his heart racing. “Have you—? I didn’t know you were here, you should’ve joined us!”

Michael smiles, waving away Thom’s retroactive offer. “Nahhh, didn’t want to interrupt. I’m not too great at conversation this early, anyway. Where are you boys headed?”

“The Vasa Museum,” says Jonny, standing close and oddly clingy. “I think?”

He throws Thom a side-glance.

“Yeah,” confirms Thom. “Big old warship, from the sixteenth or seventeenth century or something. Supposed to be mad.”

He’s about to invite Michael, but some unnamable feeling stops him. So he just stands there, a little awkwardly.

Michael slowly stirs some sugar into his coffee, letting the silence spool out until he has neatly set his spoon aside. “Well, I’ll leave you to it. See you around later today?”

“Yeah, definitely! We can do dinner or something.”

Thom and Jonny snake their way through the lobby and step out into the sunshine. The morning is quickly turning from brisk to warm, and a breeze carries the sea on it. Thom stops to dig through his messenger bag.

“He winked at me,” says Jonny.

“Huh?”
“Michael,” Jonny elaborates. “He winked at me, as we were leaving.”

“Mm, yeah, he does that. Hah!” Thom finally locates his new sunglasses. “There you are, you little buggers.” He slips them on, and Stockholm goes a soft purple.

“All right, Jon-Jon. Let’s rock.”

Chapter End Notes

- R.E.M.’s Crush With Eyeliner performance on Letterman

- Thom in Stipe’s sunnies

- Thom’s words, Slit Magazine, 1995: "The last time I was reeling drunk I made a fool of myself at a public party in Oxford two months ago. Colin and me started making out and it was fun. Colin is a rather good kisser. Did I just say that?"

- from Thom's tour diary:

August 4 - "I buy a toy helicopter with "Ambulance" and "Emergency Service" on it. When I see it at the airport it reverberates in my head and I just had to have it. The show is fine. I get hugged a few times by people who have come just to see us. A journalist here apparently believes his mission in life is to tell the world how ugly I am, but that's OK. At least it beats being called suicidal. After the show I play the role of pop star with a much bigger pop star. I have deliberately been avoiding Mr Stipe because I didn't want to make a fool out of myself. Or get mistaken for a stalker. But, tonight we end up playing with Kinder toys and talking about when he met Patti Smith so I feel much better about it all. Go out 'til morning. Do cartwheels and Elvis impersonations."
Chapter 5 - I know what I wanted

“My mum called last night.”

Colin looks up from the Swedish newspaper he’s been pretending to understand.

“Ah. That’s nice.”

Tim shakes his head slowly, staring straight ahead at absolutely nothing. He’s holding a neglected cup of coffee that, by all appearances, went cold ages ago.

“…not nice, then?”

“She asked when I was going back to business school.”

“Oh. Oh, dear. What did you say?”

“I said I had to call her back because the strip club was too loud.”

“Hmm.”

Tim’s mouth droops loosely. He is glass-eyed and looks incapable of managing much of anything this morning, let alone the five of them. The lenses of his eyeglasses are greasy with…is that jam? Tim blinks at his coffee as if he’s taken aback by its presence in his hand. He slowly avows, “I think…I should stop letting Ed take me places. I think I should stop drinking. I think this mobile phone was a bad purchase. I think mothers should never have numbers to mobile phones.”

Colin glances across the terminal to where Phil has taken over Tim’s job and is leaning over a counter, trying to work out with a brutally blonde woman why their plane is delayed. Why are planes usually delayed? Because Radiohead have got somewhere to be, and planes are malevolent bastards. Colin has lost a lot of his life to airport lounges.

He sighs and rises to his feet. “Steady on, Tim,” He pats their tour manager consolingly on the back. “We’ll get you something nice and greasy to eat and then we’ll toss the mobile into the Mediterranean. It’ll be all right. Maybe try having a little nap?”

Tim’s mouth is still hanging open. His glasses have shifted to sit precariously on the very tip of his nose. “I don’t think my eyes close anymore.”
Colin gives his shoulder a final gentle squeeze and wanders off.

Thom, ever incapable of sitting like a normal person, is cross-legged on the floor and chewing at a biro. His ugly brown satchel is open, and envelopes are gathered about him like eager little creatures.

“You overthink those,” Colin offers, sitting himself on the chair closest to Thom’s letter-writing factory. “Just say ‘thank you’ and sign them. They’ll be happy just to have your autograph.”

Thom looks up at Colin, the biro looking like a cheap cigarette holder. “Is that what it is? I don’t sign letters anymore? Every time I write my name, that’s not a signature? It’s an autograph? Fuck me.”

Colin reaches down and plucks the paper out from under Thom’s nose.

*Hi Michelle,* is as far as Thom has gotten.

“*Hi Michelle!*” dictates Colin. “Thank you so much for your letter. Glad you like the music! Hope you can make the show next time we’re in town. Love, Thommikins.”

“Yeah,” Thom scoffs. “Not exactly the sort of response you want when you’re writing someone to tell them they saved your life.”

“Oh.”

“*Yeah.*” Thom hands Colin the girl’s letter. “Fifteen-year-old kid. She says she wanted to die. But *Pablo Honey* changed her mind. ‘Thinking About You’, specifically. This little girl is saying she didn’t eat a load of pills because of a stupid song I wrote. How am I supposed to respond to that?”

Colin honestly doesn’t know what to say. But he knows that Thom does, somewhere in that fidgety little heart of his; he just hasn’t found it yet.

“And besides, it’s a sad fucking self-loathing song about wanking.”

“It’s not what the song means to you,” Colin tells him, because this he does know, “it’s what it meant to her.”

Thom is chewing at that pen so hard it looks like it may snap in half. Colin’s teeth ache in sympathy. “Why don’t you…set it aside for now. Work on a different one? An easier one?”

“I’m not comfortable.”

“With what part of it?”

Thom gnaws on the biro in silence for a full minute. “I’m not comfortable…affecting people’s lives like that. People I don’t even know. Sad little girls in Kansas. *Kansas.* Like in The Wizard of Oz! How does a sad little girl in the middle of nowhere know who I am? And who am I to…to make her feel one way or another about her life?”

Colin chooses his words carefully. “…I think it’s special. I think it’s a very special power you have, and that you are lucky to reach people in that way.”
“But I didn’t save her life. The music did. Or, she thinks it did. And that doesn’t even come from me, that’s fuckin’—beamed down to me, the music. I’m not comfortable ‘saving’ anyone’s life, Coz.” Thom’s fingers bend into air-quotes. “And I’m even more uncomfortable thinking that…that if our music could stop a kid from doing something stupid, couldn’t it also make a kid do something stupid?”

It’s a theorem Thom likes to set forth often, that the words come through him fully formed, like a broadcast zapped down into his brain by demons or angels or the ghost of E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial. Colin has never bought into Thom’s testimonials for a moment; those lyrics are deeply personal and all Thom. But Thom seems to need to believe otherwise, to the point where his persistence suggests it’s more about convincing himself than anyone else. Colin is not going to be the one to push him on the matter.

Thom suddenly looks on the verge of tears, or a panic attack. Most likely both. Colin stoops down to the floor and gathers up all the letters.

“Go back to that one later,” he suggests again. “Do an easy one. Here, do this one. It’s asking about Jonny’s hair.”

Thom seems to be diverted from a meltdown, at least for now. He takes the paper solemnly, and Colin leaves him to it.

Jonny is laughing to himself over a magazine several benches away. The laughter is infectious; well, Jonny’s always is. Thom even sampled it once, when he didn’t think Jonny was paying attention. He said he was going to use it in a song, but Colin thinks that was just a scare tactic. Right now that mirth is warming Colin’s heart in a way that almost aches. Where has his brother been hiding that? He doesn’t think he’s heard or seen Jonny looking so carefree since this tour started. He’s even less of a contrived harridan of late. Colin changes direction and wanders over to join him.

“What’s that? My biography thus far?”

“Phil nicked it off one of the planes in America,” says Jonny. “It’s absurd.”

Colin takes a seat next to his brother and cranes over to peer at the open magazine.

“Would you fancy a zombie sculpture for your garden, Coz?” He asks in a convincingly honest voice. “Only seventy-nine dollars. Not including tax and shipping, mind.”

Colin takes a glance at the page; a marbled figure grows from a patch of fake grass like a wailing, sentient tumor. He tsks. “I’d had my heart set on Frankenstein’s Monster, if I’m being honest. But I suppose I could settle.”

“Ah, well,” Jonny flips the page. “How about this, then? ‘Toppik.’ They’re little, erm, hair follicles. Synthetic. For your bald patches. You just shake ‘em on, like from a saltshaker. Comes in all sorts of colours. Am I imagining things, or is this page dog-eared? Where’s Phil off to?”

Colin runs a hand through Jonny’s hair, smirking at the letter he’d left Thom with: Is Jonny’s hair as soft as it looks? What sort of product does he use?

“Our genes wouldn’t dare, Jonathan. We’re going to be eighty and looking like Fabio.”
Jonny pulls a face, wriggling away from Colin’s touch. “Ugh,” he says, and then, “Oh my god. Look at this humane spider vacuum. Fuck that. Give me something that sucks them into the vacuum of space.”

Colin musses Jonny’s hair again. “What’s up, blood relation? You’re…bubbly. It’s a good look on you.”

Jonny pouts, clearly not a fan of Colin’s choice in adjectives. He shrugs.

Colin watches his brother’s profile carefully: He is flipping through the thin pages of Phil’s magazine, trying to look casual. But he’s not. Something’s up. Colin wonders idly if his brother might be nursing a crush. He flips through his mental catalogue, but no men pop up with a flag suggesting themselves as a possibility. That’s not really Jonny’s style, anyway; he doesn’t really seem to do crushes, at least not since he was a teenager. It’s not insecurity over his sexuality, as such. They don’t interact with many people at this point in their lives who would even blink twice, and besides, it’s the 90’s and the world is changing. It’s simply that Jonny is just so secretive about sexual matters in general. Ed and Thom think he’s a prude, but Colin knows that is not remotely true. Jonny vanishes often enough for a night, to then reappear quietly in the morning hours with nothing to say of what he’d gotten up to. The little heartbreaker.

It makes Colin a little sad, to be honest. Jonny would deny it viciously, but Colin knows that in his black little heart he’s deeply romantic. So no, not a prude. There’s no way Colin will get a word from Jonny, whether it’s a crush or something else entirely.

There are two reasons why people don’t talk about things: Either it doesn’t mean anything to them, or it means everything.

“Well,” says Colin. “I won’t pry. But I’m glad. Whatever it is…I’m glad.”

Jonny just rolls his eyes down at an image of a self-scooping litter box and waves Colin away when he rises and sets to wander further.

It takes him a while, but he finds Ed shoving a chocolate croissant into his mouth in a pub the next terminal over.

“Y’think it’s smart to be all the way over here? What if our flight, god forbid, decided to finally grace us with its presence? We’d leave you behind, hire ourselves a guy named Antonio once we got to Sicily. He’d be more handsome than you and probably have better manners as a roommate.” Colin’s been recently forced to share a hotel room with Ed ever since Jonny migrated to Thom’s room, and he’s pretty much over it. The man even sleeps hugely, what with the snoring and the sleep-talking and the bed-farts. Phil and Tim seem to have made a pact in blood that they will only share with each other. So it goes.

“Lou’speakers. ‘Nouncements come frum ’em.” Pastry crumbs fly from Ed’s mouth. He grins, teeth coated with chocolate. “Have you seen my legs? Do you know how fast I can run? Tell Antonio to get his own band.”

“Alas, Antonio,” sighs Colin. “What a life we could have shared.”

He pulls himself up onto the stool next to Ed and sweeps away the crumbs with the end of his sleeve. “Bit early for a pint, innit?”
“Nah.”

“You murdered Tim. He’s now the shame of his dear mother’s heart.”

“Aren’t we all?”

“The shame of Tim’s mother’s heart? Most likely.”

“Say, Coz, I was reading this thing. Did you know scientists have supposedly cracked happiness?” Ed’s gazing at him with a sharpness that should look idiotic when paired with the chocolate still tucked into the corners of his lips, but doesn’t.

“Shall I go grab Thom for this, then?”

“Hah! No, he’s writing back to fan’s letters. He’ll be useless the rest of the day. So what makes you joyful? Maybe a holiday, or a new car, right? A good fuck, a good book, or a good night’s sleep?”

“I like all those things, sure.”

“Well,” Ed sips from his pint and gives Colin a wise look over the edge. “A great portion of our joy depends on if others have the same fortune as we do at the same time. Inequality reduces happiness on average, both when people get more or when they get less than the people around them.”

“Okay, I’m with you.”

“So my question to you, Colin, is this. How’s it go in the opposite direction, then? If your cohort is miserable, does that mean your…miserability quo–“

“Miserability isn’t a word, Ed.”

“Shut up. Does it mean your misery quotient rises as well, or does the shared misery lessen, as it’s a communal emotion?”

“You’ve just been sitting here, drinking your pint, getting crumbs all over, and thinking about the science of misery?”

“Yes.”

Colin smacks his head down onto the table. “Everything they’ve ever said about us is true. We’re miserable gits.”

Ed’s voice rumbles above him. “But are we MORE or LESS miserable, when taken as a shared whole?”

Colin curses the power of the Airport Intimacy Zone, in which you find yourself discussing the secrets of your soul just to kill some goddamned time.

He decides to go find Tim again, jammy eyeglasses be damned.
It’s blisteringly hot, so hot Thom worries something precious inside of himself may have sweated out of existence. He’s decided there’s nothing for it and has left the thin white cotton shirt he’s wearing unbuttoned, revealing his pale skin to the general populace. He’d feel bad about his pasty English hide being gawped at if he weren’t so busy gawping right back. Fuck, but the women are sexy in Sicily. Dark-haired lovelies with large, knowing eyes. Does Thom have a type? Of course he does, doesn’t everyone? Ed thinks his type is so specific it borders on fetish, though. Whatever. He’s got nothing better to do, post soundcheck, than sit on these cracked steps down the street from the venue and watch any number of beautiful women pass by. They all just happen to be dark-eyed and dark-haired.

A group of rowdy young men stumble past him; they’re certainly brothers since they all look nearly precisely the same down to the last. Ensnconed in the center of the group is a young woman even prettier than all the rest he’s seen this afternoon. Oh my. How does one say “Fuck me silly but don’t tell your brothers” in Sicilian?

He openly stares at her as the group passes. She must feel his mismatched eyes on her skin because she looks back at him, haughty as any queen. Thom is so distracted that he doesn’t see her brothers have noticed him as well until the one nearest to him lunges and roars. Thom flinches back and down, hands up in a useless parody of self-defense, and the entire group—gorgeous sister included—laugh merrily as they continue down the street.

Thom wonders what it would be like to be beautiful, to be able to wield it like a weapon. To thrust your eyes like an iron skewer into the soft underbellies of those who dare risk showing desire for you.

It must be nice.

—

He shouldn’t have agreed to dinner with Michael.

But Michael had assured him they’d be fine with the time, that it was just a quick car ride there-and-back from the sports arena that is serving as their venue. Look, Michael had argued. Look, he had a driver for the day. They had plenty of time for a leisurely dinner.

Thom had still waffled; he generally liked to be at the venue hours in advance, not wandering far afield once finished with soundcheck. Yes, he knew he was a grandmother. No, he didn’t see himself lightening up anytime soon. Michael had playfully (and exasperatedly) asked Thom if he
was going to need to beg, and Thom was left defenseless to do anything but say no and follow Michael to the car waiting out behind the loading bay.

So here they are, very much a sizeable distance from the venue in a car that’s currently no more likely to get them to where they need to go than a wreck at the bottom of the sea. Radiohead are supposed to be taking the stage in minutes, literal minutes, but that is just not going to happen, is it? Stupid, stupid Thom. The traffic that has them gridlocked appears to have come to a standstill for the sole purpose of destroying his life based on the lack of concern anyone outside of Thom’s own wrecked self seems to be displaying, and everything is fucked. He’s pretty sure the driver of the car nearest to them sees Thom through the smoked glass of their window and is laughing.

“Oh fuck,” he whines. He’s beyond caring what Michael thinks of him. He has never cared less about appearing to have his shit together. “What’m I gonna do? Oh god, so screwed. I am so, so bloody fucking screwed.”

“Hey, it’s going to be okay. Plenty of shows get delayed. The audience can handle waiting a little longer.”

“Maybe if I just get out and run for it? It’s what, three kilometres?”

“That’s a great way to get heatstroke and leave the crowd completely hanging…”

“Well FUCK, what do YOU suggest then?!”

Michael is expressionless behind his sunglasses, as silent and unmoved as a sphinx. About as useful, as well.

Thom feels a rush of anger towards Michael, shocking in its unexpectedness and intensity. Okay, then. He’s through here. He struggles with the locking mechanism on his door and hopes this isn’t one of those cars that only the driver can unlock from the front. The familiar fingers of a panic attack are tightening around his throat and plucking at his guts, whispering that something terrible is going to happen any second, and that he needs to get the fuck out of here right now before the universe goes completely upside-down.

And then Michael’s hand falls on his thigh.

Thom forgets the way to his breath completely, but it has nothing to do with the panic causing him to shake with its intensity. He forgets what lines of dreadful thought had been barreling through his mind as his brain shorts out with what must surely be an audible phlop. His entire consciousness has misfired with a jolt.

“I need you to breathe. Can you do that for me?” The hand mid-way up his thigh isn’t moving or stroking. It isn’t clenching in any way that could be considered a warning. It’s just a solid grip through his jeans, but it’s holding him down with as much inexorable power as if it had been more brutally applied.

“Breathe, Thom.”

Thom sneaks a glance at Michael as he attempts to follow his directive. Michael isn’t even looking at him; he’s scanning the scene outside the car almost casually. There’s just that grounding hand (It’s a very large hand, isn’t it? Thom’s mind points out helpfully) on Thom’s thigh and his repeated commands to breathe, breathe.
Thom’s taking great gasps of air in time to Michael’s prompts, and now that hand does tighten—just a fraction—as his measured voice tells Thom he’s doing very well, yes, breathe just like that, you’re being so good for me, Thom.

He’s being gentled as if he’s a feral creature but he tells himself he’ll worry about the inherent humiliation of the situation later. Right now he’s willing to endure anything that allows him respite, and Michael’s soothing is slowly pushing back the smothering blanket of his panic attack.

“There we go, that wasn’t so bad, now was it?” Michael leans over Thom with his free hand, and easily flicks the lock to the back door. The driver is already hurrying around to open it.

Thom is deeply confused, his brain a gormless lump. They’re at the venue. How’d he blank out so completely as to not even notice the traffic had cleared enough for them to move?

His bewilderment must be painfully obvious, as Michael warmly says, close—too close—to Thom’s face, “You’re okay now. You responded beautifully, you focused on my voice so well.”

Thom tries to say something but his throat is too sticky. He tries again. “I’m sorry,” he croaks.

He suddenly feels small and oddly grimy but he can’t move, not even with the driver holding the door open, blandly staring away at nothing. It’s obvious the man will wait as long as he’s needed. But then, so will Thom. Michael’s hand is still upon him, pinning him.

He can’t look at Michael’s face. He stares down at the hand on his thigh, follows the thick veins running along the back of it. “I’m sorry,” he repeats in a whisper.

“Don’t apologise. Your set was only supposed to start…” The hand on Thom’s thigh finally releases its hold so Michael can check the wristwatch strapped to it. “…seven minutes ago.”

Michael is still leaning into Thom’s personal space, so when he whispers into his ear it’s as though he’s sharing a dirty secret. “So, run. Go run to your band, little kitten. Go play me a really good show. I’ll be watching.”

Thom scrambles out of the car.

That didn’t happen. That didn’t happen at all and Thom plans on taking whatever drastic measures are needed to ensure it’s shoved down into a box and buried until it fossilises into an unrecognisable lump.

It didn’t happen, because if it had, he’d have to let himself think about how he’s slightly hard and uncomfortable in his jeans.
But it did happen.

And Thom isn’t forgetting.

The rest of Radiohead are waiting on the edge of the stage for him as he comes careening around the corner, nearly shouting, “Sorry sorrysorry traffic I’m soso sorry…”

Jonny squeezes his shoulder calmly. “The driver called Tim, we knew, it’s fine. Are you ready?”

“Yeah, yeah,” he mutters, distracted by how little guilt he suddenly has over being late, now that he’s striding onto the stage. Instead, he’s feeling…what, exactly? He’s buzzing. His eyes can’t focus on anything. It’s like all the energy from his truncated panic attack is still banging around his guts, is still fizzling through his veins as it looks for release…

They’re performing “My Iron Lung” within minutes.

Thom doesn’t know what sort of transmutation is taking hold of him, but instead of the aftershocks of humiliation he should be experiencing, he finds he is feeling really, really good. Impossibly good. Present. Accounted for. Plugged right in and it’s glorious. Their set has barely begun and he already just knows this show is going to be electric. He can’t tell if it’s due to the fierce energy the audience is generating or if they’re reflecting his…well, it feels like delirium, Thom decides. Though none quite like he’s ever experienced before—maybe it’s something else entirely, something related to how he can’t forget what just happened. It’s right there in his head. He realises he’s swaying as he sings, thrusting his hips, barely contained.

He wraps himself more firmly around his mic and lets himself think that Michael is watching. He said he would be. Thom can’t see him, but he knows he’s there in the shadows, waiting to see what Thom offers up of himself tonight.

He remembers what Michael had said about that Letterman performance, about the act he’d put on to purposely seduce. With a dangerous, terrible thrill, Thom wonders if he could do the same. Right here, right now. Does he dare? He’s huffed and puffed and worn wolf’s clothing before; how hard would it be to show a little of the skin underneath? Skin. His hand grasps at his own throat, trails down into his open collar and the sweat of his chest.

It doesn’t appear he’s going to need to overthink the situation, because his body is moving with barely any input from his conscious mind as if it knows instinctually what’s needed of it. So he just releases himself, lets this unexpected gift subsume his whole body. Maybe it’s not exactly what Michael had been talking about, as there’s nothing measured or calculated about what he doing at all: He is a bullet, aimless and ricocheting and he can’t bring himself to care enough to redirect it.

“Sssssssuck,” Thom hisses into the mic, as dirty and suggestive as he can. “Suck your teenage thumb…”

He is rubbing his lips along the mesh, and for the first time he admits to himself—baldy, and without convoluted provisions—that he wants to be wanted by Michael. The revelation spikes like a spasm through his body.

He’s going to give Michael exactly what he’d asked for. He wants to give him more, even. He wants and he wants and he wants, but for what he isn’t certain. Other than for Michael to want him back and for Michael to tell Thom he gave him a good show, did a good job. It’s circular reasoning,
to be sure, but he doesn’t know what to wish for beyond its seductive simplicity.

He yowls and jerks like his spine is a live wire as they transition into “Bones.” Freed from his guitar, he lets himself fall further and further into this headspace. He is a fucking atomic burst blinding everything white. He spins and tears at his own clothes like a berserker as he loses himself within the pound of the music.

It’s nearly a blasphemy, this feeling, and all he can do is yield to it as it spools out on display for all to witness. He’s reduced to pure physicality, and it strikes him that the strange bite of this exhibitionism has affected him in an unforeseen way: he’s hard. *Fuck,* but he’s *hard.* His hand slides back to his chest, down his sweat-drenched shirt. He bunches it in his fist, the air on his stomach a thrilling lick. He touches himself. Just a little. Maybe more. He slides his palm down the front of his jeans, further down his thigh to where Michael’s hand had grasped him. Michael’s touch feels like it was just moments ago.

Thom is wanting, and he is wanton.

“*It’s called Creep,***” he spits into the microphone. “*Because I like to watch.***”

He’s pacing the stage like something predatory as the opening notes drum over him. He rolls his shoulders, jerks his neck, sends sparks flying. He stares the crowd down; he picks strangers out of the throng to tease and then destroy with a glare that says he will *never* remember them, not ever.

He notices that Jonny is grimacing down at his hand. He saunters over and sees a thin line of black against the white pad of his finger. Without thinking, too wrapped up in the demonstrative persona he’s given himself free reign to explore tonight, he leans over to kiss it. Make it better.

Jonny tries to pull his hand out of Thom’s grasp, too aghast to even flinch. He can’t hear exactly what Jonny hisses at him, but it’s not a pleased sound. So Thom instead tries to wrap his fingers around Jonny’s, hold that battered hand and pull him further out onto the stage. He doesn’t know why he’s doing this, why he’s trying to drag Jonny into the orbit of this manic, erotic energy of his. But Jonny balks like a mule, and Thom has no recourse but to release his hand so that he can move back to center stage.

Whatever. This isn’t for Jonny’s benefit, anyway.

He’d promised Michael a good show. He didn’t promise with words, of course, but he thinks Michael might already know that all he has to do is ask and the promise already exists in every pump of Thom’s blood.

That thought should probably scare him, but it doesn’t. It doesn’t scare him one little bit.
Where the fuck are all these police coming from, anyway?

Colin pushes through to the greenroom, stepping on the shiny boot of an officer picking through the fruit basket on the catering table. Colin can’t even pretend to be contrite. That’s their kiwi.

He sees Ed’s head above the throng and squeezes through to his side. Phil is there, along with Jonny and Tim as well. “What the fucking hell is this?”

“They needed the toilet,” Phil answers blandly.

“What, there’s no working toilets in the whole of Sicily?” A uniform-clad shoulder pushes into Colin’s back, knocking him into Jonny. “Oh, for bloody fucking fuck’s sake.”

“I know. I’m so glad I have no…green spells…on me,” whispers Ed.

“What the—oh, for crying—is that what we’re calling weed these days, Ed? Marijuana? Mary Jane? Reefer? Your drugs, Ed, is that what you’re referring to?” His voice rises with each query.

Ed slams an oversized mitt over the bottom half of Colin’s face. “Shut the hell up, Coz.”

It’s clear that none of these police speak a word of English. At least not for tonight.

Pulling into himself even more tightly, arms wrapped like a straight-jacket about his frame, Jonny sniffs, “I’m pretty sure all these officers are already bombed, seeing what disaster they’ve done to the catering table.”

Colin jabs out his tongue and swipes a thick wet stripe up Ed’s palm; he releases Colin immediately with an overly theatrical yuck!

“Okay,” demands Colin. “Where’s Thom, then? Let’s get out of here, this is ridiculous.”

“He started whinging about how there was no vodka, and said he was going to go look at his star. Apparently he has a star that comes out only when things are bad. So he says.” Jonny lowers his voice. “What was up with him tonight? Did you see—”

“Yeah, I saw. I don’t know. I don’t know what that was.”

“He went completely out-of-bounds, he groped me.” Jonny sounds scandalised, but not especially disapproving.

“He tried to hold your hand, Jonathan; please do try to not be so Victorian.” Colin says distractedly, trying to spot a fluffy orange head anywhere in the crowd. It’s hopeless. “I’m going to go hunt Thom down, he’s definitely not here. Do you guys want to go ahead?”

Everyone is all too eager to comply with that suggestion, so with Ed leading the way, they shuffle slowly towards the exit. Colin circles back around the way he came, colliding several more times with police. He’s pretty sure a female officer cops a feel as he slides past, but he’s on a mission and won’t be deterred.

He wanders about the backstage areas, the sound of R.E.M.’s set growing louder and then softer with distance as he wends his way back-and-forth through cement passages. He tries to think where Thom might be holed up with a view of the night sky; he decides to try closer up by the stage.
Maybe he headed to the VIP stands.

Colin scurries along faster now that he has a destination in mind. He passes into the open air of stage left and a flash of white immediately catches his eye. Ah—there’s Thom. He’s lying on his back upon some equipment cases, tucked away so that he’s not underfoot. Thom can’t see Colin from his angle, so Colin pauses to take in the sight of his slight frame. How impossible that he could contain the sort of power and raw energy he’d expended tonight. Where does it come from? Thom growls like a demon both onstage and off, but he looks like an orphan from a folk tale. Lost in some snowy woods without his porridge, and trying to understand why someone else has been sleeping in his bed. Colin has a momentary flight of fancy, an idea that Thom came out here to recharge himself with the starlight.

Colin realises that Thom’s not actually looking at the night sky, however. He follows Thom’s sightline and his eyes land on Michael Stipe. Michael’s in the middle of performing “Undertow.” Colin glances back at Thom’s face. Now that he sees it, he can’t possibly un-see how Thom’s eyes are glowing, transfixed.

I know what I wanted
I know what I wanted
I know how I wanted this to be
You go down to the water
Drink down of the water
Walk up off the water, leave it be

Colin steps away. Before he turns to start backtracking through the warren of backstage corridors, he reflexively glances up at the night sky.

The lights of Stadio Cabali are throwing up so much light pollution that not a single star can be seen.

Chapter End Notes

- here are two videos from Thom's performance described in this chapter (Catania, Sicily, 1995):
  - Creep
  - My iron Lung, Bones and High and Dry

- from Thom's tour diary:

Saturday August 5th
Stockholm/sicily

Stuck at Stockholm airport I find airport lounges traumatic and extremely lonely. Try to use the time constructively writing letters to fans (I carry this dejected satchel full of them round) reading a book on the situationiste international and the Paris Riots of 1968 (I am proud of my pretentions) and the tibetan book of living and dying by Soygal Kinpoche. R.E.M. have taken the stones Private jets, now THATS cool.
Sunday August 6th
Sicily

Spend the whole morning displaying my lilywhite body and Red Hair to gawping sicilian populace. The show is at a sports stadium. Utter Chaos permeates every corner of the proceedings. I soak up the burning mediterranian Sun and wait for the first murmurs from Mount etna. Briefly wonder what the sicilian is for "fuck me silly but don't tell your brothers". One minute before stage time we find ourselves stuck in traffic. Micheal Stipe tells me to "breathe, breathe" like im having a baby while hundreds of police stand round and do nothing. Police walk in and out of our dressing room all night to use the toilet. And theres no vodka. I have to make do and during REM's set, I lie in a haze backstage staring at a star- my star- which comes out when things are bad.
4:30 am.

Thom stumbles about the room, trying to shove everything into his suitcase.

“I can’t…bloody…fuck why do I have all these clothes.”

“Maybe if you didn’t leave it until the last minute and wad everything into a ball,” says Jonny. He’s sneering at his own face in the dresser-mirror but Thom knows he’s trying to bounce the reflection towards Thom.

“Like you’re one to talk! And you’ve been wearing my shirts and sneaking them back into my luggage dirty. Don’t think I’m not keeping track, you git.” Maybe that will take that look off Jonny’s face that’s doing Thom’s head in, threatening to rush along the hangover he knows is just waiting for him to let his guard down.

“You’re still drunk.” A statement of fact, not a question.

Thom stuffs a sock inside a side pocket and protests, “There were all these police officers. They had…I dunno what it was. Mike said that when an Italian official tells you to drink it, you fucking drink it. So I did. Bunches of times.”

Thom gives up on his clothes and staggers into the loo to gather his toiletry kit.

A primordial sense of self-preservation suggests he really doesn’t want Jonny to look too closely at him right now. Maybe he senses that Jonny is entertaining a predatory mood this morning and will draw blood at the first scent of instability or furtiveness. Thom’s just barely sober enough to know he’s in no shape to employ subterfuge if Jonny starts trying to pry his edges up.

“You smell like a pickling factory,” calls Jonny from the other room. Thom hears the TV click on.

“Your face is a pickling factory. Sour.” Thom rummages for his toothbrush, doesn’t find it, and climbs into the bathtub. His shoes squeak and scuff against the porcelain as he pushes around into an acceptable position. He sing-songs against the cool sides so that his voice echoes and expands. “Sooourrr. Soouuuuuuuurr. Sour Jon-Jon face wrinkles...”

In the other room, the telly notches up sharply in volume.
5:05 am.

“Fucking hell. Thom. THOM. Get UP, we need you awake and acting halfway human.” Tim is staring down at him with near-sighted goblin eyes.

“Don’t wanna be human. Wanna be myself.” Thom moans and throws his arms up over his face to hide from the fluorescent light and Tim’s completely unacceptable presence.

Jonny’s voice is drifting into the bathroom from the doorway, where he’s swearing he tried to get Thom together and out the door. But Thom is just impossible.

“Why did you think it was a good idea to start drinking after R.E.M.’s set last night? You knew we were supposed to leave at 5:30. When did you get in?”


“I should never have let you out of my sight…all those police were giving me the creeps and I just wanted out of there. This is all on me, I suppose,” Tim sighs, digging his fingers into his hair. “I presumed you’d just come back after the show. C’mon, you, OUT of the bathtub.”

He grabs Thom by the collar of his shirt and starts yanking.

Thom rolls sticky eyes upwards and tries to focus on Tim, whose face is growing frownier and frownier. His eye sockets feel lined in flypaper. He very carefully and very slowly enunciates, “Never presume that I will not act upon my worst instincts.”

His eyelids drift shut again, heavy as bricks.

5:20 am.

“Jonny, go get Ed.”

5:30 am.

Thom is never talking to Ed ever again.

8:30 am.

“Wait up for me!” Thom calls. They’re rushing to get to their gate and everyone has these long bloody legs and Thom doesn’t and he’s dropped his favourite blue hoodie in the middle of the walkway and he’s only just now noticed and has to go back; it’s laying in a sad little crumple like a whole city block away behind them. As he watches helplessly, someone steps on it.
He feels his heart crack a little.

“C’mon! Hold up!” He’s on the verge of a tantrum because no one is listening to him; they’re all still marching away towards their gate and it’s freaking him out. Can’t they hear him? Or has he finally gone from only-half-here to full-on ghost?

“Hold the fuck up!”

I am the fuck up. Please hold me.

9:00 am.

Thom smushes down into his seat and pulls his hood as far over his face as it will go. There’s a grubby shoe-print on his sleeve like a recrimination. He stares deathrays at everyone who manages to invade the narrow aperture of his hood.

10:00 am.

Wait around for three hours in the Rome airport until it’s time for their flight to Tel Aviv. Okay. Thom can do that. Easy enough. Just sit there. Sober up. Ugh. No.

He pulls out his fancy new PowerBook (an expense he still feels guilty over—it’s not like an instrument; you can’t make music on a laptop) and tries to write something in his tour diary. It’s an experiment. He’d been noticing that he couldn’t remember what city or even country they were in sometimes and he has a real problem with that. So he thought writing down a bare-bones description of each locale might help ground him.

The text cursor blinks at him expectantly.

Well, what can he possibly say about Sicily? Not the truth, that’s for fucking sure. What if he dies and someone reads it? Is there a way to give this thing a password? Is there a way to give the password a password? Even ignoring that, he can’t give this machine all his secrets, he decides. At a certain threshold of diary-writing this computer will contain more Thom than Thom does, and what happens when he fails the Turing Test and the PowerBook passes? Thom doesn’t want to be crushed in a compactor and buried in a landfill, thankyouveryfuckingmuch. He decides he’ll come up with something that gently bats the truth around but doesn’t, like, reverberate with any power. Truth equals power. But truth doesn’t always equal reality. He needs to think about that more. Later. He instead types out:

:) I’m :) trying :) to :) be :) a :) better :) person :) but :) some :) people :) are :) testing :) me

Yeah, this laptop was a bloody great financial investment.
1:05 pm.

They shuffle onto the plane.

Thom’s trying to shove his computer case into the brimming overhead bins. It’s not fitting and it keeps falling out. It hits him in the face right when the intercom comes on and says *Ladies and gentlemen, we’re sorry for the inconvenience, but this flight is delayed.*

The voice says more, the *whys* and *whens*, but Thom has already stopped listening. His cheek is hurting from the edge of his stupid PowerBook.

He shoves past everyone still milling about dumbly in the aisle—“Ow,” hisses Ed—and makes a break for the toilet.

Vomits.

Exits the bathroom, shuffles back off the plane with the herd, and looks for some toys to buy in one of the airport shops. He can’t find any Kinder Eggs, but he finds a bin of cleverly-detailed plastic animals. He picks through, not knowing what he’s looking for, until he finds a few that feel like protective charms in his palm and make his stomach feel more settled.

3:00 pm.

They get on the plane again.

Thom collapses into his seat and passes the fuck out, *thankfully*.

No.

That’s a complete lie. He’s too miserable and too hungover and too exhausted to sleep.

His teeth are filmy, his hair matted and greasy with yesterday’s bad decisions. He’s choking on the dead recycled air of the cabin. His bones want to abandon his body and find new flesh to live in.

He pulls out a notepad and a biro and tries to distance himself from reality.

*Something about a dog barking at ghosts. Something about sparks. These might be lyrics. Could be. Maybe. Fuck it, who knows. Who cares. Thom feels like he’s writing into a void, and if he wanted that feeling he'd scrawl in the margins of the phone book and throw it into the sea when he was done.*

He scribbles little dogs and gremlins all over the airplane’s safety card instead. He gives a woman and the small child she is calmly strapping an oxygen mask to both gigantic moustaches. He draws a stick-person which may or may not be a self-portrait laying face-first in the aisle.

*He unbuckles his evil grey lap belt (the same as it ever was) because if the plane happens to go down Thom wants to mitigate any chance of survival and use the opportunity to escape this bloody*
hangover, this bloody life, *this bloody fucking universe.*

**4:45 pm.**

They’re supposedly in Tel Aviv. But now they’re trapped in Passport Control, so who really fucking knows. Red tape. Red tape’s probably the only thing holding civilisation together at this point. That’s why it keeps growing; more is needed as the world continues its unrelenting march towards utter shit. It does Thom’s head in. He’s getting an odd look from Colin, and Thom imagines a snake of tape wrapping itself around his friend’s head until he is nothing but a red balloon of redaction.

He’s dizzy.

**6:30 pm.**

Finally they’re free of the airport, back on the soil where *Creep* first broke. A minivan has scooped them up, and Thom has never wanted to see the inside of a hotel room more in his life. Everyone is subdued and Thom is finally, *finally* drifting off into something approximating sleep.

He feels a gentle shake to his shoulder. It’s Phil, telling him he needs to stay awake.

They’re on their way directly to a scheduled photoshoot and then to *two* separate radio interviews that can’t be pushed off.

This day. *This fucking day.*

Some part of Thom will be forever left behind within it.

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Thom sleeps too deeply to dream.

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“Nah, give me the one Colin won’t shut up about. The one he says you played in the dressing room before Oslo.”

“That wasn’t a dressing room, that was a fucking toilet. Some bollocks, trying to pass it off as a proper room. It smelled of ghost arse.”

“Whatever, c’mon. Colin was going mad.” Jonny wheedles. He holds his guitar at the ready. He likes to play gently along—trying out little counter melodies—with Thom when they’re exploring new songs.

“Colin goes nuts over a perfectly ripe banana with breakfast. S’not saying much.” Thom is teasing Jonny, simply running his fingers gently over his guitar’s fretwork.

“Okay, true,” admits Jonny with an easy laugh. “But brown mushy spots on a banana are gross, to be fair.”

Thom makes an exaggerated retching sound. “Bananas are gross, full stop. Everyone just pretends to like bananas ‘cause they’re good for you. Well, I’m not falling for it.”

“Not falling to the banana agenda?”

“Nope.”

The Jonny of yesterday is nowhere to be found; the air is free of hidden traps waiting for Thom to bumble into. This is the softer Jonny of a few days ago in Stockholm. Sarcastic as always, but not mean. Granted, yesterday was especially brutal and Thom doesn’t think any of them should be judged too harshly on their attitude. Especially himself.

“Okay, Jon-Jon,” he says softly, leaning over his guitar. He strums out the new one, “No Surprises Please”, that he’d played for Colin. Jonny stills, except to nod along in certain moments and frown to himself at others.

Once Thom’s finished Jonny smiles wide and free, all teeth and apple cheeks, and Thom knows he’s pleased. Really pleased, in the way he gets when he’s been handed something meaty to tinker with. Thom feels that very special frisson that he only gets with Jonny as he starts to play the song again, Jonny joining in this time.

After a while, when they feel they’ve reworked the song’s bones into a promising state, Thom shyly asks if he can show Jonny some lyrics. He pulls out his notebook and flips through to the bit about dogs barking at ghosts. “I, well, take a look. I dunno? But they’re caught in my head and I need them out. Before I can move on.”

He doesn’t ever show anyone raw lyrics like this and isn’t quite sure why he’s doing so now; Jonny silently pulls the notebook closer with a certain delicacy.

After solemnly studying the scrawls for a period of time that Thom thinks is obscenely more than sufficient, he asks, “Is this…that dog that wouldn’t stop barking at you in Prague?”

“Yeah. And sparks. There’s sparks in there somehow. The dog saw them. I dunno.” There’s a new energy to the air. Thom feels uncertain and vulnerable. He gnaws at a thumbnail.

Jonny’s scanning the words again.
“You and your ghosts,” he smiles. And then, backtracking, goes pensive, “Sparks. The speed we’re living our lives at. It causes the sparks.”

Thom’s cuticle is bleeding, now. He crosses his arms, hides the evidence against the fabric of his shirt.

Jonny goes silent for a full minute and then says slowly, dreamily, “Like in France. I was watching these tourists. It was a beautiful square in Paris on a sunny day, and I was watching all these Americans being wheeled around, frantically trying to see everything in ten minutes. I didn’t understand how these people could be in a place so beautiful and so special and not realise it because they weren’t taking the time to just stop and look around. They were rushing…sparking…trying to get to the next big thing.”

“Yeah,” breathes Thom, transfixed. “That’s it. If you slow down to an almost-stop, you can see everything moving too fast around you. And that’s the point. You’re a ghost in your own life.”

“May I borrow this page?” Jonny seems embarrassed at his own forwardness. “I’d like to give it a go.”

“Yeah. Yeah!” Thom leans over and rips the notebook from Jonny’s hand, then rips the page from the book. He shoves the paper at Jonny. “Here! Please!”

Thom’s over the moon and—and he has a sudden inspiration.

“You! You deserve a special prize, Jon-Jon.” He leans over his satchel and rummages till his fist closes around one of the toy animals he picked up in the airport yesterday. “A present, because you’re brilliant.”

He extends his arm towards Jonny, who laughs and digs his long, clever fingers into the fist Thom is making. Thom grins like a devil as those fingers pull and pluck at his own. Jonny finally pries Thom’s hand open, revealing a small, orange mouse made of plastic.

“Huh,” he says, plucking it from Thom’s palm, turning it this way and that. “It’s so intricate. It’s like it’s…carved, and isn’t from some shitty mold. It’s…really fucking cool. Thanks.”

Thom beams. He’d bought the animals to calm himself down, but giving this one to Jonny, right here and now on this shady balcony in Tel Aviv, just feels right with the universe.

Jonny is looking at him slyly now. “Are you the mouse, Thom?”

“Maybe. I bought other animals, you know.”

“Oh really. Little totems. Are they for me, as well?” Jonny leans forward, grinning mischievously.

“You greedy fucker!” Sneering playfully at Jonny, Thom uses his feet to pull his satchel further underneath the bench he’s sitting on.

“C’mon. You can’t just give me the one, then, can you? What,” Jonny asks as he slinks from his chair to sit on the end of Thom’s bench, “do I need to do to get the rest?”

“I dunno, but I think a lot more than remember some boring square in France.”
Jonny slides closer. “Like what?”

Grinning, Thom tries to inch further down the bench, but he was already sitting near the edge and he’s at a dead-end. “I dunno…maybe be nice to me for once? You can still be mean to Colin. And the rest. Especially Tim, be very mean to Tim. But it’d really piss off Colin if you were only nice to me.”

“I can be nice to you, Thom.” Jonny is even closer now. “I can be really nice. Colin will be livid, with how nice I’ll be…”

Jonny licks his bottom lip, which is when Thom realises with a strange kick that he’s been staring at his mouth. He feels the brush of a knee and then the warm pressure of a thigh moving into place against the length of his own, as Jonny closes the last few inches between their bodies. They’re now pressed lightly together on the bench, side-by-side, shoulder-to-knee, and Thom’s still looking at Jonny’s mouth.

“Thom?” Jonny’s lips are slowly easing from a grin to a more serious shape. His top teeth slide forward to gently worry at his bottom lip.

“…yeah?”

There’s a pause: Jonny pauses, Thom pauses, the morning birdsong pauses, the whole goddamn astral plane they exist on pauses.

“May I…” Jonny drifts off, his voice unsure. Something seems to shift. “May I have another one of your stupid bloody toy animals?”

The pressure implodes as Thom nearly rolls off the bench, cackling. “OH MY GOD, you fucking tart! You’re shameless, you are!”

By the time Thom sits back up and looks over, Jonny has slid back further down the bench and into a smug slouch. He shrugs. “It was worth a try. Should’ve seen your face.”

“I nearly thought you were trying for a snog. You’re as bad as Colin.”

Jonny’s eyes widen as he shrugs again. For a moment Thom wonders if maybe Jonny had actually…no, never mind. The nebulous thought slips away before it can sprout into life, swept away back into the ether because Jonny is now staring at him disapprovingly.

“How dare you,” he exclaims, the picture of affronted affectation. “Colin will make out with anything.”

“Oi!” Thom laughs. “Now I’m the one insulted! Are you saying I’m not up to Jonny Greenwood’s lofty standards?”

Jonny sniffs. “Hardly.”

Thom snickers until Jonny relents and gives him a small grin. No matter what shit the rest of the day may bring, these morning hours spent joking and playing new songs with Jonny has made it worthwhile.
“Sometimes you’re impossibly gullible,” teases Jonny. “That’s why you’re fun to fuck with, Thom. You almost make it too easy. Barely a challenge, that was.”

Jonny fetches the lukewarm cup of tea he’s been nursing and moves to gaze off the edge of the balcony at the city stretched out before them. His posture is still soft, but seems contemplative.

Thom doesn’t want to intrude on whatever he’s thinking about but still asks, because he’s a fucking needy child, “So…you really liked it? I’m not ridiculous?” He chuckles and adds, “Not completely, I mean.”

Jonny glances over his shoulder back at Thom, his hair sliding over his eyes. He ducks his head, a shy quirk Thom doubts he’ll ever shake.

“Yeah, it’s a great song. I see why Colin was flipping out, banana-level.” He quietly adds, “You are completely ridiculous, but don’t let it concern you.”

He turns his back to Thom once again and sips from his cup. The sun is starting to creep across the balcony, signaling afternoon. It will be uncomfortably hot out here soon.

Jonny thinks Thom meant the song. He meant the mouse. It’s a dumb thing to care about, anyway, some child’s toy. Thom’s now not sure why he even thought to ask. “Oh, okay. Cool.”

If there’s some small part of him that is feeling a little bit off-center, like he’s misplaced something…like a fulcrum, some small but vital item of importance used to shape the world…

Well, he’s sure it’s nothing. He’s never quite balanced when on tour.

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Thom keeps an expansive catalogue of embarrassments that he likes to roll out when he’s doing the washing up, or trying to sleep, or attempting to feel good about himself in a general sense.

They include such hits as:

Grabbing the hand of a stranger he’d thought was his Mum.

Breaking a Hummel figurine in a shop in Brighton.

That lower case ‘e’ he had insisted upon using as his middle initial.

Wearing a shirt with the price tag still attached.

Losing his virginity.

Getting caught in a revolving door until security came to fetch him out.
Mindlessly following people off lifts onto floors that aren’t his.

Shouting “HEY!” at the end of “Jingle Bells” when no else in the school choir did.

Telling a mate he was too busy to go to the cinema and then running into him at the cinema.

Drunk-dialing that girl.

Drunk-dialing her again.

Smacking a man in a clown mask at a haunted house, who then turned out to be a sixteen-year-old.

Having a bloke in a pub call out the extra two inches afforded by his lift shoes.

Ordering a glass of “chabernet” at the first fancy restaurant he’d ever been to.

Passing gas in the Louvre and a group of Japanese girls hearing.

But right now a woman is asking for an autograph, and it’s not Michael Stipe’s. And Thom’s face is expanding with the heat of his humiliation; his skin must be burning the same bright colour as his hair.

He thinks he’ll have to wipe the entire slate of his past shames clean and carefully draw this down in permanent marker; he is doomed to replay this on a loop, forever.

And he doesn’t even say anything! Not anything beyond an “uh-huh”, anyway. He doesn’t realise till after the girl has wandered back to her table that she probably thinks he’s a complete arsehole. She’s probably telling all her friends now: Man, Thom Yorke is a dick!

He buries his face as far as he can into his dinner without getting hummus on his nose. He considers draping the napkin over his head.

Michael’s hand is laid loosely on the back of Thom’s chair. He’s listening to Bertis Downs the Fourth (or is it the Fifth?) recount a rude waitress in Rome as he nods into his drink. Thom wonders if she really was rude and he then worries their current waitress thinks the man is talking about her.

“…I mean, she complained that we didn’t leave a big enough tip. And you’re not even supposed to tip! I was doing her a favor, if you wanna know the truth.” Bertis stops to slurp at his wine. “And I’m thinking, does she not think I understand the exchange rate? Please. Plus, she knew plenty of English, but she wouldn’t use a word of it.”

Thom is wishing Michael had invited the rest of the band. He couldn’t understand why Jonny had looked so blank when Thom asked if he was coming.

“Ohhh, it’s not a huge deal,” Colin had assured Jonny, who’d been properly miffed once he realised that the invitation had only been extended to Thom. “It’s a frontman thing. They’re allowed a night alone. Who else will understand the earth-shattering importance of choosing the right throat lozenge when one feels a tickle.”

“A night alone…” Jonny looked as if he was about to blab how Thom had been stumbling back into the hotel room after four every night. Quickly, Thom had intercepted him:

“That Ricola shit does not work. It’s candy. Forgive me if I don’t want to sound like you on stage, Coz.”
It worked, because Jonny had just huffed and swallowed whatever distasteful thought was making his face twist like that.

It was too late to completely save the conversation though, and Thom had bristled. “It’s not a ‘frontman thing’, anyway…bloody…it’s not a, a fucking exclusive club or something.”

“Hey, I didn’t mean it like that. I think it’s nice, just the two of you.” And it’s true that Colin hadn’t meant it in any sort of contentious way; he might as well have been a mother telling her son how nice it was that he’d been invited over for a playdate. But Thom had felt defensive and angry at the very suggestion that he was in any way something big and special and…elevated. Which is weird, looking back. Because all he’s wanted his whole life is to be something big. Big and safe and right within the world.

“Who knows what her deal was,” shrugs Michael, and Thom is pulled back into the present. He feels the movement vibrate through his chair and into his back. “She could’ve had a death in the family, or slept through her alarm that morning. You never know. I try not to take it personally.”

Bertis laughs loudly and humorlessly. “It’s called the service industry for a reason. You don’t serve, you’re shitty at your job. It’s simple. I don’t care what kind of day you had. You fake it.”

Michael says nothing. He sets the melting cubes in his drink swirling.

Peter Buck clears his throat. “Hey,” he says, clearly trying to change the subject. “The food, though. Right? Honestly, I think my favorite part of touring is all the food.”

“Oh!” chirps Michael, head and lips quirked. “Is that so?” He leans back and lays his other hand over his heart in mock-hurt. “Beyond the music, obviously. And the pleasure of your always delightful company, Michael.” R.E.M. all laugh, Michael the loudest.

“No, no. I’ll be happy to leave you here and let you live out your days with your arms wrapped around that rotating meat thing.”

Peter throws a glance over his shoulder at the spit of shawarma grilling nearby.

“Ohhh, god. I’d make an honest woman out of that thing in an instant.” He turns back to the table, and addresses Thom. “You wanna try some? It’s insanely good. You hardly have anything on your plate.”

It’s true that Thom’s dinner plate is sparse; he didn’t order much, and he hasn’t eaten much, either. He is woefully incapable of eating anything when he is out of his element.

“Oh,” says Thom. “I—”

“Thom doesn’t eat meat,” Michael states firmly.

“Doesn’t eat meat?” Bertis interjects, staring Thom down. “Why? Is that a hippie thing or something, kid?”

Thom is beginning to remember his size, and why his obsession with being “big” is ultimately such a big laugh. He’s learning that there’s never a level of the game where you’ve earned safety. If anything, he seems to be shrinking smaller and smaller.

“I…well, no. I, erm, there was this girl I was dating who was a vegetarian, so. I pretended I was
one, to impress her.”

“Oh, you little scoundrel!” Michael grins and that hand moves from its post on Thom’s chair to shove him lightly in the shoulder.

“Well I—I did, then. Become vegetarian. ‘Cause things got quite serious, and it was a bit hard to fake it when she was coming over all the time.”

Thom dares a glance at Michael, who looks extremely pleased. “You try to impress people a lot, Thom?”

Thom goes red again, and then goes ever redder at having gone red.

“N-no, no,” he shakes his head vehemently. “No, I just—I was a stupid teenager. It was all stupid.”

“You still with her?” asks Mike Mills.

And Thom actually chuckles a little at that.

“Nooooono,” he replies. “No, no, that didn’t last. That very much did not last. But being vegetarian…that stuck, for whatever reason.”

Michael hums a soft, approving little sound. “You’re a man of conviction. Conviction by happenstance.”

“What?” Thom honestly has no idea what Michael means.

“You don’t come to your beliefs. They come and find you.”

Thom must be making that dumb squinty-eyed face he makes when he is not following something, because Michael laughs. He can’t decide if he’s too drunk to understand Michael, or if Michael’s too drunk to make sense.

And in that instant, Thom feels the entire restaurant go unreal. The sounds have raised in volume, and the smells of meats and spices in ferocity. His limbs are vibrating. He scoots his chair backwards, and it makes an awful scraping noise.

“I—I, er. The loo. I’ll be right back.”

Thom makes a numb and half-hearted attempt to push his chair back in to the table, then stumbles off in the direction of the toilets.

They’re empty; thank fuck. Thom locks himself inside one of the cubicles and presses his head to the door. He tries to focus on his breathing and run through the exercises meant to calm him down.

Why does this always happen? Everything will be good, everything will be great, and then it’s like he’s dunked underwater and tied ‘round the ankles with lead. Panic grabs hold of his throat in the gentlest of vices, and most times no one can even tell that anything is wrong with him. But something is.

It would make sense if it happened when things were bad. And it does, of course—it happens a lot, and yeah, that makes sense. But it’ll happen when things are fantastic, too.

Thom has a theory that when things are good—really, really good—the devil on his shoulder leans into his ear and grins that it will end. It always ends. And Thom will turn to his guardian angel, and find nothing there. Not one brush of a feather. Nothing on that shoulder that will offer any sort of
shelter from the storm.

“Everything is good,” he whispers to the door, rolling his forehead rhythmically against it. He shuts his eyes. He realises he is squeezing them tightly, painfully, so he lets up the pressure and tries to make every muscle in his body go slack. “Everything is good. It’s fun. It’s a nice dinner out. It’s okay. You’re okay. Michael’s here. They like you.”

The words fall flat and nearly silent against the metal.

He tries to focus on his heartbeat, tries to hold his breath and slow it down, but feeling the organ thumping away in his throat just makes it race harder.

“Fuuuck,” he breathes against the door. The paint is glossy and sea green. It’s the colour of the mental hospital he worked at. It was meant to calm the patients, they’d said. Thom had always thought the walls just looked ill.

He wishes Jonny were here. Colin? his mind prompts, and he even has this fleeting thought that he should go find a phone and ring up the hotel. It’s Colin he usually runs to, after all. No, he thinks. No, Jonny. He doesn’t know why, Jonny had returned to being his nastier self after the whole debacle earlier over not being invited. But if Jonny were only here, maybe he could catch his breath…even if it meant he would have to bear Jonny’s snide comments, shards of ice so thin and fine that just hearing them would leave cuts in Thom’s head…

“Bertie’s an asshole.”

Thom swears in a loud, indecipherable hiss.

“They’re bringing out the hookah. It’ll make you feel better. And then we’ll get the fuck out of here. Whaddya say?”

Thom opens his mouth and hopes his voice comes out sounding halfway normal. “I’m—sorry, I. Think the food’s just, er. Not agreeing with me.”

Thom stares at what he can see of Michael’s shoes through the opening at the bottom of the stall. Doc Martens, crossed patiently.

“Come on out, Thom.”

Thom flicks the little lock, and it sounds like a heavy deadbolt to his ears. Michael is sitting on the counter next to one of the sinks, leaning back against a mirror. Only the bottom half of his shirt buttons are doing their job. Thom stares at the hair on Michael’s thin chest before averting his eyes to his own reflection. He is slightly surprised at what he finds: A young man who, by all visible accounts, does not appear to be falling apart.

He’s flushed, and maybe a little wall-eyed, but he doesn’t appear the way he feels. He doesn’t see a sinkhole staring back at him. That’s something, at least.

Michael’s face is the warmest, kindest thing Thom thinks he has ever seen.

“A little hookah, and we’re out. I promise. We’ve got better places to be, anyway. Don’t worry, Bertie’s not invited.”

“Guys like that always have it out for me,” Thom states. “I’m used to it.”

Michael hops off the sink and drapes his arm over Thom’s shoulder like a warm scarf in winter.
Relief seems to manifest itself physically. Like feathers tracing gently along one shoulder.

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Thom feels weird. Not bad weird. Not entirely good weird. Just...a comfortable weird. The hubble-bubble machine had been rolled out like a wedding cake, and Thom was happy when all conversation wilted. They just passed the hose from hand to hand, lazily breathing in the strangest combination of warm and cool and sitting in a comfortable silence. That bad feeling is gone, just as Michael had promised.

“What is this?” Thom asks, watching the mist waft from his mouth in unbelievably big, white puffs. Tobacco, of course, and a little hash if Thom’s senses were correct.

“It’s strawberry,” replies Michael.

They bid goodnight to Bertis, Mike, Peter, Bill, and the random friend of Bill’s that Thom’s already forgotten the name of. Thom’s head is vibrating pleasantly now, and he doesn’t even care that he doesn’t shake any hands or really make any effort to pretend he’d enjoyed the meal. Yeah, bye. Yeah, see you tomorrow. Yeah, yeah, yeah. He giggles.

“Oh yeah?” inquires Michael. “What’s so funny?”

“Me,” says Thom.

Michael’s arm is snug around his shoulder again. “Nahhh. I take you dead seriously.”

“You shouldn’t.”

“Oh, but I do.”

--

They head out to Ramat Gan Stadium. They’ll spend all day here tomorrow setting up and soundchecking, but Michael wants Thom to see how it looks at night. They’ve done something
fantastic with the lights, he explains. He wants Thom to see them now. He doesn’t want to wait.

The stadium looks far from ready to host a concert. Apart from the skeleton of the stage, it looks mostly like it’s waiting for a football match to begin and wondering what Thom and Michael are doing here.

A large, broad-shouldered man who calls himself Avi meets them at the mouth of a concrete tunnel. He grins and greets them with a firm and enthusiastic hand; he’s the sort of man who instantly puts one at ease. Or maybe, Thom thinks, the hubble-bubble machine has turned Thom into someone who can be put instantly at ease.

Avi pushes open a door, and Thom is slightly surprised to find a crew of people filing in and out of rooms and hallways. He’d never really realised how much work went into preparing for a show of the magnitude the R.E.M. machine requires. How many people has Thom never bothered to meet and thank? How many people have stayed up all night hanging lights from rafters like streamers?

“Wait here,” instructs Michael. He says something about quickly working out some details and disappears with Avi behind a door. Thom hums his assent and floats about the place like a tiny cloud. He’ll wait. He’ll wait right here. He wonders what’s down this hallway, though?

He bobs along an expansive wall, dizzy and delighted. He smells strawberries. He finds himself in these spaces frequently now: Long, utilitarian corridors behind stages in places he cannot completely communicate. Perhaps all these hallways link together, underground and underneath the oceans. A labyrinthian tangle of passages that Thom trudges like some miserable minotaur.

Only, he’s not miserable tonight. Maybe he’d been a little unsettled, back at the restaurant. But he isn’t anymore. Come to think of it, he hasn’t been truly miserable in many nights. Days, sure. But nights have historically always been the more dangerous of the two.

He doesn’t know how long he’s been wandering. He’s staring at a framed sepia photograph of a lot of athletic-looking men posing stony-faced in sports uniforms.

“Am I going to have to put you on a leash?”

For once, the unexpected voice does not make Thom jump. Maybe because it’s quickly becoming not-so-unexpected. Michael is becoming a constant. Thom is beginning to believe that no matter how far he wanders off, the man won’t be far behind.

Thom turns. Michael is slinking towards him in his thin grey jumper and eyeliner, looking jaunty and gently bullish. His eyes have smudged over the course of the evening.

“Not hiding from me again, are you?”

“No,” Thom says. “I’m not.”

“Good. ‘Cause I feel like we’ve been making some real progress.”

Michael backs him up against the wall.

It’s not an aggressive move. It’s not a threat. Michael’s presence is soft and easy and nowhere near overpowering. And Thom can easily break free; he knows he can. Michael’s not even touching him.

A hand presses itself to the front of Thom’s jeans.
Thom freezes as his mind sinks under the staggering, paradoxical weights of disbelief and inevitability. For all of his suggestive ferocity onstage lately, he is suddenly as panicked as a rabbit in a bear trap. The fog in his head parts a little.

Michael is smiling that ever-present, immutable smile. Thom doesn’t need to see it; he simply knows it’s there. And he’s never understood faith until this moment.

“Thom.”

He doesn’t know where to look. He stares at a loose thread in the weave of Michael’s jumper. He catches the orange of Michael’s trousers in his periphery. Thom likes it when he wears those trousers. *Orange is my favourite colour*, his brain puts forth absently. He suddenly flashes back to Sicily, to the way Michael had humped at the mic stand in those same trousers. The way Thom was hard, lying backstage and watching. The way he is hard now. Michael’s hand is suddenly moving, caressing. That big palm is now sliding up and down the seam of his jeans and creating a delicious, dangerous friction.

Thom is trembling. He doesn’t think he can bear this. The wall pressed solid at his back is a reminder of their surroundings, a firm warning of *anyone could come ‘round the corner, anyone could catch you at any moment*... Is this a game?

His breath catches at that thought. Oh god, he can’t breathe. Not again. Not twice in a night. Everything is fuzzy with the aftertaste of the strawberry smoke. What if he’s read everything wrong? What if Michael knows that? Has known all along? How pathetic. How pathetic, how wanting Thom has been. What if he knows, and this is his way of laughing at him...

“Shhh,” hushes Michael, and Thom has the brief, mad notion that he is shushing Thom’s thoughts. And this *is* real. But if it is, then why is Michael so placid? He is still and calm as a quiet lake. All but his hand. That big hand, the same one that had grounded him in the car that day, that held him down and turned the key to his workings. The hand that had then redirected Thom’s wind-up energy, picking him up and then setting him free to whizz around on a flashing red stage. To sting and spit. To move like poison. To learn to *want*.

“I can’t stop watching you,” says Michael, and Thom has that sense that his brain is on broadcast again. “What have you been doing, Thom? Hmm?”

Michael’s hand is picking up pace and pressing in harder, mapping Thom’s shape through the fabric of his jeans. Thom’s lungs gasp great, dizzying gulps of air. His head weighs nothing. And it is hot. He is so hot, absolutely burning up. He feels guilty blotches of red at his cheeks and his temples and the nape of his neck, coiling around his throat and down his collar...

“What was Sicily all about?”

Something small escapes Thom’s throat. Something gagged and tremulous.

“Was that for me?”

Thom tries to nod. His head jerks, once, twice.

“Oh, *kitten*…” Michael laughs, low and sweet. “Thank you. It was beautiful. *You were beautiful.*” And he can’t catch his breath, but it’s not because he thinks he’ll never get it back. And it’s not
because he thinks his heart will stop. It’s because of the only coherent thought his brain is letting transmit clearly through the static:

*Michael Stipe’s hand is on my cock.*

“Let me.”

Thom shudders, something filthy shivering down his spine. He tries to nod again.

Michael sighs softly. Thom feels it ruffle it his hair.

“What?”

Thom nods again, more forcefully this time.

“Okay?”

Thom groans. The sound echoes through the corridor.

He’s fully exposed in the public expanse of a foreign hallway. And he’s so turned on, *fuck*, so impossibly turned on despite the dread of discovery. His eyes squeeze shut and his hands scramble frantically for purchase. He grabs and clutches at what turns out to be Michael’s hip; he fists at the fabric he finds there and whimpers, drowning.

“Shhh, shh shh. It’s all right.”

Michael’s face is close. Thom can feel it. He can feel his breath hot on his skin, strawberry steam, and he realises he wants to be kissed. He wants to be kissed, he *needs* to be kissed—

“That’s it.” Michael’s words hang so close to Thom’s lips. Thom feels his own hips canting, searching. Michael is stroking him slowly. A thumb swipes at the head of Thom’s leaking cock, rubbing slickly.

“Oh,” Michael sighs. “Are you always this wet for me?”

Thom shudders. *Yes*. Michael’s hand is so large and rough, so different from a woman’s. So different from Thom’s own. He is rudderless; whatever couple dealings he’d had with boys in the dark, they were quick and perfunctory. This is nothing like that. And these lights are so bright; there’s no place to hide from the reality of this, to pretend it’s anything other than what it is.

Schoolboys don’t know how to touch other schoolboys; Michael is a man, skilled at touching other men.

Thom’s stomach dips and crests in pleasant waves at the thought. His mind is trying to catch up with itself. What if Michael intends to do…more? Does Thom want him to? Won’t he *kiss* him?

Michael presses his forehead to Thom’s. “Good, doing so good…”

And Thom’s blood is pounding. He’s harder than he’s ever been in his fucking life, balls drawn up tight, but Michael isn’t speeding up. His hand strokes and pulls at the same slow and even pace. Thom whines. Maybe he growls. He begins to buck in earnest, desperately seeking a finer friction, wordlessly trying to urge Michael’s hand to speed up.
Michael is undeterred, however, and continues to control the pace to his liking, ignoring how Thom’s body is begging for more. Thom can feel the living heat of his pulse pounding rabbit-fast through the length of his cock.

Michael adjusts his hold, finds the sensitive spot underneath his shaft most girls always miss. His other hand is anchored to the wall next to Thom’s head. Thom grabs at the firm, wiry muscle of his upper arm and holds on. Thom is sweating, sticking and sliding where their foreheads meet. Curiosity wins out and Thom’s eyes slip open briefly; Michael’s lips are so close.

“Come on,” they spur. “You can do it. Show me you can do it.”

_God, god, oh god…_

Thom fucks up into Michael’s fist, and that wonderful heat is finally merciful enough to grip him tighter. Thom hisses.

Thom relinquishes the last dregs of self control as his baser instincts take over. He is panting and unthinking and shameless and jerking with frantic abandon. Whatever remains of his modesty implodes as he chases a release that remains two maddening fucking steps ahead of him.

“Come on,” urges Michael, and there’s a bite to his voice.

Thom grinds his head hard against Michael’s, mouth open and hot and searching. He’s rewarded with the briefest brush of lips, chaste and spectre-shy, but then Michael turns his head to watch his hand moving on Thom.

The sound of Michael’s hand working him is obscene in the silence of the hallway. Thom’s trainers are squeaking and skidding on the pitted linoleum. His voice, high and overwhelmed, is being pulled from him in little staccato grunts.

His calves are burning from holding position.

“Come for me,” Michael commands against the shell of his ear. “You gorgeous fucking thing.”

He comes with his cheek pressed to Michael’s. The friction of their stubble is raw and itching, distant in light of everything else.

It’s like he’s been stabbed; he gives one last drawn-out wail until his voice cracks from lack of breath. He convulses as his release spatters into Michael’s palm. Michael cradles Thom’s head protectively away from the grubby concrete wall as contractions continue to wrack his body. He holds and rocks him, tugging him gently through the end of his orgasm.

Thom’s ears rush like the undertow, and it’s the only sensation he’s aware of. His body doesn’t exist, he’s naught but this blissful, roaring emptiness. Annihilation.

Until reality finally begins to reinsert itself again with fits and starts.

Feeling rushes back into his skin and grabs hold of his heart in the next crushing instant. He buries his face into the space between Michael’s neck and shoulder and breathes in the undeniable smell of sex.

As if to punish him for losing them, however momentarily, too many thoughts begin racing circles inside his head. It’s like Pandora’s box has been smashed open inside his skull. Thom could cry. He hopes he doesn’t cry. He mustn’t. He feels it moving through him like something ready to jump from a skyscraper. _Why?_
“You’ve gotta stop thinking so hard.” Michael’s lips curl into a smile against Thom’s cheek. He strokes a large hand through Thom’s damp hair, over the nape of his neck, down his back. He’s pressing a firm and comforting pressure into his skin. He doesn’t rush Thom through this, just lets him lean into the warmth of his threadbare grey jumper, holds him until he feels his heartbeat shift gears, slow down to keep pace with Michael’s.

Thom’s still shaking, but no longer feels so thoroughly, oddly bereft.

“You were…so…good. You were so good for me. You’re always so good for me, though, aren’t you.” Said as if it’s a fact Michael is as confident of as any he’s ever encountered.

How badly Thom needs this. How badly. How pitiful.

Thom raises his head slightly away from where it’s been resting against Michael. If he would only let Thom have his lips…

The break of contact, when it comes, is jarring. The sweat drenching Thom’s body suddenly feels fever-cold. It’s all his own.

He opens his eyes.

“There now,” Michael murmurs, approvingly. He is smiling, still rubbing tranquilising little circles into Thom’s shoulder.

Then, still smiling, he raises his soiled hand to his lips and licks it clean.

Thom is transfixed; he blushes and cannot look away even as he feels his face go stupid with shock.

He’d never even considered such a thing before.

Do people do that outside of pornos? Well, they must, because Michael just did. And he did it like he wanted it, too. Like he enjoyed it. Like that was what he’d been after this whole time. Again, Thom thinks: Why? How?

Could you do that?

(Could you do any of that? Oh, christ.)

Michael uses his now clean hands to tuck Thom back into his pants and then does up his jeans. Thom just gapes.

Does—

Does Michael want Thom to—?

Does he need him to—

“Come on,” Michael says, chipper. He turns away, sucking from his thumb whatever traces of Thom’s release he might have missed. “Let me show you what they’ve done with the lights…”

Thom stands there. He stares after him. He’s numb and dumb and shell-shocked. His jaw hangs loose. What…?

Michael isn’t slowing or looking back.
So Thom feels his feet begin to follow, drawn along in Michael’s wake. His lips are tingling, and half of him feels deeply unfulfilled.

All he’d wanted was Michael’s mouth.

*In the end, isn’t that what you got?*

He stumbles forward, blinking and swaying like he’s just stepped off a boat. Michael marches ahead, his figure contrasted against the dingy monochrome of the surrounding cement, glowing like a beacon. Thom’s world *feels* irrevocably changed, but it still *looks* like a maintenance corridor. And Thom still feels like Thom.

And he’s still hungry.

Chapter End Notes

- from Thom’s *Tour Diary:*

*Monday, August 7*
Sicily/Tel Aviv
5.30 am. Leave hotel for airport.
9 am. Fly to Rome. Wait around for three hours. Sober up. Pass out. Read in a magazine that it’s now six months since Richie Manic disappeared.
1pm. Get on plane. Then told to get off plane as there is a three-hour delay. Throw up in toilet.
4 pm. Arrive in Tel Aviv. An hour at passport control. Drive to stadium for photo shoot and two radio interviews. Shaky. Cannot focus.

*Tuesday, August 8*
Tel Aviv
This is where Creep first broke. Way before America. That was well over two years ago. Fond memories flood back of being mobbed for the first time.
Do a press conference. Usual stuff. I always feel like a politician.
Meal in the evening with R.E.M. One of the most embarrassing moments of my life occurs when a girl comes up in the restaurant and asks for my autograph and not Mr Stipe’s. I hide my face in a napkin for five minutes. Then the hubble-bubble machine arrives. It's supposed to help digestion. But it just makes me feel weird.

- Thom and Michael and the hubble bubble machine

- “The Tourist” was written by Jonny, who, explains Thom, was “in a beautiful square in France on a sunny day, and watching all these American tourists being wheeled around, frantically trying to see everything in 10 minutes.” Jonny was shocked at how
these people could be in a place so beautiful and so special and not realize it because they weren’t taking the time to just stop and look around.
Always Rock, Never Sand

Chapter by rabbit_in_the_moon

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 7 - Always Rock, Never Sand

Jonny is dreaming about the old woman’s house that they used to share.

The sink is stacked like a mountain with dishes and moving things that look like they’re breathing. He knows he should do the washing up; Colin’s been on his case about it for months. And he’ll be home soon, won’t he? Is he still working at the record shop? And suddenly he’s there, and he’s wearing a plaid suit.

“Jonathan,” Colin sighs. “Really, we must get you a haircut.”

Jonny’s hands fly to his head. His hair is already short. It’s too short. It doesn’t cover his face at all. They can’t cut it! He’ll have nothing left!

“Why is it you never get after Thom?” he whinges. And his voice sounds so ugly to his own ears. He sounds impossibly young...too young to be living here, certainly?

“Because Thom is very busy.”

Colin turns some sort of handle, and everything in the sink drains down the moaning, clanking pipes. Jonny could’ve done that. If Colin had only given him more time, had only put more confidence in him – he could’ve done that! Colin makes it look so easy.

“You need to feed her.”

“What?”

“The old woman. You didn’t feed her today, did you?”

Was Jonny supposed to? He tries to think. He didn’t know she ate. What does she eat?

Jonny looks down, and there’s a pork pie in his hands. It’s the half-eaten one they’d found down the back of the sofa the other day. It’s hard as a rock. It has teeth marks like the impressions of fossilized seashells.

“Go on, then.”

Jonny remembers. Thom says she’s still here. Thom says she lives in the walls. That her ghost is trapped, and that she doesn’t like all these boys living in her house.
Jonny knocks on the walls. He finds hollow spaces and listens. There is only silence, and he keeps walking, and the wall stretches on forever, the house grows and breathes like the things that lived in the sink. He knocks louder this time, becoming impatient. Then there is a terrifying boom of response.

The house shakes, and she is right there, right there inside the wall, just thin plaster and peeling paper between him and her and he shouldn’t have knocked so hard, he thinks he’s made her angry.

“I’m sorry,” says Jonny to the wall. He lays the plate with the petrified pie down on the carpet and steps back.

Nothing happens for several seconds. Then the plate begins to move, to climb and slide up the wall. It hisses against the wallpaper at a ninety-degree angle, the pie glued to the cheap china. Jonny watches it in horror. It speeds up, begins to race up the wall with a horrible scraping sound; the ceiling is too high to see, and it just keeps shooting upwards, growing louder as it becomes more distant. Jonny claps his hands over his ears and runs.

He’s back in the kitchen, but Colin isn’t here anymore. Where did he go? Jonny’s scared, he can’t be alone, not like this—not when he’s made the old woman so angry…

He hears footsteps and laughter upstairs.

Thom.

Of course, Thom!

Jonny begins to shout for him. He rounds the corner, races through a long room he’s never been in before, and leaps into the living room. The stairs are steep, but surely he’s made the climb before? He thinks he sleeps up there. He must have a bed here. He can’t see where the stairs end; they reach towards that unseen ceiling and bend and warp in places. Jonny grips the banister and tries to climb.

Only, he can’t. He can’t get up the first two steps.

“Thom!” he calls again. “Thom, please help!”

Thom laughs again, but not at Jonny. There’s someone else up there.

“I’m busy, Jonny,” he yells down. But it’s more like his voice is close, is somewhere only just out of reach upon the stairs.

Jonny tries to climb again. The carpet slips under his feet. It’s like walking on softened butter. He scrambles on his hands and knees and makes no progress.

“Thom, who’s up there?”

“No one!” shouts Thom. But he’s lying. Jonny knows he is, because he can hear someone; he can hear a man talking.

“I can hear someone! I’m not…not stupid, you know!”

Thom just laughs and laughs. And so does the man.

“Who’s there? Thom! Who’s there?”

A loud bang! The slamming of a door. And the house is flooded with stadium lights.
“Who’s... who is...”

Jonny’s words go dense like molasses. He can’t see anything.

*Oh. Because my eyes aren’t open.*

So he opens them, and wakes up.


Jonny’s brain vibrates as it comes back to reality. He groans, swinging his forearm over his eyes. Thom’s got the big overhead light on.

“Turn’t off...”

“Sorry,” says Thom, but he’s probably not. The room flicks back into darkness.

The light in the bathroom comes on, and then the door swings shut. Jonny listens to the sound of the fan and the shower.

When it’s clear he’s not going to be falling easily back into sleep, he sighs and stares at the line of light at the bottom of the bathroom door. The minutes march by. He starts to watch the digits shift silently on the glowing bedside clock.

It’s 3:47 when Thom emerges. Steams wafts out and Jonny breathes it in, gently. It smells like a generic, lightly-perfumed sense of *clean*. It’s a scent Jonny has come to find comforting; the little bottles of shampoo and body wash don’t vary much from hotel to hotel, and he clings on tightly to whatever small constants there are in their strange life.

“Are you drunk?”

Thom is toweling off his hair. Jonny’s eyes have adjusted back to the dark, and he can see Thom’s shape in the soft light of the digital clock and the faint light filtering in past the dreary polyester drapes. There’s another towel slung low around his hips. He’s staring at the light fur on Thom’s stomach, a smudge of darker shadow, and then Thom’s turning around and dropping the towel. Jonny catches a brief flash of Thom’s bare backside and quickly turns over and faces the wall. He thinks he might have inhaled a little too sharply, a little too loudly; he hopes Thom didn’t hear.

“No. Not really.”

He hears Thom slip into some boxers and then under the covers.

They both lay in silence, knowing the other is not asleep.
The beach burns the soles of Jonny’s feet. He runs to the water, and Thom cackles behind him.

“Shut up,” Jonny mutters when Thom catches up. Jonny watches his toes sink and disappear into the wet sand. “Look at that. Sand! Not a pebble in sight!”

At a safer distance from the water, Thom plops himself down and pulls off his trainers. Jonny laughs at the disgusted face he pulls at the grit that cascades out of them.

“See? Told you.”

“Now you can just shut right up.”

“We should’ve gotten sandals.”

“No way,” says Thom. “Can you imagine? I already look a right pillock as is.”

Jonny smiles at him fondly. He can’t help himself. Thom looks small and infinitely pale under the hot sun. He says his hair is red, a colour which Jonny will never understand. To him it’s a muddy yellow, just a little ruddier than what it was before. He used to feel robbed for missing something everyone else could see; now he feels special for seeing something no one else can.

Thom looks up, shaking his other trainer upside-down. “What?”

“What?” Jonny shakes his head, still smiling. “You don’t look that bad.”

“Yeah, well. I feel like a peeled, boiled egg.”

His feet soothed, Jonny pads over to Thom and sets himself down on the towel he’s laid out. Their bare shoulders touch, and Jonny finds himself both wishing they’d brought two towels and thanking the heavens for Thom’s forgetfulness.

“What’re the others doing today, anyway?”

Jonny shrugs, and inhales deeply of the hot, salty sea air. He luxuriates in the moment, before answering. “Ed’s sleeping in as long as he can. Colin said something about an art gallery. Tim and Phillip are doing something terribly sensible, probably. Everyone is living out their stereotype.”

Thom snorts. Jonny shoots him a glance and feels deeply annoyed at the ridiculous-looking sunglasses perched on his nose. They’re not doing much against the sun; actually, they’re doing nothing. They’re pointless. Thom is squinting, his face muzzy. There’s a sudden unpleasant tilt to Jonny’s mood.

“And Michael?” he asks.

“Hmm,” Thom hums, and Jonny knows when he’s trying to make his voice sound casual. “Dunno.”

Meaning, Jonny thinks, he didn’t invite you along to wherever he’s gone.

A little bit of selfish pleasure stirs in his chest when he hears the unplanned words that come out of his mouth. “Snorting lines off a model’s stomach somewhere?”

“Michael doesn’t do coke,” Thom snaps quickly. Defensively.
“Oh, yes? How do you know?”

Thom shoots Jonny a dirty look through his—Stipe’s—ugly sunglasses. “I just know. He’s above all that ugly male sleazy semen-smelling rock bullshit.”

“Really.”

“Yeah, really.”

“Didn’t realise you knew him so well.”

“Maybe I do, yeah. Can we stop talking about him?”

“Why?”

“Because you’re being an obnoxious cow, that’s why.”

Jonny bristles but it’s rote. He feels like he’s won something. “Well, forgive me for bringing up your favourite subject matter as of late. Just trying to speak your language.”

Thom opens his mouth, ready to retaliate. But another voice intercepts him:

“Are you Thom Yorke?”

Thom and Jonny look up in unison.

A painfully beautiful young woman is staring down at Thom, her head cocked and inquisitive. She’s wearing a one-piece swimming costume that somehow manages to look more salacious than any bikini could. It’s flustering Thom; Jonny recognises the insecurities working over his features. They were inflicted during a shaky adolescence where Thom would shadow girls, begging for their attentions but only getting sneers in return. Always the most beautiful girls, because Thom had an eye for beauty but beauty had yet to develop an eye for him. He outwardly became the fox once those old wounds scarred up, disparaging the grapes he could now easily gorge on, but Jonny knows better. Thom will always hunger for beauty.

“Er…” Thom looks to Jonny, who raises his eyebrows. There are two Thom Yorkes: Jonny’s, and the one who is a rock star. Thom obviously doesn’t know which one he should be in this moment.

“Yes?” he finally manages, weakly.

The woman cants her head further; long, black-brown hair hangs in wet tendrils and rains little droplets into the sand. She looks like a mermaid. And she floats away like one, too. Something magical and perfect that Thom is undoubtedly terrified of, whom he’ll never realise is just another ordinary human being.

Thom watches her walk off, his face a gormless droop. “What was that?”

“The most clinical curiosity I’ve ever seen. Congratulations.”

Thom looks down at himself. “God, these shorts. These fucking shorts. I should have denied everything. I’ve got to buy some better fucking swim shorts.”

“They are quite ugly,” Jonny agrees. They go well with Stipe’s hideous sunglasses.

“God.” Thom pulls off the offensive glasses and digs the heels of his palms into his eyes. He stays like that for a good couple of minutes.
“What is wrong with you today?”

“What,” spits Thom. He rises to his feet rather ungracefully and stomps towards the water. Jonny watches his body shiver as it transitions from hot to cold, and then it’s simply gone. Lost beneath the gentle waves.

Jonny feels a mild panic set in when he doesn’t surface. Until he does.

He always does.

Jonny really shouldn’t worry so much. He’s turning into bloody Colin. And he refuses to turn into bloody Colin.

He watches Thom lose himself to the water and remembers the last time they were alone on a beach together. Was it really that long ago? It had been night, and Jonny had been thirteen. It feels like another lifetime.

What he remembers most about that night is how much it hurt.

Thom had been pining after a girl not unlike the one who’d just approached them. She was petite and brunette; they usually were. Jonny wishes he could say he doesn’t remember her name, but he does.

They were staying with a friend in Sussex, a haughty, pompous boy who came from a wealthy family. His parents were halfway across the globe and completely oblivious to a group of eight teenage boys crashing their summer home.

Jonny had felt intrinsically out of place, and knew Colin had been forced to bring him along as part of the deal with their mum that allowed him to go, himself. He and Thom were perpetually drunk, and that was the summer Ed truly discovered the joys of cannabis (or at least finally found a semi-reliable dealer). The pack of older boys were restless, on the verge of starting their final terms.

Jonny mostly kept to himself, holing away in corners and reading the books he’d brought with him. When he was finished with them, he raided the house’s small but impressive library.

He found a book by E.M. Forster that he’d learnt in school was published only after the author’s death; they’d discovered a note accompanying the manuscript. “Publishable,” it had read. “But worth it?”

Jonny had hidden the book under his coat and smuggled it into his room. And he had read, rapturously, about boys who loved each other.

He kept the novel hidden inside his pillowcase, but felt as though the story was plainly scrawled all across his face.

One cold night, Ed had dragged Colin and another boy into a little cove to smoke them out into the stars. Thom was distancing himself from the remainder of the group ranging along the beach, so Jonny had furtively followed along the gritty shore until Thom eventually spotted him. After what had felt like eons (but was probably scant seconds) Thom had gestured for Jonny to join him, and that was how he found himself listening reluctantly to the apparently unbearable woes that had befallen Thom.

“And now she’s going with Brian. Can you fucking believe it?” Thom’s laments were punctuated with swings from a blagged bottle of what was probably very expensive whiskey.

“Brian Harris?”
“No, no, *fuck*, that tosser? He’d almost be worse. *Almost.* Brian Sutcliff.”

“Oh.”

“She wants to be my *friend*. So she says. But she *knows* what that does to me! It’s torture! Having to see the two of them together, having to listen to her prattle on about him…she *knows* it kills me!”

“The thing is,” Jonny had been brave enough to say, “she might not.”

Thom laughed humorlessly. “How could anyone possibly be *that* blind?”

“I don’t understand it myself,” replied Jonny truthfully. They were no longer talking about the same person.

Thom began kicking pebbles and stones about, sending them flying into the gently-lapping water. Jonny could barely make out his figure in the dark.

“It’s just…why doesn’t she *want* me?”

“I really couldn’t tell you.”

And those words flew over Thom’s head, too. Straight into the sea along with his stones.

They sat at the edge of the water. Thom cursed when he let himself fall to the cobble a little too heavily.

“Fucking stones. Fucking *stones*. Why don’t we ever go to a proper beach? One with sand?”

“Not sure those exist much here.”

“*Fuck* England and its…stupid…dodgy…beaches.” Thom nursed his bottle of liquid misery. “Someday we’re going to find a sandy beach, Jonny. Just you and me. Tell everyone else to just sod off. Deal?”

Jonny had blushed freely in the pitch black. “Deal.”

He knew Thom would go back to teasing him in the morning. But that night he was being nice. And as wary as he was of letting himself foster any sort of hope, Jonny couldn’t deny himself this small moment of joy at being treated like Thom’s equal, and not just Colin’s tag-along brother. A small, burgeoning flame of ardour was growing in his chest, a bright but simple thing that was no one else’s but his. He promised himself he’d stomp it out before bed.

But he hadn’t.

In the present, Jonny feels that particular adolescent ache break through and squeeze his heart with wistful fingers.

He knows Thom has no memory of that night, much less of their pact. It’s a small tragedy, one Jonny must suffer alone. He adds it, silently, to his collection.

Jonny was ten years old when Colin first brought Thom home. He was barely fourteen when he realised he fancied him and fifteen when Colin figured it out.

“Are you…are you cross with me?”
Colin had looked shocked at the idea.

“Of course not! Why would I be cross?”

“Well, because I…you know.”

“Jonathan, I’ve known you liked boys since you tacked that picture of Han Solo up on our bedroom wall.”

“Oh. I thought you’d be mad because I’m in the band, now. Sort of. You’d think I was being… unprofessional.” Jonny shrugged, embarrassed. “Or something.”

Colin had just rolled his eyes, and that had been that. Colin had ribbed him a little over the next few months, and Jonny had laughed it off.

But they grew older and Jonny’s worshipful, boyish crush became, simply, a crush. Sixteen and at an impossible age—gangly and spotty and miserable—Jonny skulked around Colin, who was back from uni on holiday. He wondered how he and Thom were getting along, as Thom was taking a gap year. Jonny saw Thom at least once a week, to listen to him whinge about the latest in his string of useless jobs and to practise playing. He had begun to feel possessive. His crush made it even easier to decide that Thom was more his than Colin’s, and without the concern of his brother’s distracting oversight, it was effortless to sink into a world where subtext could be freely assigned to every word and action that Thom put forth.

It had hit Jonny one night, standing there in the doorway, that Colin looked out of place in his old bedroom, though he didn’t understand why. Thom didn’t feel misplaced anywhere he inhabited. It wasn’t until years later, after making his own trip home and standing in the center of his own bedroom—and had it always been that small?—that he understood why Thom’s bedroom, unlike Colin’s, had still breathed and stretched during his year off. It was an organism feeding off the overflowing energy of a teenage boy killing time, one crouching unsteadily on the cusp of adulthood but not quite ready to make the leap. What Jonny had felt along the edges of that moment in Colin’s room was the husk of Colin’s adolescence, a reliquary for the past’s echoes. Colin had moved forward but Thom hadn’t. Not yet.

Near the end of his break, on a rare night he wasn’t out with friends, Colin had frowned at Jonny. He was worrying at the edge of a textbook with fidgety fingers and clearly having something to say.

“What is it?”

“Jonathan…look, I just…I just need you to know. That Thom is, erm. Well, he likes girls. A lot.”

Jonny had stared at Colin blankly.

“…which…well, what I mean is…I just don’t want you to, you know…waste too much of your time on him.”

Jonny knew Colin hadn’t meant to hurt him with those words. He’d been trying to help. He knew that now, and he’d known that in the moment, too. But god, had those words hurt. The implication that Jonny’s feelings were a waste of time, were ridiculous, with the added bonus of Colin thinking he was a baby that needed to be directed away from a stove’s flame.

Jonny had instantly worked on hiding that most vulnerable part of himself away, and the situation seemed to vanish completely from Colin’s radar once he was back at uni, much to Jonny’s relief. He began to play a character, maybe. Or sew a costume that distracted from what was underneath.
Within the year, he’d learnt how to treat Thom with a very convincing disaffection and not long after, he found that he very often felt the real thing towards him as well.

Then Thom went off to uni, and Jonny—with a strange mix of guilt and relief—found himself not thinking about Thom that much at all. He had other crushes. He figured out how to doe-eye his way into the trousers of any number of boys, learning along the way that acting aggressively shy and then, in turn, shyly aggressive was a winning combination. Thom was now just the background force keeping them in check, pushing the band forward, herding them together to practise whenever possible. Jonny found himself believing Thom—they all did—when he said this was it, this was what really mattered. They were so hungry. Thom was the growling voice in their guts telling them to feed.

Thom was by turns an aggro dictator and a wheedling child, a fragile-looking spitfire who—just maybe—also sparked with genius, and Jonny could only shake his head with slightly embarrassed (yet fond, always fond) amusement that this strange little bloke was who he’d spent years pining over. He marveled indulgently over his childish obsession.

Jonny was three weeks into uni when they were signed to a major label. Three weeks, and suddenly Jonny was back in Oxford, sharing a grouchy wreck of a house with the rest of the guys.

Thom had been the only one home when Jonny came by, dragging his academic future behind him along with a bin-liner full of clothing.

“Jonny! Is that all?”

“No. It’s just all I grabbed on the way out. My mum’s livid. I had to leave or we’d be fighting the rest of the afternoon. I’ll go back when she’s cooled down.”

“Yes, well.” Thom had the thought to press his face into a shape approximating concern. Jonny had seen him consciously think about it, seen the way his eyes still glittered with happiness. He had felt the itch of annoyance; couldn’t Thom understand how much he was risking? The rest of them had their bloody degrees. Right now, as it stood, Jonny was just a drop-out with no other options.

He had let Thom grab his bag of balled-up t-shirts and lead him up the crooked stairs. “Be careful! These will send you arse-over-tit if you’re not watching where you put your feet. Ed nearly went down the other day, saved himself with the banister. Which is pretty dodgy, too, now I think about it. Now that he broke it. There, that bit right there, don’t grab that part of the bannister. So maybe, just, you know, tip-toe up. Or crawl up the stairs on all fours. Or scoot down on your arse. That’s what I do when I’m piss-drunk.”

“I do have comprehensive experience with stairways. Would you like a refresher? I have nothing else to do with my days now, it appears.” Thom shot him an amused yet questioning look over his shoulder so Jonny had smiled back to let him know he was just taking the piss. Sort of.

“This house is haunted,” Thom said matter-of-factly. “It’s the old woman who lived here. She’s not happy with us.” He stopped at the door of a room and had added, knowingly, “Too much masculine energy. Maybe having both Greenwood Sisters here will make her happier. Do you knit?”

Jonny reached out and shoved Thom against the door, hard. It wasn’t latched and Thom staggered through.
“Oh, she’s not going to like that! So much aggression, Jon-Jon. She’s going to touch your prick when you’re trying to sleep tonight, just you wait.”

Jonny had stepped through the door and looked around. “Impressive. It’ll do.”

“Yeah, it’s just a room. C’mon.” Thom dropped Jonny’s bag and was back out the door and moving down the stairs. He ignored the banister and ran a hand along the wall instead. By the time they moved out, a dark grubby mark would stretch along the wall from the top to the bottom of the stairs.

When he reached the ground floor, Thom had turned to look up at Jonny with a strange intensity until Jonny had been forced to stop descending the steps and huff, “What?”

“Nothing. Just…I’m glad you’re here? On a Fr…I mean Radiohead,” Thom tasted the word, still so fresh at the time, “needs you.”

“Oh, come off it,” Jonny had mumbled, embarrassed. “You already have me here, so you can stop buttering me up. I dropped out proper, I’m not going anywhere.”

“Okay.” With that stupid mouth of his, Thom smiled just like a child. “But I’m serious. You’re the only one that can see the music that’s stuck in my bloody head. You just get it, Jon-Jon. So thanks, I guess. For, erm, coming home. I can’t do this without you. Git.”

And that was when Jonny knew he was a fool and that—really and truly, if maybe he’d been wondering on some level—he didn’t have a crush on Thom any longer. Crushes didn’t feel anything like this.

Shortly after but before he quite realised it, Jonny had pulled out his old costume and learnt once more how to pretend he didn’t care. And he then continued to build that costume up and up. He’s still building it, a few years later. He’s sewing metal into it.

Colin had once asked Jonny, back when he was still fifteen, why.

Because it was as much a part of Jonny as his own limbs. Because it always had been. Because of Thom’s goofy grin. Because of his stubby fingers on Jonny’s acoustic. Because of his singing. Because of when he swore at a teacher and the news spread down the forms to Jonny before lunch had even rolled around. Because of the way he laughs hard at things that aren’t even that funny. Because that laugh sounds so stupid. Because of how soft and rumpled and gentle he is on the mornings when he’s stayed over for the night. Because he’ll see Jonny reading, and ask what it’s about, and then borrow the book once Jonny finishes. Because he runs outside shrieking with spiders in cups instead of smashing them. Because of all the times he’s wrapped his skinny arms around Jonny. Because he never teases Jonny about his lisp, even when everything else has been exhausted. Because he fidgets constantly. Because when Jonny is sarcastic it makes him laugh. Because when Jonny’s mean he still laughs. Because of his eyes. Because he writes beautiful words. Because Jonny could arrange an entire orchestra someday, but it would never be as perfect as three simple chords Thom could string together.

“Just…because.”

Colin had nodded, though it was obvious he didn’t understand. He accepted it, though. And that was enough.

Jonny has learned to survive on just enough.
Thom collapses onto Jonny’s bed because it’s closer to the door than his own. It’s barely 9 AM and they’ve already fled the beach. The sun had been lobbing dull spikes at Jonny’s temples as they trudged back over the sand.

“I’ve got sunstroke.”

“You wouldn’t be able to complain so much if you had.”

“What if I can’t do the show tonight? My stomach hurts, too. Do you think that’s from the sunstroke?” He shakes his head and winces. “No, that’s probably from the hubble-bubble machine.”

“The what? Never mind.” Jonny is miffed at their beach exploit being cut short. And he doesn’t even like the beach that much; he’s just so sick of this scenario that’s playing out, even though it’s barely begun. “You’re a hypochondriac.”

So is Jonny, to be fair. But he’s not so fucking annoying about it.

“I feel truly fucking awful.”

Jonny throws their beach things in a corner and falls heavily onto the remaining space at the foot of the bed; it is his, after all. He lies along the width of it and stares at the ceiling.

He’d be perfectly content not doing the show tonight, if only to watch Michael flounder. Knowing what little he does of the man, though, he’d probably be maddeningly fine with it. Jonny can just picture his placid, sympathetic face. Don’t sweat it, he’d tell Thom. Your health comes first, or some such bollocks.

There’s plenty of ire inside Michael, though. Jonny’s pretty sure there is, at least. He’s seen it barely contained when talking to a journalist in Oslo, and flung sharply at an aggressive stranger who’d somehow talked her way into an afterparty. If Stipe doesn’t like you, and wants you to know, there’s no misunderstanding him. His graciousness turns quickly to stone.

But if he does like you, he’s charming as a Cheshire cat. And if you’re Thom, you can apparently do absolutely no wrong. Even if you’re acting like a nutter. Especially then.

Jonny wonders what Michael’s criteria is. Jonny doesn’t fit within it, in any event. He may do a flawless job of radiating warmth towards Jonny, but Jonny knows it’s artificial as a heat lamp.

One of Thom’s grotty feet hits Jonny in the mouth.

“Ugh!” he yelps. He can’t help it; feet are disgusting. Even if they’re Thom’s feet. He slaps at the offensive, kicking little thing. “Get off my bed!”

“That’s no way to speak to the elderly and infirm.”
“You’re getting sand everywhere. Get the fuck out.”

They bicker lazily until they grow tired of it. At some point Jonny falls into an unintentional and dreamless sleep.

When he wakes, it’s to Thom flitting nervously from wall to wall.

“I’m going shopping.” he says when he notices Jonny is awake.

“You’re…” Jonny’s voice is rumbly and sleep-heavy; he clears it. “…what? Where?”

“I dunno. I’m just going to start walking.”

“I thought you said you had sunstroke.”

“Maybe it’s cooler now.”

Jonny glances at the clock. “That’s not how noon works.”

But Thom isn’t one for reason right now, and he’s out the door in no time.

The silence is very loud.

Jonny doesn’t get too much time alone on tour. Well, none of them do; it’s a luxury they quite literally cannot afford.

So, Jonny should enjoy this. He should.

…but why isn’t he?

He’s feeling lonely and left-out. He huffs into the emptiness of the room at the emotion. Don’t be so fucking pathetic. Honestly. Self-pity is boring and ugly.

It’s not as if the others are all out together. Thom has nothing but whatever is eating him for company, and who knows where the rest are right now. They’re probably scattered, taking in the city or, in Ed’s case, catching up on sleep.

But Jonny feels, oddly, the way he did when they were younger. When he was younger. Not just in age, but in perception. The weight of the three- and four-year gaps between them have shrunk with time but run that time in reverse and they stretch and gape till they are deep and unforgiving chasms.

Jonny had always been the baby of his family. And he could deal with that. He liked it, even. Maybe. But perhaps that was born of the dynamics his particular little family shared; there was virtually no conflict between him, Colin, and their sister. There was the typical squabbling of siblings, but even that was good-natured and minimal. His sister was so much older than him, and Colin…well, Colin had always been protective. Instead of letting it rub him raw and become a point of contention between them, or a contest of wills, Jonny somehow intuited at an early age how to make use of it. Twist it around to get out of unpleasant tasks, avoid certain responsibilities, and be allowed liberties. It’s not like he was some sort of schemer. It’s just…it was so easy and it sometimes felt like his brother, especially, wanted to. Like it made him feel good to spoil him. Jonny can admit to taking advantage of that, now.

Perhaps it was the absence of their father. Perhaps the four of them had learnt very early on to hold onto and love what they had with all their might. It could all disappear so easily. Maybe that’s why
Colin so desperately tried to keep Jonny happy, keep him sheltered.

At school, Jonny would compare his family to the other boys’, and it was frankly baffling to hear of their dysfunction. But it made it easier to feel superior to them for his good luck, instead of sorry for himself for not having a dad.

Then his second family came along, formed in fits and starts like most are. He hadn’t asked for it, but then, no one ever does. Happenstance brought them together just as easily and accidentally as biology had the Greenwoods. Radiohead might have been born of Thom’s dreams and ambitions, but it is family. Maybe not all the guys get that even now, but Jonny does. Will they stay a functioning band long enough to realise it, even? Maybe not, and so maybe they never will.

In that primordial family, he was still the baby. Just Colin’s tag-along little kid brother, to be treated accordingly. He finally understood the other boys at school.

Because he hated Thom at first.

Thom, who teased him incessantly. Who laughed in his face. Who seemed so much bigger, even when puberty sent Jonny sprouting past him. Thom didn’t try to explain things to Jonny. He didn’t coddle him, or assume the best of Jonny’s actions. Jonny would have Colin on the knife’s edge of agreeing to something—taking him somewhere, or letting him do something—and then Thom would come along and casually slice right through every painstakingly placed lure Jonny had set to catch Colin. And then suddenly Colin was saying yeah, I don’t think that’s a good idea, Jonathan.

It was infuriating.

He worshipped him, too, of course. But that came later, and worship didn’t seem to have any problem coexisting happily alongside dislike. It just moved in next door and if anything, they became best friends. They’d have bloody garden parties together where they schemed, and the worship would find ways to push Jonny into trying to impress Thom, over and over, while the dislike would then leave him seething with childish impotence when his efforts were ignored or laughed at. And then the day came when dislike moved houses and attraction moved in.

No wonder Jonny was so relieved when Thom went off to uni and he’d stopped fancying him. Remembering some of the more painfully obvious ways he tried to show off to Thom still makes him want to cover his face in embarrassed sympathy for the boy he once was. He was shameless in his machinations; he thought he was so clever whenever he had a new plan to win Thom over. And then he was so, so shattered then they inevitably crashed and burned.

Jonny was always shy, but around Thom he became invisible. He fumed and spat in his mind, where it was safe, where no one was going to argue with him. He had tried, once or twice, to complain to Colin about Thom. He learned very quickly from Colin’s responses that he didn’t enjoy having it pointed out if he’d brought any the teasing on himself, or if he wasn’t being fair in his reading of a situation, or that he wasn’t simply owed Thom’s attention because he wanted it. It was so insulting. It was so dismissive.

He became Thom’s shadow instead, watching and dreaming and judging. After a while, after the years started to erase those age-enforced gaps, he started to speak up. His thoughts had teeth; he found he wanted to bite.

It was years before he learned the word hubris, and since it came out of Thom’s mouth directed towards Jonny, he found it easy to dismiss.
Like Thom was one to talk, especially in those early years. He still thinks Thom was wrong on that one. He doesn’t have hubris, he has a fucking clue.

As for the rest of his wayward family?

Ed hadn’t meant to be cruel, looking back. And that’s the wrong word, isn’t it? He was never particularly cruel, just…Thom’s mate. Which meant he couldn’t help but laugh and join in when Thom had his bit of fun at Jonny’s expense. But it never felt personal when it came from Ed—he’d just as soon laugh when Thom’s teasing was aimed in his own direction. Ed was a popular teenager, good-looking and outgoing and just simply easy. Easy to admire, easy to talk to. He didn’t have to put down others to feel better about himself. Jonny doubts the urge ever crossed his mind. When you find esteem so readily available by simply existing, you don’t need to scratch around in the dirt trying to find it through any means possible.

He’s pretty sure Thom felt towards Ed the way Jonny felt towards Thom. He remembers Thom trying to play it cool for Ed, pretending at being world-wise to impress him. Jonny recollects Thom going off at length about some kid they had classes with—a fucking prat according to Thom—and Ed just shrugging and saying he was actually really cool once you got to know him. Thom’s face had gone red and he’d sputtered and mumbled and backtracked. Yeah, I mean, he’s definitely cool when you talk to him, one-on-one. That’s just, erm, just why I get mad when he acts like an arsehole, because he’s really really cool. That’s all I meant, Ed.

Well. He hopes Thom didn’t quite feel towards Ed what Jonny felt for Thom.

Phil was always kind to Jonny, at least. But then, Phil had always stayed almost exclusively in the background. He liked it that way. He still does.

It was Colin’s behaviour that had really broken Jonny’s heart in places. And he hadn’t even done anything terrible; he was the same loving and protective big brother he’d always been. But suddenly he had a close group of friends his own age or even older, and he began to pay less attention to Jonny. It’s not like Jonny didn’t have friends of his own, and that wasn’t the point even. If Jonny hadn’t become friends with Thom’s younger brother and decided with him to start a band of their own—like a clubhouse the older boys weren’t allowed to join, created out of a shared envy—he’d not be in Radiohead now. Not that he and Andy are all that great of friends these days, but Jonny won’t let himself go down that path. What’s done is done, and it’s not like Andy wouldn’t have ditched Jonny if his own brother had recruited him to the band, anyway. Thom and Andy just didn’t have that sort of friendship beyond their familial bonds, and to be honest, Andy didn’t have the talent. So it fucking goes.

But Jonny was greedy. He didn’t want to make due with the other shy, nerdy kids he shared classes with, or be the token quiet kid found in every group of more boisterous boys. He didn’t want the blandly pleasant friendship of Thom’s younger brother. He wanted the chaos the older Yorke brought. Pandemonium. Jonny loved that word. Still does.

And he wanted to touch the music Thom was starting to make. He felt frantic when he’d hear them playing and couldn’t tell them the thoughts he was having, the feelings he could barely contain. One word or foot wrong and Colin would kick him out, reminding him the deal was he could watch if he shut the fuck up. Jonny would run back home to his room and throw things around, kick at the much-abused leg of his dresser. He’d finally sit down, tantrum exhausted, and daydream the melodies he knew belonged in the songs his brother’s band were playing. The songs were crying out for it; why couldn’t they hear that?

He never got mad at Colin specifically, though. He didn’t understand his frustration enough to
project it onto anyone else. Much easier to busy himself with the more mundane teenage dramas.

“Jonathan, it’s really not the place for you,” Colin said countless times about countless parties. And he’d been right, of course. But it hadn’t been the place for them, either. They were just children themselves. A fifteen-year-old isn’t much more prepared than a twelve-year-old, are they? More hormones and a few extra inches taller, surely, but not an ounce more common sense, as Jonny remembers it.

Jonny would wake in the dead of night to the sound of Colin sneaking Thom into the house, hissing that he had *better fucking hold it in till we get to the toilet, you are not vomming on the carpet.*

“How was it?” Jonny would whisper later, sneaking into his brother’s room. It was always easier to come out of hiding and talk to Thom when he’d been drinking. Thom would be sprawled, dizzy, on a pile of blankets on the floor. He’d force a painful grin.

“*Brilliant. Absolutely fuckin’ top.* Best night of my life. You shoulda been there, Jon-Jon.”

Then he’d throw up again, all over the carpet. Jonny would rush off then, because he couldn't deal with vomit, not even Thom’s. *Ugh.*

But it wasn’t just being left out of parties—though Jonny has to grin at the impractical yearnings of his younger self. Had he even thought about what he’d *do* if he were allowed to attend one of those seemingly legendary parties? He could barely speak around Colin, Thom, and Ed in a group; what did he possibly think he was going to do when faced with a *battalion* of drunk fifteen- and sixteen-year-olds he didn’t know at all?

No, it wasn’t the parties themselves. It’s what they represented, writ large. It was the simpler things like being told, *Oh, you wouldn’t understand* and *you’ll get it, someday, when you’re older.*

It was complaining of aching feet when he was ten, as they trudged through the moors looking for adventure, and being told to stop whining and looking for attention. *We’re not going to turn back just for you.* When he’d only been saying.

It was being left out of deciding which pizza toppings were best, and not even *knowing* there was a pizza on its way till it was knocking at the door. It was always getting the short end of the stick, like getting stuck with the Monopoly playing piece no one else wanted (why did they even *make* a thimble?). It was Jonny’s ideas being laughed at, when the rest would’ve *ooohed* and *ahhhed* had they come from Thom’s mouth. It was the indulgent laughs he’d garner from the smartarse comments he’d sometimes spout as a kid, the attention making him braver and mouthier even though he was unaware at the time that the attention was just because they thought it was a *party trick* to see a kid be so snide. It was getting squished in the middle seat in the back of the car. It was achievements of his being viewed as “cute.” It was never, *ever* being treated fairly. Or equally.

Maybe he’s still not treated as an equal and doesn’t realise it? On some level, he knows that’s not true, but he’s not so stupid he doesn’t see the other guys roll their eyes when he’s talking about certain things, sharing his views and opinions. Maybe they’re just taking the piss out of him like they do with each other, or maybe not. They all have *real world* experience and degrees. Jonny has those three weeks after Abingdon before he dropped out of school and since then, this has been his life. *Who the fuck are they to tease me about the books I read or how I talk to people? Who the fuck are they to judge me on anything, anything at all? They think it’s all such a laugh. Little Jonny Greenwood, trying to teach himself all the things they take for granted. They’re all so dull in their superiority. They think they know everything and see nothing and yet call me the pretentious one?*
Maybe nothing has changed at all. Maybe he’s still just the party trick.

And, because his animosity has grown over the course of all this reminiscing and staring into space—and perhaps because Thom always got the terrier Monopoly piece—Jonny drags himself from his sprawl on the bed and starts to dig through Thom’s things and steals the tiny plastic dog he eventually finds in a side pocket.

He considers the little bird that lies alongside it, but he can’t tell what colour it is. The dog is black. He likes black. Black dog, black-eyed dog. Like the Nick Drake song.

*A black-eyed dog he called at my door*

*The black-eyed dog he called for more*

*A black-eyed dog he knew my name*

Jonny puts Thom’s bag back precisely the way it had been. He opens up a secret little pocket in his own luggage and slips the dog inside beside his mouse. He has no interest in snooping through Thom’s notebooks—the very idea is offensive. It’s just…he just wanted to take something. He does that sometimes. Takes stuff. Shoplifts pointless little things. It doesn’t matter.

He zips the toy dog away like nothing has happened. He settles down and busies himself with his crosswords, trying to enjoy solitude.

His heart jumps when, an hour or so later, a knock comes at the door.

He leaps to his feet a little too quickly, and undoes the locks without bothering to look through the peephole.

It’d normally be amusing how Michael Stipe’s face drops when Jonny opens the door but Jonny can feel his own face mirroring Michael’s, so he can’t really take any pleasure from it.

“Oh,” he says. “Hello.”

Michael’s countenance gathers itself up quickly into something saccharine-pleasant.

“Jonny! Hi. How’s it going?”

“Oh, ah. Very well. I suppose.”

Jonny realises he’s never been alone with Michael before. They’ve never had an actual conversation—come to think of it, they really haven’t even exchanged more than a handful of words. Jonny is well accustomed to feeling awkward around people, even if he doesn’t show it, but there is something *beyond* awkward about this. Michael shifts his weight in the doorway, and Jonny wishes for a sudden and unprecedented alien abduction.

“I was, uh, looking for Thom. Is he around?”

*There it is.*

“No, sorry.”

“Do you know where I might find him? I found myself with some unexpected free time, so I’ve run away before they could schedule more interviews or something. Don’t tell our tour manager—Dave will have my balls. Anyway, I was hoping to surprise him with lunch.”
Hoping to surprise him with lunch. That’s an odd way to word it, isn’t it? Not thought I’d check if he was around or even a slightly more patronising but still acceptable see if I could treat him to lunch. Michael’s wording is irksome. You show up at your sweetheart’s office to surprise her with lunch.

Jonny feels a very particular brand of loathing trump his social anxiety. It comes on with an intensity that confuses him. “I honestly haven’t a clue.”

Michael looks past Jonny, into the room. Their room. Thom and Jonny’s. It feels intrusive and oddly violating, like someone prodding their fingers into Jonny’s ribs. Does he think Jonny is lying? What, does he expect to see Thom emerge from the loo, or to magically materialise in the centre of the room?

Maybe he thinks he’s got Thom zipped up in their luggage. Not implausible. Thom can fit into weirdly small spaces and used to take a lot of bets when drunk. It’s not like Phil left him in there too long.

It strikes him that there are dirty clothes and belongings strewn everywhere, and that the place must look a mess. The cleaning service hasn’t been around yet, so the beds are tangled lumps and he’s pretty sure the room still smells stuffy with their sleep. He hates himself for feeling embarrassed, and for briefly flashing upon a mental image of what Stipe’s room in his much-nicer hotel might look like. He schools his face to smooth out even further into serene politeness.

“This is nice,” Stipe contends, as if sensing precisely what Jonny is thinking. And Jonny honestly can’t tell whether he is taking the piss or if it’s an attempt at small talk. He begins to believe the latter, though, as Michael starts to say something pointless about the heat.

It’s interesting; Jonny didn’t think he was capable of small talk. He thinks of how he used to feel about Michael Stipe, as a concept, before meeting the man. He is supposed to be deeply shy. He’s open about it, too. Unapologetic in interviews, discussing it with offhanded simplicity. Jonny had liked that. A lot. Thinking about it now, though, makes Jonny annoyed. With himself, and even more so with Michael. Even if he largely suspects the man is wearing his own carefully-constructed suit of armour, a mask of quiet charm instead of quiet sharpness, that doesn’t mean he has to like him. That doesn’t mean Michael’s not a fake. There’s a lesson to be found here: Don’t scribble any personal meaning on the surface of another person’s mask. Never meet your heroes.

Not that Michael Stipe ever was someone Jonny had admired in the past. What a horrible thought. Jonny had just found him… interesting.

“Have you seen the venue yet?”

“No, I haven’t.” Jonny’s got his arms crossed tightly and is silently going mad. Won’t he just leave? What if Thom comes back? Then he’ll whisk him away from Jonny again. Even worse, Jonny might have to come along and watch them try to impress each other.

“Oh, it’s great. I mean, I usually hate doing stadiums, I much prefer amphitheatres, you know, better sound, a little more intimate – but I think this one’s going to be special, they’re really going all-out for us.”

How terrible for you, is what Jonny would say if he could. Having to make do with filling out a stadium.

Then Jonny’s worst nightmare comes true: Thom appears, looking utterly preposterous, in a wide-
brimmed Jewish orthodox hat. Jonny makes a mental note to ensure it’s accidentally left behind when they depart this city.

“There he is!” Michael exclaims. The entire air about him changes; but, Jonny decides, it doesn’t necessarily become significantly more genuine. It simply mutates from one state of ostentation to another.

Thom looks stunned. Two bulging bags of what are probably ridiculous purchases hang from his knuckles like weights. Eventually, he is able to form his new favourite word: “Michael!”

“That’s a hat!”

Thom’s eyes attempt to locate the top of his own head. “Hmm, yeah. I dunno, I was just walking back thinking it might look stupid…”

Jonny’s mouth flies open, and he has to clamp it shut hard before the words fall out. He wishes they were alone. Until they are, the words “might look stupid?” will just have to fester in his throat. Thom moves to enter the room, forcing Jonny to take a few steps back. Michael follows behind Thom as if he just assumes he’s allowed anywhere he’s decided he wants to be. Jonny glares at the back of his head, at the aggressive outline of his shaved skull.

“Well, it’s a look, that’s for certain. Protects your face and neck, though, that’s good. This heat. Honestly, at this point breathing feels like trying to eat a hot cloud with my nose.” Michael gives the brim a playful little flick, and Thom’s grin blossoms even if he immediately pulls off the hat and frisbees it onto a bed.

Jonny loves that hat, now he’s properly seen it. Thom shouldn’t let people get away with making him feel self conscious about something he so obviously likes, like that hat. He makes a mental note to ensure it’s tucked safely into Thom’s luggage when they head out on the US leg of the Monster Tour.

“What are you doing here?”

Michael’s eyes flick briefly to Jonny’s. “Well, I was wondering if you’d want to have lunch. If you guys haven’t eaten yet, that is. There’s a great place across town I think you two will love. It’s a little bit of a drive, but it’s worth it.”


Thom darts about their small room excitedly, talking rapidly and trying in vain to tidy the place as he lays down his bags and collects the things he needs to venture back out. Jonny watches Michael watch Thom, and it churns his stomach the way Thom is apparently as amusing and adorable as a hamster on a wheel. Because that’s how Stipe is looking at him. Partially, at least. Jonny hasn’t wanted to place the correct name to what else he sees. Has been seeing. To define something makes it real.

Lust.

How can Thom not see? Maybe Thom does, and is okay with it? Maybe he likes it? No, no… Thom’s not the sort to lead someone on and let them bark up the wrong tree. He’s too decent to allow that, for all his other faults. He’s blinded by his hero worship and his childlike assumption that Michael is a friend with no ulterior motives. Thom doesn’t know what that look in Michael’s eyes means.
Jonny does, however. He knows the look one man gives another when he is contemplating how to best seduce him.

*Over my bloody dead body,* Jonny thinks. *You’re not going to do that to Thom. He thinks you’re his friend. So don’t you fucking dare. It’d be one thing if you were going to keep your attraction to yourself, but I don’t think that’s the plan, is it, Michael? I think you’re going to try to have him, and when you do he’s going to be crushed and the rest of us will have to pick up the pieces of that betrayal. He trusts you, you fucking tosser.*

Jonny curses to himself. If only Thom was more…oh, who knows, more astute on this topic, perhaps. More jaded. He’s still often incredulous when it comes to sexual matters, and to others’ attraction to him. He treats women who approach him warily, like he can’t quite believe it’s him they really want to talk to. He’s the opposite of Colin in that way. Colin approaches it all like a great adventure, acting like it’s his game to lose. Of course, he always does lose in the end, but he cheerfully carries on. It defies Jonny’s understanding, to be frank.

It’s not like Thom’s an innocent in any way, but he just never seems to understand his own sexual power, what he can bring out in people when he’s on stage. If he did…fuck, he’d be a holy terror. It’s different than the energy that draws Jonny to Thom, but it’s vital and pungent and effective.

But if Michael does make an overture, shouldn’t Jonny actually want that? Thom will turn him down and be left feeling a bit disillusioned. Jonny wants that. Jonny wants Michael’s power reduced. He should be helping push Stipe towards his failure of a plan. Just to get it over with.

So how come Jonny feels so uneasy?

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Chapter End Notes

- The house they shared in 1991:

  Colin: “It was only really me and Thom who stuck it out all the way through. But it was a bit eerie because the woman who’d lived there before had died. I think she died in the house. And Ed and I kept finding things which had obviously belonged to her. Combs, half-empty fag packets, stuff like that. One day we found this half-eaten pork pie down the back of the sofa. It must’ve been there for months but you could still see the teeth marks. Of course, being morbid people we managed to convince ourselves that she’d choked on it. Jonny never did the washing up, he’ll admit that, but he’d only just left school. I don’t think he’d quite got his head round this living together business."
Thom: “At first it was quite a nice house but we turned it into a complete fucking hole. We’d just begun taking the band seriously so there were musical instruments everywhere. We ripped half the wallpaper off taking the Hammond organ in and out. There was always fag ash everywhere. Plus, the carpet would roll down the stairs every time you went up them.”

- from Thom's Tour Diary:

**Wednesday, August 9 - Tel Aviv**
The hubble-bubble is still giving me all sorts of pains. Go to the beach and a heartbreakingly beautiful Jewish woman comes up in a swimsuit and asks if I'm Thom Yorke. Given the shorts I'm wearing I consider denying everything. She looks me up and down and I feel reduced to the size of the sand. I weakly reply, Yes, and watch her disappear, curiosity satisfied.
Feel even stranger than when I woke, so scurry back to the hotel fearing sunstroke. Despite fears of possible boiled head, however, I feel reluctant to wear my Jewish orthodox floppy hat purchase of yesterday. Especially at the beach.
It IS sunstroke! I now feel like a very sick old man.
Chapter 8 - Little Blue Pick-Me-Ups

Apparently everyone in R.E.M. sleeps on the bottom bunk when they’re on a tour bus. Stipe gets the one on the right-hand side.

“In an accident, the bus would probably fall to the right, so it makes sense to me to be closer to that side,” he explains, “but that’s really macabre.”

“How very fascinating,” Jonny responds blandly. He can’t quite bring himself to be outwardly rude, but he also can’t bring himself to allow Michael to think they’re on intimate enough terms that they should be discussing their mortality. It’s too gauche for words.

The car they’re riding in is something of a short limousine. Jonny is couched in a plush backwards-facing seat, subjected to staring at Thom and Michael sitting closely together.

Thom’s gone funny again.

For all of his moaning this morning about being sick, he had been his typical, ankle-biting self. His edges were a little sharper than they have been as of late, but he was still predictably Thom. His childish delight at Michael had been predictable, too. Now he’s shifted back to the strange, silent mood he’d been in when he’d come in last night, and when they’d woken up this morning. Jonny had woken at dawn to find him staring at himself in the bathroom mirror, his expression a mixture of bewilderment and something like epiphany.

“Are you all right?”

“Yeah,” he’d said. And that had been it till they’d gotten to the beach. The sight of the bright, hot sand lifted whatever vow of pensive silence Thom seemed to have taken on during the night.

Now Michael is asking him the same question.

“I’m sorry,” Thom blurts in a rush.

“What? No, don’t be sorry. You just look a little red and peaky. You didn’t get heat exhaustion out there today, did you?”

Oh, fucking come on!

“D’you think? Is that possible?”
“To get a little sunsick? Sure, it’s easy. You guys aren’t used to this kind of heat. You need to take care of yourselves.”

Thom’s eyes go wide at having his paranoia stroked and coddled, and then neatly legitimised. *He’ll be impossible now,* thinks Jonny. *Thank you, Michael.*

“We take care of ourselves just fine,” says Jonny curtly. He really doesn’t care how unfriendly it comes out. Thom’s eyes narrow at him a little.

Michael smiles at Jonny very carefully, slouching further in his seat. “Oh, I know you do. That’s what I told your tour guy the other night. Nervous thing, isn’t he? Like a neurotic giraffe with a cell phone. Where did you find him?”

Jonny frowns. Thom laughs, forced and jittery. Michael turns to him, looking pleased. He slips an arm over Thom’s shoulders; the sight makes the hair on the nape of Jonny’s neck prickle.

“Tim’s an excellent tour manager.”

“Oh, no, no,” Michael chuckles. “I’m just poking fun. I can tell he is. Looking out for *this one here.* He’s a good guy.”

*This One Here* pipes up. “Tim’s not so tall. He’s no taller than Jonny.”

“Oh, I know,” Michael chuckles at Thom and waves a hand dismissively. “There’s just something so giraffe-like about him, you know? Like, there’s an inner gangly giraffe trapped in the body of one five-foot-nine man.”

Jonny doesn’t know at all and even Thom looks a little dubious at first but he suddenly barks laughter and says, “He’s got knobby knees like one.”

Jonny shoots a look at Thom from under his fringe. *Traitor.*

Michael squeezes Thom’s upper arm, rubs at it casually. It’s overly familiar and striking all sorts of wrong chords in Jonny’s stomach.

“I hate driving in traffic like this. It’s making me feel more sick,” mutters Thom, changing the subject. Jonny wonders if he saw the look he shot him, and is feeling guilt over being a turncoat. But if he’s really feeling ill, Jonny prays he doesn’t vomit up all over the backseat. It’d almost be worth it, as Michael would get the brunt of it. *Almost worth it. Not quite.*

Michael peers down at Thom again, who is stealing funny little glances at him and hovering somewhere between a silly smirk and a worried bottom lip. “You’re all right, Thom. We’ve done this before. Just remember what we’ve talked about. You’ll be fine.”

And it suddenly seems the most unfair thing in the world that Michael and Thom *talk.* That they stay out till dawn having dinners and drinks and sharing words and moments Jonny will never be privy to.

What do they talk about, he wonders? What does Thom share with this man—this practical *stranger*—that he doesn’t share with Jonny? He feels the two have talked more in a couple weeks than he has with Thom in a year.

They share a relative silence for the remainder of the ride. Michael looking at ease in it, and Thom looking lost.
Jonny tries for a look that says he feels nothing at all.

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They’re all throwing puzzled faces at each other.

“Creep” plays on, absent of verse, waiting for Thom to jump in. But he doesn’t.

Jonny tires of bending over his tele with a pick like a trigger, waiting for a chorus that is clearly never going to come. He straightens up and sighs, throwing an elaborate eyeroll in Colin’s direction. Colin grimaces in agreement and stops playing. Ed and Phil follow suit.

“Thom?”

Thom is staring into the emptiness of the stadium, mouth open slightly.

“…Thom?” Ed tries again.

Thom twitches, scratches at his face. He’s still staring into space. “Yeah. Yeah, sorry.”

“You forget the words to the number one single in the world, mate?”

“Number seven,” corrects Colin.

“In the UK,” adds Phil.

“Two years ago,” Jonny can’t help but mumble.

Ed shrugs. “That’s what I said.”

“Next song,” is Thom’s only response to that. He begins to pace the stage, rolling his shoulders and shaking his right hand like he’s trying to rid his arm of it. He stares at the floor.

They launch into “Bones”.

All of them but Thom.

And Jonny’s annoyance is gradually turning to concern. If this were one of Thom’s little tantrums, he’d be more obvious about it. He’d be swearing and yelling by now. But he’s just pacing the stage, taking turns staring at his feet and then back off into the distance.

He appears to forget he’s holding a mic; it slips from his fingers heavily, and the resulting sound seems to jolt him back into reality. He jumps, looking panicked.

Colin makes a move to approach him, but Jonny quickly pulls the strap over his head and sets his
guitar down against an amp. He strides up to Thom, feeling Colin’s curious eyes on his back.

“Hey,” Jonny says softly. “What’s wrong?”

Thom turns, looking displaced and shocked. Like he’s not sure how he ended up on this stage, or where Jonny could have come from. His face is a deep, flushed shade.

_Could it be the heat? Maybe Thom’s hypochondria is onto something this time._ Jonny has the urge to press the back of his hand to Thom’s forehead, and his arm actually raises a bit—he has to pull it back down quickly.

It’s not just concern he’s feeling now. It’s guilt.

“Thom?”

Thom shakes his head, seeming to calm a bit. His fingers fly to his mouth, and he begins to chew. Fleetingly, Jonny has the thought that Thom would be very bad at poker.


“Thom—”

“It’s _fine._” Thom spins on Jonny, giving him an unnatural and exasperated half-grin. One meant to bite. “It’s fucking fine, Jonny.”

The rest of soundcheck goes terribly.

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Backstage, it seems all the friends and families of everyone who works there have turned up. It’s a happy, chaotic mess of faces and voices, and Jonny doesn’t recognise a single one of them. Colin, when Jonny finally spots him, is a welcome sight. He lets his hair swing down to form a protective curtain over his expression before entering the main thrust of the crowd. As he starts to edge his way over to join his brother, Jonny thinks that tonight he’ll just ignore the rest of the world and see if maybe Colin wants to do something. Perhaps watch a movie back at their hotel? That’d be nice, actually, really nice. Stick some dumb American thing on the TV and listen to Colin’s running commentary. Maybe he’ll even stick Thom with Ed tonight, and make it a sleep-over. Jonny sighs at himself. The doldrums, that’s what they call it. His brain feels _itchy_; he’s both glum and jumpy at the same time. He’s homesick, he realizes.

“An artist with an _assault rifle,_” Colin is saying. “My. Is it out of line to admit I’m more than a little…impressed?”
The girl he’s talking with laughs, loud and confident. “Well I don’t actually carry one around with me. That’s the point. I sit in the background and design brochures. If they’re going to force me into service, I’m at least going to decide under what conditions.”

Colin seems to riding high until another woman appears and kisses his army girl on the cheek. There’s an abrupt exchange of goodbyes, and Colin sighs with resignation as he watches the two walk off together, their pinky-fingers hooked.

Jonny approaches him from where he’s been watching the exchange. Colin sighs again at the smirk Jonny’s not even trying to suppress. He might be embellishing it, actually.

“Enjoy that, did you?”

“I did, yeah.”

“Sadist.”

“Watching you explore the alternative option of being a masochist makes me think that’s a compliment, so thank you.” Jonny says, archy.

“Oh, you just don’t get it…” Colin is using a very specific tone, and trails off to see if Jonny takes the bait.

“Oh, no, I obviously don’t.” Right now, there’s nothing in the world that Jonny wants more than to play this game with his brother.

“The world is vast and grand. There’s so much to take under consideration and weigh, so much to experience with as many senses as we’ve been gifted. It’s our duty to recognize that we’re part of a greater whole, and the best way to understand that is to explore as much of as we can in the time we are given.” Colin’s eyes go wide.

“That’s so true, big brother,” Jonny says with over-wrought earnestness. He already knows where this is going, but can’t help himself but play along with his brother’s shtick.

“I think it’s humanity’s imperative to not waste any fortuities for adventure that comes our way. Helen Keller said that life either a great adventure or nothing. So it’s a tragedy of spirit if we choose the latter! We should be open to new ideas and actions, don’t you agree? And…and we should assist each other to achieve these unique—”

“—achieve, yes, yes, I couldn’t agree more. Expansion of experience leads to the expansion of the mind, of course. What greater calling is there than to help out those seeking a guide or, lacking that, a cohort in this journey?”

"You understand me! Excellent! So you see," concludes Colin, "there are certain things that every woman regardless of personal situation should do at least once in their lives and I am foremost amongst those things."

Jonny tries to school his face but fails; laughter tumbles from his mouth. Colin grins and joins in, pleased he’s been able to rumble Jonny’s mood using their oldest game: bantering that escalates until one or the other cracks up and breaks character.

“Ugh,” grimaces Jonny, still laughing, hiding his teeth behind a hand. “You’re hopeless, Coz. Hey, tonight would you like—”
He is interrupted by a sudden loud commotion; it rings in sharp contrast to the party-like mood that’s been buzzing backstage. Thom comes pushing through the crowd as if he’s being chased by the indistinct voices behind him, looking a little shell-shocked. Jonny feels his rising mood falter. His laughter falls back down his throat into his stomach like hail.

“Who let him in here?”

Michael’s voice is resounding and angry. Jonny spots him across the room as the crowd shifts back; he’s rearing up, gesturing accusingly at the throng and demanding explanation from people who look clueless to whatever it is he’s yelling about.

“Get security!” Michael shouts. “Where is Dave??”

At the edge of the open space that has opened around Michael, a scraggly, sunburnt man with a camera is suddenly looking very wary. “Hey, now, there’s no need to—”

Michael spins on him, jabbing a forefinger at his face. “No. You are done. You are fucking done for today, you should be grateful I’m not pressing charges.”

Two burly members of security appear on either side of the man and begin to escort him out.

“Hey!” He argues. With the first syllable, it already sounds like the start to a much longer spiel the man has rattled off before. “I have a press pass! You can’t do this!”

As the man’s protestations become distant, Michael stomps towards them. Half the room’s eyes are on the photographer exiting the room, the other trained widely on Michael.

He huffs once he’s joined their circle. They’re used to handling Thom’s outbursts; this is another band’s territory. So none of them knows quite what to say. Not even Colin.

Colin, who is looking at Stipe coolly. Jonny knows that look; it’s Colin’s kind faith in humanity discovering that, once again, people are just people and consistently fallible. That often seems to disappoint him, thinks Jonny, though he’s never understood quite why Colin would ever assume anything else. Sometimes his brother is just so aggravatingly decent. It’s a waste. It’s annoying.

Thom is nibbling at his nails and staring somewhere past the floor.

“Goddammit. Fucking paparazzi,” Michael finally spits when the silence stretches on a little too long. The crowd gradually begins to turn its attention back to itself. People start chattering again, a bit too loudly, unconsciously trying to make up for the silence.


“You’re fucking right it’s no fun, that little shit’s been on my ass all day! I thought I’d shaken him at lunch. Apparently not. Probably hiding in the fucking bushes or something, like a rat.”

Thom glances at Michael at that, gnawing at his nails a little harder.

Jonny wonders if Thom is exploring that idea: that somewhere there might exist covert photographs of the three of them sharing a moment in time on the patio of a restaurant in Israel.

Well, no, he reasons – not the three of them. The two of them. Thom and Michael. Which is
decidedly less lyrical than *Thom and Jonny*.

Could Thom be...enchanted at the idea? Of course he *could*. Maybe those photos will be published in a newspaper. And maybe the world, or some small corner of it, will see Thom Yorke breaking bread with Michael Stipe.

Jonny will be sitting there as an afterthought. Frozen in time and in gloom.

“They’ve got no respect. No regard or decency for another person’s privacy, like I’m not even human, like I’m just some object, or some *fucking rare animal* in the wild.”

“Hmm. They’re cretins, yes. I’m sorry.”

Colin is being conciliatory, mostly. Not that Stipe notices of course. The man can be intuitive enough, Jonny supposes, but he wonders if he only taps into it when it interests him. Jonny has witnessed Thom’s nervous brand of laughter in response to something Michael has said more than once now, and each time Michael will only smile, self-satisfied at having amused him.

It’s tiring to watch.

Michael waves a large hand, as if shooing his lost composure from the air. “Anyway, it doesn’t matter. I’m not wasting another breath on him. I’m sorry.”

Colin is considering Michael placidly now. Jonny knows if he brings up the squabble later, his brother will simply wave it off as easily as Michael has.

“Oh, it’s just typical celebrity stuff,” he’ll say. “I’d fly off the handle too if I had to deal with that every day. We’re lucky, you’ve seen how they treat Thom. Multiply that several times over, and that’s what Michael has to deal with. Michael has been nothing but nice to us.”

Jonny has the childish wish that Colin would just listen to him but Colin has obviously dismissed Jonny’s misgivings on Stipe. He curses himself; he knows he’s like the boy who cried wolf, because he acts like he has misgivings over *everyone*. He knows Thom would dismiss him the same way, even if he’s currently staring at the ground like he’d like to be anywhere else than next to Michael.

Maybe Thom had gone into this feeling the way that paparazzo had about Michael Stipe. Hopefully he’s now learning what Jonny never seemed to need a lesson in: that Michael is a real, thinking, breathing, and *flawed* human being.

Well. It’d be nice. But doubtful.

“Anyway, got to run.” Michael places a gentle hand on Thom’s shoulder. “Are you going to be all right? Feeling better?”

He seems to be asking permission to leave his side. What if Thom says no?

But Thom will say he’s fine, even if he isn’t. He’ll save his dramatic fits for his best mates, end up moaning on the floor with a bottle of vodka or catatonically ignoring anyone who approaches him...but for Michael he’d *never* indulge in such theatrics, now would he? Because it’d mean Michael hadn’t succeeded in making him all better. Because it wouldn’t *please* Michael.
Thom blinks, realises he’s practically eating his fingers, and pulls them from his mouth clumsily. “Yeah. I mean—yeah, I’m okay.”

“Of course you aren’t. Come walk with me.”

That makes Jonny blink, taken aback.

“No, really, I swear I’m fine.” Thom’s blushing; with his peakedness it almost balances out his colour to normal.

“Are you not feeling well?” Colin asks tentatively.

Thom groans, nipping at nail and cuticle once again. “I’m bloody fine! Why is everyone asking me that today?”

“Because you’re not? C’mon, let’s walk.”

Is there anything Jonny loves more than the sight of Michael Stipe’s retreating back? He doesn’t think so. It’s a beautiful vision.

Yet.

Yet he follows, catching up to walk on the other side on Thom. He very pointedly doesn’t look at Michael, even though he’s sure Michael is assessing him as they walk. Michael leads them into the restroom. He grabs Thom gently by the shoulders and turns him to face his reflection in the mirror.

“That guy look okay to you?”

“He looks fine,” mumbles Thom.

Making eye-contact with Jonny through the mirror, Michael asks, “Jonny? Does Thom seem fine to you?”

It’s sour to say, it burns coming up, but he still quietly responds, “No, he doesn’t.”

“Is it the sun from today? Or is it the anxiety? Is it your body or your soul that’s sick?” Michael’s voice isn’t leaving any room for dismissal.

Sighing, Thom says, “Both. I think that hubble-bubble machine messed up my stomach. And I think I got sick from too much sun. And I think I did see that pap today, and I thought of saying something but I didn’t. I’m sorry. And you’re asking me if I’m anxious?” Thom barks laughter.

“What’s funny?” Michael is rubbing at Thom’s shoulders. Jonny looks at the floor.

“I’m always anxious. I’m a neurotic, didn’t you notice?”

“Hey, so am I. Nice to meet you.”

Thom chuckles. He still looks terrible though.

“Here,” says Michael. His hands leave Thom’s shoulder and he rummages through his knapsack. He pulls out a small plastic sandwich bag filled with a handful of blue pills. He fishes two of them out. “These’ll help.”

Jonny glares, watching one of the little pills drop into Thom’s palm. “What is it?”
“A little pick-me-up. It’s organic.” Michael sighs at the very dubious face Jonny is giving him. “It’s not speed or anything.”

Stipe pulls a canteen from his bag and unscrews it. Thom pops the pill in his mouth and throws his head back, grabbing the water and drinking deeply.

Michael passes the bottle to Jonny and offers him an identical blue pill.

“Cheers,” Jonny sneers.

When Michael’s attention is turned back to Thom, Jonny pockets the pill and takes a conciliatory sip of water.

Thom is now looking at Michael through the mirror steadily. He’s smiling up at him, and Jonny maybe hasn’t seen his eyes that big and trusting, ever.

He feels as though he is slowly turning invisible.

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When they come out of the bathroom, Colin is still waiting for them. Jonny feels a fierce burst of love for him in that moment.

“Done doing blow off the toilet seats, then?” Colin is joking, but there’s a question in his eyes. Is everything okay?

“I’m sick, Colin, fuck off.” Well, there’s the Thom they all know and love.

Jonny shrugs the heavy carapace that protects him back onto his shoulders and extends the spikes. It’s safer right now to not really feel anything. He would have really enjoyed that film with Colin, though. But he has no idea what Thom just took, and isn’t going to act like a little girl over it and question Michael. He’ll watch Thom.

“It’s fine, Colin,” he sighs. “We did the cocaine off of Thom’s arse. Toilet seats? Do give us some credit.”

Thom boggles, trying to decide if he should be offended, and Stipe snorts.

Colin tsks. “All right. I need to eat something. We take the stage in forty-five, so Thom? Do please try to stay vertical.”

Thom throws him a backwards V, one which crumples quickly when Michael’s hand pats him on the back.

“I’ll see you afterwards. Okay?” Michael is looking at Thom levelly, not making one single move
until Thom returns the gaze and smiles wanly. Michael pats him on the back once more, more forcefully this time. He slinks off.

And then it’s just the two of them.

Jonny opens his mouth to say something, but then closes it. Then opens it, and closes it again. He thinks he must look like a stupid, gasping fish, so he forces his jaw shut and contents himself with simply glowering.

Thom is clearly in no mood to talk, anyway.

A blonde woman stalks up to them, and with an accent Jonny can’t quite place, demands to know if they’re friends of the band. No, not Radiohead. R.E.M. Thom only stares at her with wide, haunted eyes before drifting away.

She turns on Jonny. She’s self-consciously skinny and mostly all leg. Maybe she’s a model. Her head seems too large for her body and reminds Jonny of that candy novelty, PEZ. He half expects that if he snapped her head back, a large pink brick of sugar would jut from her mouth.

Instead, she asks, “What about you?”

“I definitely am not friends with Michael Stipe. Sorry."

“I’ve been trying to talk to them since I’ve been here,” see accuses, as if Jonny is purposely keeping her from her goal. The woman clearly missed Michael’s outburst just minutes before. She looks over his shoulder at something with a sudden shift to her expression, and Jonny quickly glances back. There’s a mirror back there and he realizes she’s reviewing her reflection, cataloguing what she has to offer. She’s making seductive faces at herself, things Jonny thinks she maybe copied from Hustler spreads, cycling through different variations.

“Oh, go with that one, Michael likes fish,” enthuses Jonny.

“What?” She looks at him, confusion warring with the provocative look she’s trying to freeze-frame on her face.

“Nothing. Don’t mind me.”

“You’re not helping,” she pouts. “Could you introduce me, do you think?”

“I can’t possibly begin to think, I’m afraid.”

The woman narrows her eyes, but finally – thankfully – wanders off, unappeased. He mentally wishes her the best; such a plucky young woman, hopefully she finds Michael.

“You could possibly think about trying to be a halfway decent human being, just to see what all the hubbub is about,” snaps Colin. He’s snuck up on Jonny during his exchange.

“Oh, do calm down. That one won’t sleep with you, either. She’s only looking to pull with R.E.M. so why even get cross?”

Colin rolls his eyes but takes the hint and walks away. “Oh, fuck off.”

Jonny, finally free, moves to catch up with Thom.
He’s not letting him out of his sight.

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“We’re going to have to cut it a bit short, Colin’s got a belly ache.”

They’ve not even settled into their instruments; Colin himself is only just stepping onstage, and looks instantly baffled.

The crowd is a mixture of disappointed sounds and cheers. Thom stalks away from the mic and grabs his guitar. Colin mouths something confused and inquiring at him. Thom just shrugs, looking bored, distracted.

The show goes as though that weird soundcheck never happened. It starts off slow, with Thom acting mechanical and indifferent, then picks up speed. It’s not a great performance, but it’s good. Thom gets into it, really into it, and he’s flirting with the audience and smirking in no time. It’s obvious a switch has flipped; his mood is bright and plugged-in.

Jonny wonders if this is going to turn into another Sicily. God, he hopes it doesn’t turn into another Sicily.

But near the end of the set, Michael’s pill begins to take hold. Or maybe it’d had a hold of Thom this whole time, and is now pulling him into some other headspace. His smile wilts, and his movements become strangely slow.

Once they’re off this stage, Jonny is not letting Thom out of his sight. Not for the rest of the night. Maybe not ever.

They end with “Stop Whispering” and little fanfare. Thom doesn’t thank the audience or bid them any sort of goodbye.

“I cannot believe you told them I had a stomach ache,” Colin is complaining as they file backstage. “Have you got a stomach ache? You’ve got a stomach ache, haven’t you.”

“Sorry, Coz. Got to keep up appearances.” Thom says slowly.

He has stopped in the hallway and is staring dreamily at a fire extinguisher on the wall. Thom had taken the towel a PA had offered him when they stepped off stage, but it hangs forgotten from one hand. The show’s sweat is still beaded up along the arch of his neck, the scoop of his throat.

“You’re such a fucking wanker sometimes,” Colin complains, pushing past him. The rest of the band follows, stretching out shoulder muscles and rubbing sweat from their hair.

It’s like they don’t even notice Thom is acting off. But then, thinks Jonny, Thom cries his own
version of wolf. When a person is always in some state of melodrama, how can you pick out when
they’re really in trouble?

“Thom—”

“For once in your life, Jonny, stop fucking following me around.”

Jonny’s body comes to clumsy halt.

He watches as Thom drops the towel to the floor and wanders off as if pulled forth by some
invisible and lazy force.

And maybe it’s just because he’s been considering the past a lot lately. But he’s eleven again and
being told to fuck off, go away, Jonny, you’re so weird, why are you always around, haven’t you
got some Lego to go play with or something?

Jonny’s eyes feel too big for their sockets. God, is this really happening right now? He blinks away
the funny, fuzzy feeling in his vision and puts an end to the tears before they get a chance to form.
No. That is not happening right now.

Fine, then.

The towel on the floor looks sad. Usually Jonny can ignore sad objects; he’s worked very hard over
the years at tamping that particular compulsion down. It was a great source of ridicule for
classmates when he was a child. “An excess of empathy,” Colin calls it. It’s what made Jonny have
to rescue their mother’s purse from its hook so its “arms” wouldn’t get tired. What makes him drop
a second potato crisp to the ground so the one that’s accidentally fallen won’t get lonely.

Jonny folds the towel carefully and places it gently on a nearby table.

“Where’d everyone go?”

Tim looks harried, which is another way of saying he looks himself. Jonny shrugs.

“Is Thom with them?”

“No.”

“Well where is he?”

“He made it very clear he wanted to be alone.”

“And you listened to him?” Tim shakes his head. “Am I the only one seeing that he is not right
tonight?”

No, Jonny thinks. And feels a small mixed cocktail of pride and affection for Tim.

“It’s just one of his moods,” Jonny says, taking the easy way out. “I think everyone’s fairly
apathetic at this point.”

“No though? Something seems…off. I can’t have him going wrong again. He’s been so good
lately, it’s just…” Tim trails off, sighs, pinches at the worried space between his eyebrows. “Please
find him and try to talk to him. Yeah? These aren’t just little shows in Ipswich anymore. This is big. He needs to keep it together.”

Jonny shrugs again.

“Please, Jonny.”

“Yes, fine, whatever.”

Tim emits a plosive, relieved breath. “Thank you. I need to go coordinate with Dave, you’ll come let me know if anything’s the matter?”

Jonny nods. Tim thanks him again and nearly trips over his own feet as he rushes off in search of R.E.M.’s tour manager.

Fine, Jonny thinks again. It’s an excuse to keep an eye on Thom. But he is not making one more attempt to talk to him. He’s exhausted his banks of solicitude for tonight and, frankly, for the rest of the year, besides. Damage control is Tim’s job, anyway.

He begins to wander, trying to look as disaffected as possible.

He has no idea what’s up with Thom. It’s not the...okay, he can admit it now, Thom stayed out in the sun too long and caught himself some sun exhaustion. Yes, he’s properly ill. And whatever Michael gave him, there’s that to contend with as well. It had better not be hallucinogenic or he’s going to have words with Michael. But Thom was acting odd this morning, staring into the mirror, an expression like he was trying to look through to the other side. The silence. The self-scrutiny.

He begins to wonder if Michael already has tried something with Thom. Dozens of different scenarios bombard his imagination at once, and he tries to tamp down the more…distracting ones. He might not like the man, but even he can’t believe Michael has been that pushy. He’s just a gross youth-chaser, if anything. Thom’s probably just mortified that his idol has made a move on him. Right? And that’s if Jonny’s suspicions regarding Michael’s feelings are correct. It’s probably something else entirely. It might even be nothing.

But that doesn’t stop him feeling angry and defensive.

And it’s not nothing. He can’t even pretend to talk himself out of something he knows to be self-evident.

He weaves through rooms and corridors and works himself into a stormy state.

By the time he finds Thom, he’s prepared to ignore his plans to not talk to Thom and instead hold him down and interrogate him. But Thom’s arms are flapping bizarrely, and he’s mumbling something to the wall. Jonny hovers in the doorway.

He’s not sure what he was expecting, but it wasn’t…this.

Now that he’s faced with Thom’s bad trip, he doesn’t know what to do with it. Any words he’d worked up the boldness to say are forgotten. What should he say? What should he do? Not run and fetch Tim, obviously. Tim absolutely cannot know about this.

Maybe Ed would know what to do?
Jonny slips behind a tall rack of folded metal chairs and watches curiously. He realises that Thom is signing, albeit sloppily. He rarely gets to witness this, and the way Thom had reacted when he had walked in on him practising in that one posh suite they’d had makes Jonny think it’s an oddly private act for him.

Jonny likes the flow of it. He likes the way Thom’s hands move and paint meaning into the air. He wishes he could understand it. He wishes he could ask to be taught.

But Thom’s easy, graceful movements are not present tonight. The wall is witness to an unnatural pantomime, unnerving in its almost inhuman movement and silent but for Thom’s murmuring. He looks strange and animal-like. His eyes are squeezed shut tightly. Jonny strains to make out what he is chanting.

“…bought a…crooked cat…caught a crooked mouse. Crooked mouse. Caught a crooked mouse. Crooked, crooked.”

Thom begins to shake. His hands slow and then stop altogether. They lay flat against the wall, and Thom grinds his forehead against the concrete.

“…crooked mouse,” he whispers. “Crooked mouse. All lived together…crooked little house…”

The shaking is getting worse. And Thom’s words are slurring further, becoming lost to a quiet hyperventilation. If this is a panic attack, it’s the most passive Jonny has ever seen. He has the random, intrusive thought that he can easily picture how Thom might look when he's ninety, sitting on a park bench somewhere, hunched over and squinting, a look of focused bewilderment on his face. He’d look like this.

He’s just about to give himself up and go to Thom when Michael comes bounding from behind a curtain, from some unseen hallway.

“Hey! Hey hey hey, it’s okay.” He reaches Thom, who is looking like he might melt to the floor. Jonny tucks himself further behind the chairs.

Michael steadies Thom and turns him away from the wall. “Hey. Thom. Thom, look at me. Aw, crap. I'm sorry.”

Thom’s eyes are still tightly shut. His little shoulders rise with his laboured breaths.

“Thom. Look at me.”

Michael eventually manages to coax Thom’s gaze to his own. He holds it carefully and massages his thumbs into Thom’s thin biceps. “Breathe. Shhhhhh, shh-shh-shh. Breathe.”

“I can’t,” Thom whispers, “feel my hands. My hands have gone all weird and when I’ve gone deaf I won’t even be able to sign. I’ll be unable to talk. I’ll be mute, Michael! It’s this body, my body is…a failed experiment, or something. It’s a mess. I had to have six operations, did you know that? I don’t think this body was made right, I think I’m a mistake.”

“Hey now, none of that. You listen to me.” Michael hunches down and nearly brings their foreheads together. “You’re made of the same genetic muck that wolves are built from. You’ve been dinosaurs and rattlesnakes and jellyfish. You’re made of water and water doesn’t vanish, it’s
Thom looks like he’s in a trance, but thankfully also looks like he’s forgotten what had set him off into a panic in the first place. “I like dinosaurs.”

“I know. You’re just having a bad time right now, a bad trip. That’s fine. But let’s turn it around, okay? I want you to feel good, that’s why I gave it to you. So how about you tell me about dinosaurs. What’s your favorite? Did you see the ones at the party in Berlin?”

If watching Thom sign had felt voyeuristic, watching Michael talk him through this feels downright pornographic. Jonny shouldn’t be here. He should not be watching this.

He is, though. Thom starts mumbling earnestly, a farrago spilling from his lips. He talks about dinosaurs and how he liked the blue one at the Berlin party the best, and he cried as a child when he realized what extinct really meant, and then he talks about how he loved H.R. Pufnstuf as a child, but he couldn’t tell if it was a dragon or a dinosaur or an atomic frog, maybe. And when Michael manages to completely calm Thom down after several more minutes, Jonny still hasn’t moved an inch.

The two talk quietly. Michael asks if Thom is going to be all right, and Thom assures him that he will. Is he sure? Yes, yes, he’s sure. He’s fine. Really?

Michael’s face turns uncertain. And it looks genuine. “Hey. This isn’t because of…you know. Is it? Because if you—”

“No!” Thom blurts. “No, it’s…s’not.”


Thom turns his attention back to the wall and becomes very interested in the moulding. He runs his fingers along it. “This wall has a spine.”

“Good catch! It does. Listen, though. Really. If you don’t—”

Thom suddenly turns away from the wall to face the man next to him. “Michael? Kiss me.”

Chapter End Notes

- Poor thirsty AF Colin! From Melody Maker, June 1995:

This is Colin at 4 a.m.: “I mean”, he says, slumping in his chair, “I’m in a band, we’re...”
reasonably successful, I’ve got a very nice suit — I’m not even a bad person — so why can’t I get a shag?” He pulls a face, slurps morosely at his wine, and gestures for a light. Someone holds a candle across the table, and drips molten wax on his trousers, in one action cutting his chances of getting laid by a quarter. “Oh! My trousers! Fuck!” This is how you should think of Radiohead.

- from Thom's tour diary:

Wednesday, August 9 - Tel Aviv

"I meet Mr Stipe who gives me and Jonny what he describes as an organic pick-me-up. It's not speed, he says. He's pissed off because some paparazzi guy has been following him around, photographing his every move. Backstage at the gig it seems like all the friends and families of everyone who works there have turned up. The security guards demand autographs from everyone who passes. A long-legged blonde asks me whether I know the band. She appears to be angry that none of R.E.M. have offered to sleep with her yet. I can't think of an answer and walk off. Suddenly, during the show, Michael's stuff starts kicking in fabulously. I feel like I've been plugged straight into the mains. Then, as I walk off at the end, I realise that I can hardly move and wonder in mild panic what I've done to myself. The whole world appears to be going in slow motion."
Jonny Goes For a Ride

Chapter by rabbit_in_the_moon

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 9 - Jonny Goes For a Ride

Jonny backs up, his hands held out stiffly as if to ward off the actions spooling out in front of him like something out of a fever dream. He’s now more fully hidden by the stacked piles of chairs, but he can still see all too much more than he’d like.

He can’t have heard Thom’s words correctly. He cannot have heard that.

As if the world wants to assure Jonny that it’s a sadist, Thom repeats his demand to Michael. “I want you to kiss me.”

“Do you now?”

“Yes.” Thom’s face suddenly falls, his eyes darting back and forth. Jonny knows Thom has exhausted his bravado. “Don’t you…don’t you want to?”

Michael chuckles. “Oh, kitten. There’s absolutely nothing I want more.”

And then he’s got Thom’s face in his hands, and he’s pulling it upwards, brushing their lips together gently. Teasingly. Thom’s hands move to hover and vibrate over the twin knobs of Michael’s shoulders, not quite daring to touch. Michael starts to deepen the kiss, cutting Thom off from his breath so that his only choice is to inhale it from Michael’s lungs or grow dizzy. Michael draws back for the most delicate of moments, before crashing their mouths back together. It’s lewd and messy and forceful, and Jonny instantly feels sick.

How many times has he daydreamed what Thom’s face would look like framed by long-fingered, masculine hands? How much time has he spent mentally sketching the exact arch of Thom’s trusting neck? How little did he ever imagine the scenario as viewed from an outsider’s perspective?

Thom is making desperate little sounds. One of Michael’s hands fists itself into the errant spikes of his hair. He pulls, and Thom moans. Jonny knows it’s just hard enough to confuse Thom, blurring the edges so that Thom’s brain can’t decipher it as pleasure nor as pain. He knows because he’s
dreamed about doing the exact same thing to Thom enough times to know where that threshold would line up. He’s measured and calculated the way Thom pulls at his own hair, either in inarticulable frustration or in the throws of overwhelming happiness. Michael has found that leverage without even trying, without putting in the years of study Jonny has. Jonny is left with the same thought pounding through his head that a child has with its first outraged realization that the world is impartial.

*It’s not fair.*

Michael is now attacking Thom with his lips and tongue and teeth, and Thom isn’t having any trouble keeping up, even if he’s not as refined. He reciprocates enthusiastically, excited little fingers now twisting themselves in Michael’s shirt.

Jonny has an irritatingly unwelcome thought surface; Michael knows how to kiss someone very thoroughly. That naturally makes everything he’s witnessing even worse. Michael is taking his time, as if there’s no place he’d rather be. He is kissing not like he’s waiting for something else to begin, not like this is a prelude. He is kissing like the act contains its own culmination. He is kissing an ouroboros into Thom’s mouth.

Michael sucks hard at Thom’s lower lip and releases it with a *pop*. The skin there is left swollen and red, plumped by the heat of Michael’s mouth. Then he presses a kiss to Thom’s forehead, chaste in comparison to everything else Jonny has just witnessed.

“I don’t…don’t want you to…” Thom trails off, his voice slow and slurred. He’s high. Really, really high on whatever the pill is that Stipe gave them earlier. “I…don’t want you to go. Don’t wanna go. I really don’t wanna go back home.”

Michael threads his fingers back through Thom’s hair, but this time he doesn’t tug; he’s tender. He shushes Thom, who immediately falls silent, his complaints sheared away cleanly by the touch of those hands drifting over his head. Thom’s eyes close as if in reverence, and he leans into Michael’s touch.

Jonny knows a thing or two about being touch-starved. But when he has dreamed of holding Thom, it is with more than his arms. Can Michael even *conceive* of that?

“It won’t be long,” assures Michael. He gentles his voice even more, his tone a tidal ebb-and-flow that makes Thom shudder as even more drug-induced anxiety leaves his frame. “You’ll see. You’ll be in America before you know it. We’re going to have such a great time, aren’t we? It’s going to be the *best* goddamn month. Can’t wait. You’re worth the wait though, aren’t you?”

Does Thom think Michael is touching him with any real feeling? Jonny determines that Michael is just trying to calm him down, correct the course of the panic his stupid pill has caused. Jonny feels an unexpected, heady rush of annoyance, directed at Thom. *How can it be him, why this man. It wasn’t ever supposed to be a man, I’ve made peace with that, and if the universe shifted on its axis and suddenly it could be a man…*

Jonny can’t finish the thought. He can already feel his anger wanting to dive-bomb Thom like he’s an airfield landing pattern, flashing bright to direct home the betrayal Jonny is feeling. But that’s not fair, is it? This is all Michael’s doing. And it’s just a kiss. Nothing but a game for Michael. Jonny wouldn’t want that anyway. It’d be cruel. Maybe Michael is just fine with a silly bit of stoned snogging, but Jonny couldn’t settle for that. So it’s ok. *This is ok.*
Michael leans down, and it’s clear that Thom thinks he is getting another kiss; his face moves like a flower turning towards the sun. Instead, Michael turns his head teasingly and rests his lips against Thom’s ear. His voice lowers, and Jonny can just barely make it out: “Next time I see you, I’m going to take you apart.”

Thom shivers, a gnarring moan his only response. He bears the stunned face of a man for whom the entire universe has shifted. Abstractly, Jonny wonders if his own face looks the same.

Michael grabs a handful of arse and squeezes. Then he pulls back, like it’s nothing. “Can I call you? When you’re back in England on break? I got your road schedule for the next month from your tour manager.”


“Okay,” Michael smiles.

“Okay,” parrots Thom. “Yeah.”

Jonny’s heart can’t find its legs, slipping and tripping over the raw, scattered chunks of itself that have been blasted away from the whole.

_So which is worse, Jonny, dashed hope or consistent hopelessness? Now that you’ve experienced both?_

A man with a headset appears from behind the curtained door and touches Michael’s arm briefly. “Thirty minutes, Mr. Stipe.”

Michael nods, and the man scurries back the way he came, his face carefully blank. Thom looks razed by comparison.

“Okay. Well. Erm.” Thom makes a move towards Michael and then steps back, looking disoriented. “I’ll, uh. Let you…”

Thom wanders like a sleepwalker towards the door the PA disappeared through.

“Thom.”

Thom pauses at the door, swaying. He spins jerkily back around and Jonny’s heart breaks at the glowing, worshipful expression on his face. He should be worried that Thom could easily spot him from his position, but it’s clear he only has eyes for Michael.

Michael chuckles indulgently and pulls a notepad from his back pocket. “I can’t call you if you don’t give me your number.”

“Oh, right.” Thom giggles and recites the digits. Jonny recites along in his head. Michael scribbles them down. Thom is absently pressing fingers against his lips — feeling, perhaps, for the leftovers of Michael’s kiss.

“I’ll be calling you. Now go. Go find a nook. You’re okay, nothing bad can happen to you tonight. I promise you.”

Jonny has never quite heard that shy tone from Thom before. It makes him angry. Thom should never sound like that; he’s not meant to be tamed.

Thom wobbles away and now it’s just Michael and Jonny in the room. Jonny hopes Michael fucks off quickly. Jonny needs space to move and rage and plan how to get Thom out of this mess. Surely Michael needs to make preparations before taking the stage?

But Michael is just standing there infuriatingly, looking like he has never had a single appointment to keep in his life. He flips his little book closed with a brisk snap of his wrist and slides it back into a pocket.

Conversationally, he says, “You know, I don’t know how it was for you growing up, but I was taught it’s extremely bad manners to eavesdrop.”

Oh fuck. Jonny feels himself flush with shame and savagely grapples with the feeling, trying to shove it down. He can’t show weakness. He refuses to give Michael that. He very carefully keeps his arms lax, despite how badly they want to cross themselves around his ribs, and he steps from behind the stack of chairs with as much dignity as possible. He acts the very picture of nonchalance, deliberate and composed.

“I was keeping an eye on Thom,” he responds, just as casually. When Michael just stares at him, blank and bored, he prompts, “Your organic remedy. He’s stoned off his head.”

“Ah,” smiles Michael. “That’s a good friend, then. He’s safe as houses, though.”

“Is he?” Jonny affects a moue, expressing his skepticism.

“Of course. Why wouldn’t he be? He was with me.”

“I don’t like you.” There’s bile climbing his throat but he doesn’t force the words; he’s viciously satisfied that his voice still conveys the relaxed modulation he’d use when discussing the weather. “I don’t like you, and I certainly don’t think Thom is safe with you.”

“I see. I’m sorry to hear that. I like you, though, Jonny.” Michael favors him with one of those tacky, movie star smiles he can seemingly produce on demand.

“I would never dare to insult your intelligence, Mr. Greenwood.” Michael’s smile widens impossibly, showing too many bone-immaculate American teeth, and Jonny knows he’s hit his mark correctly and drawn first blood. He’s become a connoisseur of the fake smiles his words can draw out of people. He’s become a connoisseur of fake smiles in general.

Michael’s voice changes slightly in tone; dark shapes are drifting just under the placid surface. “But here’s the thing. Me and Thom? It’s really none of your business.”

“Everything about Thom is my business,” Jonny shoots back.

“Does Thom know that?”

“He doesn’t need to.”
“Thom doesn’t belong to you though, Jonny.”

Rage slams his body hard. He’s shaking.

“Of course not. And he definitely doesn’t fucking belong to you, either!” His voice is growing louder and more shrill and his arms have started to wind themselves around his torso. Fuck. Fuck.

Michael shrugs, noncommittally. His smile says he doesn’t quite agree with Jonny, however. How can one man have so many different smiles, like knives lined up along a rack? Each one honed for a specific purpose, each one meant to cut and dissect in a distinctive, precise manner.

Jonny is beginning to realize he may only have brought butter knives to this fight; he wants to hide them, tarnished, in a very back drawer. His arms hug himself more tightly, and he hates himself for it.

“I don’t think you’re a good influence.” God, he sounds so fucking insufferable to his own ears. Is this how he always sounds?

“Well, I would agree with you, but then we’d both be wrong.” Michael looks to the ceiling, as if for patience. He waits a beat, draws in a deep breath. “I don’t play these little games. And I’m not about to start now with you. Look, I am dreadfully sorry that Thom doesn’t return your feelings for him. But that’s not my problem. Now, I think I should go and—”

“—Excuse me? What the fuck are you on about?” Jonny blanches, his blood an ice-cold slush.

Michael sighs. He’s no longer smiling. He clinically looks Jonny over for several long moments, as if cataloguing things Jonny might not be aware of. Like Jonny’s sick and hiding the symptoms, even from himself. In response to whatever it is that he sees, Michael’s expression shifts to pity.

“You’ve never even told him, have you? Oh, darling.”

His most buried, precious secret has been peeled open by Michael as casually as if it was a soft orange and he cannot – will not – abide the pity it’s elicited from the man who has destroyed his world with a kiss. Jonny can’t stop himself from what he says next.

“Fuck. You. You’re just a sad, pathetic parasite. Chasing after young blood. I know your reputation. Everyone fucking does. What, are you scared you’re losing it? You need to suck it off younger, more talented people? It’s sick, the way you’re using Thom to feel good about your own empty life—”

Michael is suddenly moving and it costs Jonny a lot to hold his ground and not step backwards from the man who is now directly in front of him, to not cringe away from the fury he’s wrought. The mixed signals of fight and flight hammering away in his chest have him rooted to the spot and swaying at once.

“That little hug, in the restaurant that morning? That was cute,” says Michael. “Did it hurt? Did it make you ache?”

Jonny growls, seethes. That was theirs. His and Thom’s. How dare Michael talk of it, sully it, make it sound dirty and grasping on Jonny’s part. But then a traitorous little voice inside—in Colin’s cadences, of course—asks if perhaps the scene he has just witnessed between Thom and Michael
might not have been private as well. His heart skips a beat.

Michael leans further into his space and captures Jonny’s eyes, refuses to let go. They’re nearly of a same height and it feels grossly intimate.

“What you saw here, in this room? Think of it like that little show-off hug of yours. Except in my version…”

Michael smiles slowly, deliciously.

“…Thom was the one aching.”

Jonny jerks back as if slapped.

He raises a fist.

Michael raises an eyebrow.


“I’ll take my chances.”

“I wonder what Thom will think…” Michael tilts his head as if he’s genuinely curious how this will play out.

Jonny’s fist wavers.

“You’re willing to throw it all away, ready to be another session musician with no real place to call home?”

Jonny’s hand falls to his side, defeated.

Michael’s lips curve into a soft smile again. “I thought so. My, my. That’s so…tragic.”

A childish aspect of Jonny wants to perversely confess everything to Michael, explain that he has it all wrong. Part of his reasoning in never pouring his heart out to Thom was to prevent the very thing Michael brought up. Not the session musician part; the abandoning Thom part. What they have, Radiohead, is everything to Thom.

And Thom deserves better than pointless, selfish declarations from Jonny. Keeping Thom safely away from the truth has always been essential. He knows it’d put everything at risk to admit to Thom how he fancies him when Thom can’t return those feelings for a multitude of reasons. Though, he thinks ruefully, perhaps he can now strike off Thom’s assumed sexuality as one of them. But still, he’s done the maths enough times and how does this revelation really change anything? He’s not stupid.

Michael’s smirk seems to confirm the horrible, rotting pit at the core of his secret: Sometimes he’s still so weak. He’ll read what he desperately wants to see into Thom’s affectionate nature and hungrily respond, pretending that Thom is teasing him with promises of more, that he’d reciprocate if Jonny would only give him a sign. It’s a betrayal of Thom’s friendship, every time, even if in his
innocence Thom is completely unaware of Jonny’s duplicity and devotion.

He is fully aware he’s been a hypocrite, thinking earlier that it was just-barely-okay if Michael lusted after Thom as long as he kept it to himself. And an idiot, a condescending, careless idiot to think Thom was a naif that didn’t understand what he was playing with when it came to Michael. In his arrogance, Jonny’s confused familiarity with insight. He took his assumptions about Thom for granted.

God, there is no way this bloody story turns out well for anyone involved.

“He’s unaware of Jonny’s duplicity and devotion.” Jonny sighs, suddenly tired. Tired of thinking, tired of feeling, and definitely tired of Michael Stipe.

Michael backs off, still staring intensely at Jonny. Suddenly he spins on his heel and yells at the walls, sending Jonny’s heart flying into his throat. “FUCK. FUCK! Jesus christ. I feel like the bad guy now.”

He rubs a hand tiredly across his face, and turns carefully back to Jonny. “I don’t want this, I don’t want to make bad blood. Look, I’m really fucking sorry you didn’t have the balls to try for Thom when you had a chance. I’m really fucking sorry you’re, like, projecting your shit on me. And I’m especially really fucking sorry that I can’t help you out here.”

“Just leave Thom alone. That’ll help immensely.” It wasn’t meant to, but it comes out sounding like Jonny is pleading.

“No.”

“Why?”

“Because I want him. And he wants me.”

Jonny looks at him, mutely, miserably.

Michael lifts his arm like it weighs a thousand pounds and is taking more effort than it’s worth to check his watch. The air shifts, and Jonny understands they are truly done here now. Michael starts to pull himself together; Jonny has seen this happen hundreds of times, but on Thom’s smaller frame. Preparing oneself to take the stage. Transformation. Metamorphosis. Michael is now composed, taller, and more solid. Jonny feels like an afterthought, already half-forgotten, and ready to puff away if Michael blinks.

Michael gives Jonny one last appraising look. “I’m sorry, kid. It’s a bum deal, I know it is. Whether you believe me or not, I completely understand and you have my sympathies. But sometimes the world’s not fair. Sometimes you don’t get what you want. Being deserving has nothing to do with it.”

“I’ll be watching you,” he mumbles, as Michael brushes past him to the door.

“That’s fine. I like to be watched.”

Jonny’s alone.

He doesn’t think about what has just happened. There’s too much to process, and every angle he

Okay then.

He shoves a hand into his pocket and fishes around until his fingers brush at a small, smooth lump. He fists out the pill that Michael had given him in what feels like another life now. Without putting too much thought into it, he tosses it into his mouth and dry-swallows. It catches momentarily at the back of his throat, bitterness pooling his mouth. Then, it’s gone. Swimming around his gut, releasing however-many milligrams of I don’t give a fuck.

He absently thinks that Colin would be so pleased to know he can finally swallow a pill.

--

The place to be, right now, is anywhere Michael’s voice isn’t. The crowd roars, far louder than it had for Radiohead, and Jonny just starts walking. Walking is a good first step.

He winds his way down rabbit-holed hallways until the tangled din of music and elation is a muffled and distant rumble. He couldn’t have wandered off that far, though. And come to think of it, he can’t hear his own footsteps. He stares down at his battered shoes in fascination. Eventually, he hits a bend and collides headfirst with a large frame.

The thing shudders, and Jonny can hear that, a little. He rubs at his forehead and watches it swing slightly. He reaches out a hand, and then is shocked when he sees it come into view. It looks alien and alive, and Jonny has this intense realisation that he is in control of it. He can feel himself inside his head, like a conductor peeking out a window. He watches himself send the command to move his fingers, enthralled. The digits press at the glass and still the minute movement.

*Other hand now,* he thinks. The twin crab-like creatures grab at the frame. They work in tandem to right the large, hanging rectangle. He has the passing thought that hands are monstrous, in general, and who could ever love a man with hands like these, in particular?

Jonny shakes his head to clear it, the motion of his hair around his eyes a momentary distraction, before stepping back to admire his work. Rows of men stare back at him from the photograph; they are unimpressed with how evenly he has hung their home.

They all have their hair cut in the same, cropped style. People with little hair have little to hide.

Jonny doesn’t realise his silent film feet have carried him backwards until his back collides with concrete. He slides down the wall slowly, still staring at the men in the photograph. His mouth is very dry. He instructs the mechanics of his body close his jaw, but apparently that line of communication is down. His shirt rides up and bunches at the back of his neck. The wall feels cool and bumpy and good against his skin.
The men in the front row are kneeling. One knee pressed to the brown grass, the other raised and supporting their pride. Oh, is that what Jonny’s trying to do? It’d explain why he’s down in this slouch. He looks at his knees, which are higher than his head. He thinks. Well, he can’t send a message all that distance. He’s not going to be able to arrange his knees like the others. Is that okay? It should be. They should understand that he can’t kneel.

Ridiculous to be facing the sun like that. The men are all squinting. Everyone is going to remember them as sour. Jonny squints back. His eyes lose focus. Shit.

Oh well.

He’ll just wait here.

What is it he has to do again?

Surely someone is coming to tell him.

Surely.

“Jonny!”

“Oh,” says Jonny. “Hello.”

“You fancy an adventure?”

--

Thom is floating.

People backstage are floating, too. But they’re looking busy about it.

He wanders up to a man in a black t-shirt and peeks over his shoulder.

“What’s that?”

The man turns, nearly bumping noses with Thom. He takes several steps back.

“Uh. The setlist.”

“Can I have it?”
The man frowns, throwing another black-shirted fellow a glance. “Well…not, uh… not right now. I need it.”

“Oh.”

The man’s face looks huge. Thom takes in his stubble and pockmarks and thinks it could be a terrain. Some alien planet. Sometimes he thinks hills look like giants sleeping under green blankets. If giants can be mountains, maybe faces can be wide, unearthly plains with rutted soil and plow-breaking stones.

The guy clears his throat. “I can give it to you after?”

“Cool,” says Thom.

Michael’s voice is blaring, but it sounds far away. “I…am…smitten…”

Thom runs his fingertips along the wall that separates them and feels the music tickle inside him. It crawls onto his fingers like bumblebees and travels up his arm.

“…I’m the real thing, I’m the real thing…”

There’s a man sitting on a gear case and tuning a guitar. Thom’s not sure if his face is expansive or not; he’s leaning over and his hair is hanging down like a curtain. He thinks briefly of Jonny.

“…life is strange, yeah, life is strange…”

Thom gets to his knees in front of the man. His shirt is dark grey. How embarrassing. He didn’t have any black ones. He’s going to get fired. Thom tilts his head, trying to catch a glimpse of this man’s face. Is his terrain different from that other man’s? It must be, because his shirt is grey. Maybe his face is grey, too.

The man notices him. Thom stares back. The man’s face shifts with consternation. It makes his face bunch up, a crumpled paper towel tossed over whatever landscape might exist underneath. Thom doesn’t like it.

Thom feels a hand on his shoulder.

“Thom.” It’s a woman’s voice. An American voice.

Thom plants his elbows on the floor. His forearms. His palms. The floor vibrates with way more music than the walls; it’s absolutely crawling with it. The sensation soaks through him and makes the spaces between his bones feel pleasantly carbonated.

“…won’t you be my valentine…”

“Thom, why don’t you come with me? There’s a nice spread they’ve put out in the dressing room.”

Thom lies down. He rolls onto his back. The woman is very, very tall. She has short brown hair and a round, pale face. That face is the moon, probably. She offers her hand. Her nails are tiny and rounded and perfect, painted in a glossy pale shade of nothingness. He’s seen her before. She does something for R.E.M. She has several tags hanging from lanyards around her neck. She is all business. She was born in business casual.
She smiles and bends over.

The man who’d been tuning the guitar is still looking at Thom like he’s turning into a werewolf. Well fuck you too, grey-face.

Thom takes the moon’s hand.

“Theeeeere you go,” she says, pulling Thom up with easy strength. The first black-shirt, the one with the setlist, is whispering something into her ear. Fuck him, too. He’d better make good on his promise to give Thom that setlist. The woman is shaking her head at him.

“Don’t worry about it,” she instructs. The man’s lips are a straight line. A long line drawn in the sand.

The woman steers Thom down a hallway and into the dressing room. She sits him down on the small couch and hands him a bottle of water. “Here. It’s a dry climate, we’ve got to keep hydrated. Do you want something to eat, Thom?”

Thom shakes his head back and forth in slow motion. It’s so heavy.

“No? Let’s see, we’ve got a cheese tray…it looks a bit sad though, doesn’t it…crackers…some fruit, that looks nice. How about a bagel?”

She puts a bagel in the hand that isn’t holding the water. Thom stares at it. His fingers slip through the hole, crumbs catching on his hangnails. His nails are short as the moon-lady’s, but tooth-worried and nipped down past the quick. And they are not the color of the atmosphere (Thom has finally placed the color of her nails, he did go to art school after all). His nails are the color of earthworms. Makes sense. No worms on the moon, are there? Thom’s a wicked creature of the mud and sea.

Thom doesn’t mind if he’s more of the earth and not the sky, but he’d most prefer to be from the tides. Plankton, he decides. He wishes he was as unselfconsciously small, as inclined to drink in light.

“You take a little rest, Thom.” The moon-lady pats him on the shoulder. “And drink that water, all of it! I want to see that bottle empty when I come back in here.”

Yes, miss, he thinks. She’s a bit like his favourite teacher from primary school. He opens his mouth to tell her this, but she’s gone.

Thom’s not sure how long he’s been holding the bagel and the water. A long while. A good, long while. He can’t open the water, because the bagel’s in his left hand. Well that was stupid of her.

The door opens, and Jonny drifts in. Look at that – Jonny knows how to float, too!

“Hey Jonny. I was just thinking about you. Your hair. Your face isn’t that big. I’m glad.” A thought suddenly strikes him with dismay. “Is my face big?”

Jonny makes a beeline for his backpack. He isn’t listening to a word Thom is saying, is he? Doesn’t he understand how important this is?
“Do you want this bagel?” Thom drops the bagel, and it rolls under the dressing table. “Oh, shit.”

Well, at least he can open his water now.

Avi is suddenly there.

“Thom!” he booms in his loud, gregarious voice. “You want to come along for a little ride?”

A couple of others have popped up behind him. One is on their crew, his name is Domhnall. The other is a petite, beautiful girl. Thom has no idea who she is.

“A drive?”

“I’m going to Lebanon,” says Jonny, tersely. He won’t meet Thom’s eyes.

“We are taking my jeep,” says Avi. “We can squeeze one more inside. You won’t have a seatbelt, but I am a good driver! What do you think?”

“Oh, um. I dunno. I’m supposed to drink this water.” He holds up the bottle.

Jonny is staring at his feet. He’s moving his toes inside his shoes, making the cracked rubber sidewalls of his old trainers flex and stretch. Thom stares as well. He understands this must be very important, that they’re keeping track of something. He wants to help Jonny, so he’ll be vigilant.

But then Jonny starts, and comes back into himself. He slings his backpack over one shoulder and spins around back to join his motley group. “You should stay here, Thom.”

Yes. Yes, he probably should. He’s got this water. And he can’t leave while Michael’s voice is still in the air. That voice told him he’s safe. Olly olly oxen free.

“Goodbye, Thom.”

“Bye, Jonny.”

But time is doing that thing again, where it’s leaving Thom behind. And when he speaks those words, Jonny has already gone.

Thom’s alone.

--

“He went WHERE?”
“Lebanon,” mumbles Tim.

“In a jeep,” adds Thom.

“Lebanon,” repeats Colin.

Tim nods.

Colin stares, eyes wide and mouth slack. His arms fly up from his sides, palms upturned and empty of explanation. “…Lebanon.”

“In a jeep.”

“Yes, so you’ve fucking said! What does the jeep matter!”

Thom shrugs, chewing at a nail and tracking the lazy zigzagging of a nearby fly. “I’ve never ridden in a jeep.”

Tim grunts and removes his glasses to rub at the bridge of his nose. “Thank god we’re not flying out tomorrow. Lebanon is a good five hour drive. At least.”

Thom signs at Tim, “Even in a jeep?”

He doesn’t know the precise motions for jeep, so he signs big tooth car instead. He then tries signing at the fly. The fly has nothing to say on the matter.

Tim, for reasons of his own he’s never quite shared with them all, knows enough sign language to catch Thom’s meaning. He doesn’t bother signing back and instead mutters, “Yes, Thom. Even in a jeep.”

“I’m going to kill him. I might kill you, too.” Colin jabs a finger into Tim’s chest. “This is your job, you’re our fucking tour manager. Thom’s off his face on god knows what, my brother is missing, and–”

“Oh, Jonny was floating too.” When he sees he has everyone’s attention, he sits up and enthuses, “Don’t worry, guys. Michael will keep him safe, too. The bees in the walls will help. Michael makes them. With his voice, you get it?”

It’s crucial that they get how important the bees are. But somehow Thom loses the plot, and everything pertaining to Thom’s sense of time becomes helplessly folded in on itself after that, like an M.C. Escher print. Colin’s yowling like a cat just let in from the storm, and Tim’s glasses are sitting forgotten on the craft table next to the sad cheese tray while he pokes at that brick of a mobile phone of his, and Ed’s suddenly there, leaning over Thom, grinning and asking him how’s outer space. Phil passes through for Tim, to ask about a schedule for his girlfriend when she visits during their next show at the Roskilde Festival. He gets a good look at what’s what and immediately sails forth, removing himself from their frazzled knot of energy. Ed’s rumbling calming words like an incantation over them all; it’s not like Jonny is lost and Thom’s right here just exploring another reality, which is probably what Jonny’s doing as well, good for him, and as Thom falls asleep against Ed’s shoulder he wonders, what if I was the only person left alive on the planet? What is the song I would write?
Thom’s last thought before sleep takes him is that it’d be a lullaby. Lullabies are for children; in a world with only one single man remaining, what could be more hopeful?

Chapter End Notes

- from Thom's tour diary:

Wednesday, August 9 - Tel Aviv
"Suddenly, during the show, Michael's stuff starts kicking in fabulously. I feel like I've been plugged straight into the mains. Then, as I walk off at the end, I realise that I can hardly move and wonder in mild panic what I've done to myself. The whole world appears to be going in slow motion. The rest of the evening is hell and I can't bring myself to do anything but moan. The last thing I remember is Jonny saying that he's off to the Lebanon in a jeep. OK, I say."
Kittens, Great and Small

Chapter by rabbit in the moon

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 10 - Kittens, Great and Small

The trick, Colin thinks, is to not focus. Just breeze in, get your books, make some small talk, and get out.

Jonny lets him into the flat with a nod and not much else in way of greeting, before moving to the couch and flopping down into the threadbare cushions bonelessly. He picks up the controller to his Nintendo and returns to the game he’s been playing.

“Your shit’s on the table,” he calls out.

“Uhh, okay. Cheers.”

Colin retrieves the bag and, he would swear on the honor of the Greenwood clan, walks towards the front door with every intention of leaving his brother to do…whatever it is he’s been doing in the five hours since they’ve officially been back home from Denmark. But somehow he finds himself standing next to their sister’s cast-off couch, watching Jonny play Bomberman. Jonny only has eyes for the little man on the screen, blowing paths through bricks and hiding from aggressive little monsters. Neither brother says anything for several minutes, the pointed silence made more sharply palpable by the interjection of cheery bleeps and bloops from the telly. They’ve never had uncomfortable silence between them before. It’s disorientating.

“Oh, watch out! That tiger-faced thingy is going to eat you. Why are they so cute? This is a Japanese game, isn’t it. Bless. They always want you smiling as you die, don’t they? Oh, look at that bloppy! It’s a carnivorous raindrop.”

Colin’s aware that his blithering sounds forced; he thinks that Jonny is just going to ignore him but after another few moments, he stops the game and sits back into a slouch. “This is two-player.”

They both settle down, taking turns with the manky controller, with Colin providing a commentary as they try to manoeuvre the mazes of each level. By Colin’s reckoning, Jonny is slowly easing down his emotional drawbridge with each level they finish. Maybe he has realised Colin isn’t going to bring up Lebanon. What would be the point?

Jonny wouldn’t discuss what had happened over the hours that led him to Lebanon and then safely
back, and he wouldn’t allow that he’d acted in poor judgment. Jonny had basically told Colin to
 fuck off (well, literally, but he didn’t truly mean it, Colin tells himself now) when Colin had
 rushed him in the lobby upon his return to their hotel. *Fuck off,* he’d said, and *don’t you ever get
tired of trying to play at being dad?*

Colin had wilted where he stood, all his self-righteous energy drained away by the spigot of
 Jonny’s words. He could suddenly feel the hours he’d spent curled up on the couches of the lobby,
each one dropping a heavy stone of delayed exhaustion onto his shoulders.

*Fuck off.* So Colin had. Ever the indulgent slave to his little brother’s whims.

Tim had looked at Jonny over the rims of his glasses and said, “Pull stupid shit like that again and
 there will be a reckoning. I don’t give a fuck what you get up to. But you will be accounted for
 while you’re doing it. Or I *will* bloody quit and you can find yourself another tour manager.”

“Sure, Tim. Clean your fucking glasses. They’re disgusting.”

He smirked, leaving them behind in the lobby.

“I’m sorry, Tim,” Colin offered, weakly.

“What are *you* sorry about?”

“Jonny—”

“—He’s right. You’re not his father. Stop covering for him.”

Colin found himself cringing at the annoyance in Tim’s voice. “You didn’t actually mean any of
 that, did you?”


The childish urge to beg Tim on Jonny’s behalf was hard to push down. *We’ll be good, I promise.*
*Give him another chance.*

But then Tim threw up his arms as if disgusted. “No, no, of course not.”

Colin sighed in relief, all the same.

“But…it sounded good, right? Good and serious?” Tim asked hopefully.

“You had me wondering for a moment.”

“I doubt it even made Jonny pause.” Still, Tim nodded, satisfied. It was the best he could have
 hoped for and he’d take it. He turned to head in the direction of the lifts, but then paused to look at
 Colin again. “I don’t know what you’re going to do.”

“Do…about what?”

“About the level you’re about to hit. It’s coming. Surely as your brother’s asking for a good kick to
 the arse, it’s coming. You know, I wonder if I’ve let the lines get too blurred. You’ve become my
 mates and you’re not supposed to get that close to the *talent,* did you know that? *I ought* to quit
being your tour manager, because I don’t think you can handle what’s coming and I’m not sure I can handle you not being able to handle it.” Tim exhaled a great mouthful of air. “Fucking hell, I don’t even know how you’re going to get through this tour, let alone after. I’m not even talking about Thom. He’s just a piece of it. I thought if I could keep Thom centred, everything else would fall into place. But do you know what I’ve realised? You’re all just a fucking mess.”

He remembered telling Jonny something very similar, in what felt like a lifetime ago. Still, he said, “We’re not that bad, Tim.”

Tim huffed laughter again, but it was more genuine, relenting. “No, no, I suppose you’re not. Just…don’t mind me. But I care about you guys and that makes all the difference, I guess. Like I said, it’s a dangerous thing, being mates. I’m so bloody glad I don’t have to look at any of you for the next couple of weeks.”

And that really was that. The Roskilde Festival had passed uneventfully. Everyone was more quiet than usual. No one partied and no in-fighting occurred. They got on with their jobs, each of them counting down the hours until they were set free to enjoy a shortish break from their tour schedule.

Colin had planned on giving both himself and Jonny some space—certainly more than the scant hours since being dropped off at home—and if it hadn’t been for his forgotten books he’d have stuck with the goal of leaving Jonny to his own devices for the whole length of their break.

Colin has his own life to pretend to lead. But here he is, all the same.

Looking at Jonny now, Colin wonders why he’s become so sullen and angry, far beyond his normal level of sarcasm. And even that had seemed like it might be getting a little bit better, hadn’t it? Had something happened in Lebanon?

“Stop staring at me.”

“Sorry. Jonny…is there anything you’d like to…talk about?”

“Nope. You have plans tonight?”

“Ah. Okay. Um, yes, I’m going out with Rebecca.”

“Ugh, why? She’s so trashy.”

“Jonny! No, she’s not. She’s perfectly nice.”

“No, she’s a ghastly cow,” Jonny says with matter-of-fact disinterest, mashing his thumbs against the controller. “Aren’t you better than that? Can’t you just, I dunno, pay for it, if you’re that hard up?”

“You need to stop.”

“What?” Jonny asks, flush with faked innocence. “You’re certainly not interested in dating her. It’s a fair question.”

“Jonathan. Stop.”

“I know I’d certainly pay if it meant I’d be spared the sight of her naked,” Jonny continues. “And
her voice! I hope she can suck cock like a pro and that’s why you keep her on a string for when you’re desperate. Is that how you keep her silent? Still, I don’t see how it’s worth it. But it’s your life, I suppose.”

Colin knows when he’s been set up to take a fall. He leaves without saying a word, but Jonny calls out as Colin is letting the door swing shut:

“Give Rebecca my regards!”

When Colin gets home he sees that Rebecca has left a message on the machine, cancelling their date, claiming illness. He can’t even muster the energy to care if she’s telling the truth. There’s a part of him that’s frustrated, but there’s also a part of him that feels relieved.

He slips his shoes and socks off and pads into the kitchen.

Being alone with one’s own thoughts can be treacherous; it’s been a while since Colin and his brain have had any real time to themselves. Colin pleads with his head to fuck off, please, just, I don’t know. go think about puppies, or about how nice it is to feel familiar linoleum beneath bare toes.

He’d been hoping for a nice dinner out at that new little Italian place off Richmond Road. He was going to order the spaghetti; the puttanesca sauce is supposed to be their specialty. A sauce named for ladies of the night. They would place pots of it in their windows to tempt men into the bordellos.

He opens a cupboard and scans its scant supply. Heinz Tomato soup. That’s close, right? That’s sort of like puttanesca.

Colin struggles with the can opener and sloshes a bit of the soup onto the counter as he pours it into a bowl. He’ll clean that up later. He places a warped Pyrex lid atop the bowl and places it carefully inside the microwave.

Then he watches it hum and rotate for two minutes and thirty seconds.

His brain, to its credit, is blessedly silent.

---

Thom doesn’t think to get nervous when the phone rings his first night back home. The memories concerning the night of their gig in Tel Aviv are questionable at best, a fogged funhouse mirror at worst. The only bit that stands out from the chaos with any steadfast clarity is the kiss he had begged for, and if that bit of classic Yorke neediness isn’t mortifying, Thom doesn’t know what is.

So when he is greeted by Michael’s deceptively soft voice, he promptly drops the phone. Oh fucking hell.
“Shit! Sorry! Michael…hello!” Jesus, he sounds as breathy as a teenage girl. Is this how it’s going to be?

“I was having the best daydream just now.”

Thom is already blushing. His ever-helpful mind flashes lewdly to the image of his cock in Michael’s hand. Okay, yes. This is definitely how it’s going to be from now on.

None of that now, Yorke. Keep it together. He clears his throat. “Oh? What was it about?”

“I was fantasizing about refusing to accept a major award.”

Thom is surprised into a staccato burst of laughter and then, suddenly, everything is okay and not weird at all.

Conversation with Michael zips along at a nimble pace—he doesn’t allow for much small talk. Things get personal and interesting fast when you’re intent on eliminating lies.

Thom hasn’t realised how long they’ve been talking until Michael says he needs to get some sleep. The cordless receiver has warmed to the same temperature as Thom’s skin and peels away sweaty when he crawls out of his rumpled bed to check the time. His ear is tender from the hours pressed against hard plastic.

“Oh, man. You shoulda told me. It’s so late.”

“Hmmm. Yes. Are you going to sleep after this?”

“Probably not for a bit yet.”

“Good. Touch yourself and pretend it’s me before you do. Goodnight, Thom.”

Thom’s left with a dead piece of moulded plastic in his sweaty grip, a scandalised response still trying to work its way from his lips, and a hand already fumbling at his fly.

---

Colin has a genial lunch with Phil. Phil has a staggeringly huge slice of chocolate cake after; this gently quavering, moistly-layered thing with caramel sauce swished artfully across the plate beneath it for effect. And he won’t let Colin have any. Not even the single forkful he tries to claim around the edge of Phil’s hand. He gets a swat for his efforts.

No one ever believes Colin when he says Phil is the most ruthless among them, an affable warrior keeping their finances and personal boundaries solvent. Less interested in the liquidity of their day-to-day dynamics, on meeting the short-term obligations they place on each other. That’s Colin’s
arena.

Still, he didn’t need *all* of that cake, did he?

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They’re talking about the things they miss from home when they’re out on the road. The unexpected things.

Michael tells him about Athens and the summer nights when it’s so warm and syrupy it feels like walking into a damp paper towel the moment you step out the door. Those are the nights when he can’t sleep and the fireflies will come out. Hundreds, maybe thousands, so that you can’t tell which way the stars lie and if you squint you lose your sense of equilibrium.

Thom says they didn’t have fireflies in Oxford and that he was convinced they didn’t really exist, or if they did it was in kind of a disappointing way, like they were freakishly scary with bonus legs and pincers or they had more of a vague glow than anything else, so you maybe had to catch them and get stung and cup your hands around their horrifying hindquarters and peer in real close to see any kind of light and then get dizzy and sort of stagger around and then collapse from the poison and wake up in some hospital in Mexico, years later, trying to make time with the nurse on the psych ward.

Michael laughs, long and hard and delighted. Thom feels pride at pleasing him, at having his blatant, clownish dramatics rewarded sweetly with Michael’s approval.

The only other person Thom has ever tried to impress like this is Jonny.

Michael says he’ll show Thom the Athens fireflies, that they’re better seen than described. And not to worry, they don’t sting. *We can take midnight walks*, he says. The word sinks through Thom, that one frail little syllable weighty enough that it sends up a shower of air bubbles through his blood. *We.* It’s a pretty word, an old and simple one. He doesn’t say anything, just stays still and quiet on the phone as Michael starts to talk about the record shops in Athens they might visit. Michael is thinking about Thom in a *future tense*.

He can’t sleep after talking to Michael that night. After tossing and turning for what feels like eons, the pillow never moulding into quite the right shape under his head no matter how many times he flips it, he gets up. Muttering curses under his breath, he shoves and pushes at the bed until it’s been rotated and pressed against the adjacent wall. Newly-freed dustbunnies skitter away from his bare feet as he goes to fetch a drink of water before crawling back under the sheets. He huffs, satisfied, and drifts off almost immediately.

Maybe sometimes you just need to move your bed up against a different wall and see how long it takes for your dreams to adjust.
“Hey Coz, I’m not going to make it. Sorry. Had a bit of an accident here. Why are knives so bloody *sharp*? Tomatoes don’t need that sharp of a knife. They’re soft and stationary, why the aggression?”

Colin whistles. “Ed, what have you done?”

“Nothing,” Ed says. “I definitely didn’t cut the fuck out of three fingers chopping tomatoes.”

“I’ve done nothing too,” replies Colin, sighing. “There’s nothing to do. Life is such a bore.”

Ed apologises again, and when Colin hangs up the phone he realises that while maybe he started playing at it for Ed’s benefit, he’s actually feeling sorry for himself now. He makes tea, for something to do, but then only stares at the way the vegetal steam drifts off into nothingness. The day stretches out before him, as quiet and beige as an empty hallway.

Back home, and once again faced with the realisation that they’ve not been terribly missed, that life has carried on without them. Each time Colin returns from a tour, there’s some part of him that expects (hopes, daydreams) that he’ll walk into a gathering and all his old friends will gather round him, faces lighting up. Like he’s a genuine pleasure, missed and often brought up in conversation. *How’s Colin, d’you reckon? Wish he was here, it’s not the same without that bloke.*

It’s a simple wish. The lowest common denominator of fantasy, really.

In reality, he’s treated with mild curiosity, a relic from times-gone-by. People whom he’d once considered his mates make small talk, before turning to call out to others, sharing stories and in-jokes about events that Colin has no connection to. Jobs are commiserated over. Plans are made that don’t include him. These people, increasingly strangers with each meeting, are polite. They’re inclusive. But it’s half-hearted. Their lives have moved on and Colin is no longer anything to them except an anecdote to share. *Hey, I went to school with Radiohead’s bassist when I was a kid.*

He reckons it must be the same for the rest of the guys. They leave each other at the airport, or maybe a van picks them up and then drops them each off at home like schoolchildren. *See you next time* is said with an air of impatience, like they can’t wait to pick up with the hectic lives they’ve left behind.

The days start to pass. Usually it’s Thom that starts it, calling around or just showing up at the door like a grouchy, half-feral cat that wants let back in to be fed. Maybe he’s had to make peace with this brave new world quicker than the rest of them, being the face of Radiohead. Or maybe he brought it on through his own behaviour—pretentious and mouthy—that he affected after coming back from tours in the early days. Thom had a predilection for burning bridges, and now guards the few remaining with something approaching a fetish.

The rest of them have become masters of pretext. Excuses are made as to why they need to stop by
each other’s flats or meet up at the pub. The reason is never spoken of; they pretend the universe is prankng them, forcing them back into each other’s orbit. How long can they continue to crack jokes that contain traces of truth, like veins of quartz in the bedrock that they’ve built up into Radiohead?

They’re all they have, but to acknowledge it? That’d give the situation gravitas.

But they have their own in-jokes and anecdotes and don’t need to ever pretend to politely understand each other’s experiences. Who else can debate over the pros and cons of the Great Launderettes of Europe? Who else knows what it’s like to give six repetitive interviews in an afternoon? There are only four people Colin can talk to who can understand that precise moment when a band clicks into a new gear on stage, subsumed to where it’s like you’ve been pulled down into the belly of a great heaving beast.

But still…

Colin worries they’re only fit to be around each other, anymore.

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Stanley sighs at length.

“What? What is it?”

“It’s this tree,” Stanley grouses, and points into the distance with his paintbrush. Blue paint flicks away from the end of the brush and onto the scrub at Stanley’s feet like a spat curse. “It’s testing me.”

Thom squints, trying to make out which tree on the distant hill is the one picking a fight with Stanley. “How so?”

“It’s entirely out-of-place. And it knows it, too. That tree was never meant to be there. It’s a fluke of nature. An abomination. It’s going to ruin the entire painting.”

Thom glances over at Stanley’s canvas; it looks more like an accident than a landscape. Black-and-blue tendrils drip down a fiery red nebula. “So don’t paint it?”

Stanley sighs again and whisks his paintbrush rapidly inside his jar of turpentine. “No, that won’t do. Would that it were so simple, Thomas. Come.”

And with that, he’s setting off towards the small ridge, his black suit coat flapping out behind like buzzard wings.

Thom cleans his own brush quickly and sets it aside. He takes a step back from his work and tilts
his head. Not too bad. At least his has actually got trees in it (it still looks worse than Stanley’s, though).

He retrieves a canteen of tea from his bag and jogs to catch up with his plein air partner.

“We should probably think about packing up soon, anyway. It’ll be dark.” Thom unscrews the cap of the tall bottle and offers it up, but Stanley shakes his head. Thom takes a long gulp; it’s lukewarm, but not entirely unpleasant. “What time do you normally head back?”

“I don’t know, I’ve never done this before.”

“What? I thought…I thought you knew what you were doing!”

Stanley laughs. “I do.”

“There are wild goats that live around here with satanic eyes, they stink of death and fight at dusk by charging at each other like stags. We do not want to meet them, trust me.”

“Oh, never you mind that, we’ll be well away by then. Though I must say, I’m intrigued. I’ve yet to meet any of the devil’s emissaries.”

Thom has to walk quite briskly to keep up with Stanley’s stride; he’s got long legs, for being only a head or so taller than Thom. Jonny has longer legs though, and Thom never has to scurry. Have Stanley’s legs gotten longer in the time they’ve been apart? Thom studies his profile in the sunset, wondering how it is a bony man with alopecia can be so effortlessly cool. Maybe it’s the black blazer. Maybe Thom should invest in a black blazer.

“I like the earrings.”

“Ah, thank you,” beams Stanley, reaching up to grasp briefly at a silver hoop. “It seemed a necessary addition. I like your hair.”

“Oh, yeah.” Thom scratches at the crown of his head. “I did that before we left. Needs to be redone, actually. Erm, how far is this tree, Stan? We don’t seem to be getting much closer. The goats, mind.”

It’s far.

They walk until the sun is kissing the horizon. Thom watches, as closely as his eyes can bear, as it sinks and slips away quickly. They’re left with a pink and gold sky and a scarred, ancient tree which Stanley has deeply misjudged the size of.

“Well.” Stanley pulls a palette knife from his pocket and taps it against his thigh. “Hm.”

Thom struggles to understand Stanley’s intentions. “Were you…were you going to try and cut it down? With that?”

Stanley shrugs.

“You do realise it’s not actually a knife,” says Thom, in disbelief. He can’t tell if this is an elaborate joke, or if Stanley’s mind actually works like that. Either way, he begins to laugh.
“You, my dear, tricked us. If you wanted us to come out all this way you might have just said, no reason to be coy. Well, there’s nothing for it then. I know when I’ve been outmanoeuvred,” Stanley nods to the tree with admiration. “Oh, don’t you get smug, now. It’s unbecoming in a lady your age. Come, Thomas, *la reine des arbres* desires a convivial atmosphere.”

They pass the canteen back and forth until it’s cold and dreggy. They lie on their backs and catch up. Stanley doesn’t mind ants crawling over his arms and neck.

“Is that a constellation?” Thom points upwards to a collection of stars that look familiar.

“Certainly, that’s Vermis Minor.”

“What’s that?”

“The little worm.”

Thom laughs, loud and sharp. “That is such bullshit!”

Stanley’s face is grave and stoic as he peers up at the stars. “Look it up, if you don’t believe me.”

Thom, Stanley, the Queen of the Trees, and the Little Worm stay out far too late.

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“Yeah. And you can name them as well, which is the cool bit. So when every track comes up, it's got a different name on it…three hundred pounds, it cost me, but it's amazing. You can make records on it. You can use it as a data input and output thing using the optical line in...so it can be like a hard disk if you want it. It's got, like, instant access to each track as well. So, I'm giving it the hard sell.”

“Hmmm. You'll have to show me your mini-disc-walkman-recording-thing, in person. I should probably move past dragging a tape recorder on tour. I need people like you around me, on top of all the new technology out there. Tell me, have you ever sucked a man’s cock before?”

“I...no.”

“Have you been thinking about it?”

“I. Um. I've been thinking about some stuff.”

“I look forward to teaching you.”

“Teaching me…”
“Yes. How I like my cock sucked.”

“Michael…” There’s no way to respond to that. None. Thom trails off, unsure. He is out of his league. *Doing* is one thing, but *talking* about doing it makes his brain stumble, his tongue balk. *He’s trying to have phone sex, say something! Be sexy, idiot!*

“I’m sure you’ll take direction very well, won’t you?” Rumble of a hunting tiger, slinking into Thom’s ear to send trails of vibration straight down to his groin, causing the skin there to tighten and prickle. If Michael had a tail, Thom is sure it’d be lashing. *What immortal hand or eye could frame thy fearful symmetry?*

“You *like* to apply yourself,” he continues. “And please people. You want to please me, right?”

“Yes.” A whispered admission.

“Good kitten,” Michael say fondly, his voice stroking over Thom like a warm hand.

Thom bites his lip. Michael has been calling him that more and more. *Kitten.* Thom’s not sure how he feels about it. Michael has nicknames for everyone, it seems, so on the one hand it seems silly to take issue. But “kitten” is so…diminutive. He’s not an idiot, he knows he’s small. *Obviously.* But still. He doesn’t think it’s much to do with his physical size. Does Michael actually see him as that? A wee puff hissing and spitting and trying to convince itself up larger? Because that’s what Thom sees. But maybe Michael means it the same way as people use *baby.* Maybe Thom is reading too much into it. As usual.

The building blocks of magic are right here though, in the naming of things. Defining them in relation to yourself. If Thom accepts Michael’s label, how does it alter him? What does it infer back onto Michael? Magic, and science, too, is all about identification, nomenclature, taxonomy. Is he a project to Michael? Is he okay with Michael drawing up the blueprints for whatever is happening between them?

And is it too late to mark in his additions? Was it ever even up for *discussion?*

Maybe what he’s really discomfited about is how the word stirs up a silty mix of embarrassment and shyness, flattery and dismissiveness. And, god help him, it’s a bit of a turn-on, because it’s intrinsically possessive, and how could the idea of Michael *wanting* him be anything but a sexy mindfuck?

Maybe Thom’s just forgotten what it’s like to be treated like a normal human being. Maybe. Maybe this is normal. Maybe real people don’t always treat each other like a chore, or a commodity, or—on the other end of the spectrum and even worse, in some ways—a deity, another person’s aspirational pneuma made physical…

Or maybe Thom needs to just get over himself, and enjoy this.

He re-adjusts the telephone against his opposite ear as he rolls onto his side. He curls up, resting his free hand over the part of himself that doesn’t care a wit about existential dilemmas. He rubs his thumb slowly over the warm cotton covering his erection, teasing himself, and decisively pushes away all the mental rubbish.

“I’m touching myself. I wish you were here. Watching me. Wish you were here, telling me how to touch myself for you.”
“Oh?” There’s an indrawn breath over the line. “I think we can do something about that…”

Michael’s voice starts to whisper filthy directives into his ear.

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Thom only accepted the invitation down to Exeter for the weekend once he’d convinced Ed to tag along.

He’d expected the visit to be awkward, and had been right—that was where Ed had come in. Ed, who got on better with Thom’s old university mates than Thom ever had. Ed, who made them laugh drunkenly and chide Thom for never bringing him ‘round back when they were in school.

By Sunday evening, Thom is more than ready to go home.

“But I’m not! Come on, let’s go back in, tell ’em we can stay another day—”

“They’ve got work in the morning, Ed.”

“Ohhh.” Thom can practically hear the gears turning in Ed’s brain, working out what day it is and what that means for Normal People. “Right. Boring.”

They’re nearly at the M5 when a thought strikes Thom.

“You want more adventure?”

Ed only turns his face from the road and grins hugely.

“Okay, then turn around.”

“Where am I going?”

“West. The Jamaica Inn.”

“The Jamaican?”

“No, the—bloody—Inn. Jamaica. INN. It’s a hotel.”

Ed’s face goes from thrilled to instantly dubious.

Showing someone an artifact from your childhood is always a disappointing experience. You can describe the way it had been, the way it had affected you—how it looked on a rainy day in 1978, how the air tasted. But ultimately it is an insular novelty, and you’re not going to get much beyond polite and patient ears. But that doesn’t stop Thom from trying to drum up excitement in Ed.
“It’s haunted. *Proper* haunted. My parents used to take Andy and me there on holiday. Andy saw one, once. A ghost.”

And Ed’s interest *is* piqued. Out of the other four, he’s the only one who actually believed Thom about the old woman in that horrid house they shared. The others played along, and their lightness at the situation made Thom realise that perhaps his belief in the supernatural was something he should keep to himself. At least, to an extent. But then Ed came to his room with a lighter and some cosmic ammunition one night and he’d learnt that Ed believed, too. In fact, Ed believed in things beyond Thom’s grasp. Thom had struggled to keep up with Ed’s meandering talk of conscious energies and the invisible world, holding smoke in his lungs till they’d hurt. Even if he didn’t understand everything Ed had spoken about—it had all smacked a bit of the *occult*, hadn’t it? —he was left with a sense of relief that he wasn’t alone in his beliefs.

“Andy’s a liar, though. To be fair. If he’s a liar now, I can’t imagine what he must’ve been like aged six.”

“No, no,” Thom assures. They pass a sign telling them how far Cornwall is, and a pleasant and very old wonder prickles inside his chest. “I believe him. I never saw them myself, but I heard them.”

Ed wants details. And because it’s Ed, and Ed believes in ghosts, he tells him the truth without either ornamenting or, conversely, downplaying it.

One night, around two in the morning, they were all cleaning their teeth in a suite that was supposed to be *especially* haunted. They’d gotten in very late during the off-season, and the few other occupants were fast asleep. The place felt dead and the silence had teeth. Thom had been groggy from the car ride, and had wanted nothing more than to crawl into bed. But he had found himself being loud and belligerent, and Andy had followed his lead. He thinks now they wanted to pretend they didn’t hear the silence.

“You can hear silence sometimes, you know,” says Thom.

“Yes,” agrees Ed. “You can.”

“And then, the moment our mum had us quieted down, the silence came back and there was this *knocking,*” Thom explains. “Mum turned on us, saying, ‘That’s the management!’ She was mad, saying that someone had complained at us jumping on the beds and laughing, she saw this coming, we were never allowed to stay up this late again, blah blah blah…”

But it wasn’t the sleepy-eyed manager who’d been none-too-pleased at being woken to let them in an hour prior. It wasn’t *anyone.*

Thom and Andy had peeked out into the empty hallway from behind their mother. Andy clutched at the safe, floral fabric of Mum’s dressing gown with wide eyes.

And he pointed, very insistently, at thin air.

Their mother huffed and ushered them back inside.

“He saw something we couldn’t. I know he did, because he was scared shitless, Ed. He had to sleep in my bed. And then there was the *other* time.”
It was a few years later. They’d checked into the same suite. The day had been spent playing in the sea and eating ice lollies, and when they returned to the hotel they passed out immediately.

“But I woke up, in the middle of the night. Andy was already awake, with his covers all gathered up around him. And I heard what had woke me. A banging.”

It was loud, and coming from somewhere down the hall. It grew closer and closer till it stopped at their door; it paused for maybe thirty endless seconds. And then it moved on.

“It just kept going?” Ed’s knuckles are tight on the steering wheel now.

“Yeah. It just went on with the loud banging, down to the other end of the hall. And disappeared.”

“Fuck, man.”

“I know! It was like in that old film, The Haunting. It was exactly like that. We made a pact to stay awake together till dawn. And we did. Mum and dad couldn’t understand why we were so tired the next day.”

After an endless parade of farmland, they reach the Jamaica Inn just as the sun is setting. A large wooden sign bears the visage of an indifferently (yet garishly) painted, angry-looking pirate lit from below. A parrot sits goofily on his shoulder, cutting his menace. Ed is positively delighted.

“You didn’t say anything about pirates!”

“Oh, yeah, there were smugglers who came through here a long time ago. This thing’s been here since the eighteenth century.”

Ed gasps. “Pirate ghosts.”

“Maybe. And I haven’t even told you about the best part yet!”

They get a few drinks in them before Thom reveals the Best Part. Ed is enjoying himself immensely. It’s not in the way Thom had intended—his boyhood memories contain nothing of lager and gossip about Colin’s underwhelming sex life—but so long as Ed’s having a good time, and isn’t bored, Thom is satisfied.

The pub is smaller than Thom remembers it, though he’d only glimpsed it in passing as a child. Everything in the bar is made of wood so old and stained it appears black in the dim light, and the grubbiness of the threadbare red carpet covering most of the creaky, sloping floor is best not examined too closely. They sit by the fireplace, and Ed makes friends with a group of old, bearded men who look like sailors out of a children’s book. They’ve even got pipes.

It’s nine PM by the time they are ambling towards the hotel’s small “museum,” and a wiry woman is busy locking up its door. Thom runs forward.

“Wait! Wait, please!”

After an exchange of a small admission fee and some charm from Ed, they’re let into the cramped room.

Thom can’t keep himself from grinning; it’s exactly the same. It’s even got the same stale, mouldy
smell. Like ancient books, if maybe the leather of the covers had been cured with the fur left intact. He looks over at Ed, and grins even wider at finding him speechless.

The room is inhabited, wall-to-wall and floor-to-ceiling, by a menagerie of small, motionless creatures. Glass-faced dioramas depict an array of scenes: to Thom’s left is a tea party. Above it, a classroom. Ed is peering into a wedding ceremony.

“Are these real?”

Thom joins his side and peeks into the box of kittens.

“I mean, yeah. This mad old taxidermist made them, ages ago. In his spare time. All of this used to be in Sussex, actually. That’s where me and Andy first saw it, before they moved it here. I thought about coming down from uni once or twice to see them, but never did. It seemed a waste of money to get a room unless I brought a girl, and I wasn’t sure they’d find the place, you know, sexy. Not sure where the displays were before that. But they’re really old, like from the eighteen-hundreds.”

Ed bends to look closer at the wedding scene.

A feline bride and groom stand side-by-side before an equally as furry officiator. Bridesmaids and groomsmen look on, dressed similarly in lace dresses and smart suits.

“Creepy.”

Thom bites at his cheek. “Is it?”

“Well, where’d he get all the fucking kittens?”

“…I don’t know. I never actually thought about that before. It never seemed creepy to me at all. It was always more of, just… Beatrix Potter come to life. Well, not life, exactly, but. You know what I mean.” He pauses, staring fondly into the glass eyes of a bespectacled kitten. “I thought they were the coolest.”

Ed obviously isn’t getting it. Oh well. Michael would understand. Would he? Thom conjures up an alternate reality in which Michael is here with him. Just the two of them. His thoughts stray to what might happen after viewing the collection, alone together late at night at a hotel halfway between civilisations…well. He has to put a quick end to that train of thought.

“My god,” says Ed. He’s wandered over to the biggest display in the room: The Death and Burial of Cock Robin. Thom remembers the title well. He’s always liked it. He’s always thought of writing a song around those words. Or photographing the scene and putting it on an album cover. Or something.

Birds of all colours and sizes are perched upon branches, their focus fixed intently upon an owl who stands over a collection of small and fragile bones. A tiny shovel is clutched in its talon, while several feathered mourners sport glass tear drops. These animals do not wear clothes like the kittens, which somehow makes them less friendly. There’s a feral, ancient grace to the scene that none of the other twee dioramas seem to evince. The birds are beautiful—it’s all beautiful—but this display always intimidated Thom.

He finds himself thinking of liminal spaces again.
“You can’t tell me this isn’t creepy,” Ed whispers.

“Okay, yeah. Fair enough.”

They look into the frozen lives of several more animals. A group of toads play happily on swings and see-saws. Two teams of guinea pigs stand poised on a cricket field. Eighteen red squirrels are waited on at an exclusive club. A rowdy gang of rats gamble and brawl. A rabbit copies its classmate’s work.

Thom would like to stay longer, but the woman standing outside the little museum is jingling her ring of keys and beginning to look testy. He and Ed and rush out, once again thanking her enthusiastically. She’s clearly over Ed’s charisma and wants to clock out. Thom smirks when Ed’s compliment upon a very garish necklace falls flat.

“Goodnight, boys.”

Thom’s already out the main doors when he realises Ed isn’t beside him. He walks back into the lobby and finds him negotiating with a man at the front desk. There’s a lot of nodding and smiling, and then the man disappears into a back room.

“What’s up?”

“I told him to give me his most haunted suite.”

“What? We can’t—”

“Sure we can. What’s the use in being rockstars if we can’t drop a couple hundred pounds on a creepy old hotel room in the middle of nowhere?”

Thom smiles.

Like the pub, the old suite is much smaller than Thom remembers. The two twin beds that he and Andy had laid awake in are gone, a double in its place. Ed hurls himself onto the king at the opposite end of the room and spreads out luxuriously.

“Ahhh.”

Thom laughs. “These mattresses are shit, Ed. This isn’t exactly a five-star place.”

“Hey, we’ve got two months on a tourbus ahead of us. Let no mattress go unappreciated.”

They talk and giggle stupidly well into the night. Ed eventually becomes unresponsive, and Thom sighs when the snoring starts up.

He has trouble falling asleep. He’s aware that he’s listening very intently to the dark, waiting for a bump in the night.

He almost doesn’t believe his ears when he hears something scrape against the other side of the wall his bed is butted up against. Thom catches his breath, ears straining. There—a muted shuffle and a creak, further down the wall, near the door to their room. The hallway!

“ED!” He’s not sure if he should whisper or scream, so he settles on a forceful croak.
“HUHWHA—” Ed sits up in bed, arms flailing. “I’m up, tell Tim t’ fuck off for ‘nother five…oh.”

He looks around, obviously trying to place where he is. Thom waves at him through the semi-darkness, and points to the front door.

“Wha’s the matter? Is sumthin’ the matter?” Ed’s not quite present yet. “I was sleeping.”

“There’s something out there in the hallway,” Thom hisses. “Listen.”

They listen. All is silent. Thom curls up tighter under his blanket. Of course if there’s a ghost it’s not going to do a song-and-dance now that Ed’s awake. It’s waiting for Ed to drop back off and will continue with Thom at that point. Obviously.

Suddenly a light goes on and Thom startles, but it’s just Ed, swinging his legs off the bed and crouching to dig through his backpack.

Thom sits up to watch, and when Ed stands back up Thom sees he has an engraved glass saltshaker in his hand. Ed unscrews the lid off the jar as he crosses over to the door, and he then pours the entirety of the salt in a line across the threshold.

“Did you steal a saltshaker from the pub?”

“Oh, you know. You said the place was haunted. Figured I’d be prepared. Salt is protection against spirits. Everyone knows that.”

Thom didn’t know that.

He blinks at Ed’s reasonable tone. “Ed…are you a bloody witch?”

“Don’t be daft, Thom.” Ed crawls back under his covers.

“Okay.” Thom thumps back onto the bed. “Ed?”

“Yeah?”

“Can I kip with you?”

“Sure, Thom. C’mon.” There’s no mockery in Ed’s voice.

Thom scurries from his bed and leaps onto the mattress next to Ed. He burrows down under the blanket. The light switches off.

“Hey Ed? Thanks for coming along. And, you know, believing me. I really did hear something.”

“I believe you.” Somehow Ed’s already drifting off again. His voice is going gruff and faded. “Maybe it remembers you. Time’s different for ghosts, I’d think.”

Thom shivers at that, but now that there’s salt across the doorway protecting them and he’s safe next to Ed—Ed, who took the side closest to the doorway, he notes—it’s rather a delicious shiver.

“Ed ain’t afraid of no ghosts.”
“Shut up, Thom. Go to sleep.”

He tries, and even though he feels secure, it takes his eyelids over an hour to feel heavy and sticky, old words drifting through his head and pulling him into dreaming:

All the birds of the air
fell a-sighing and a-sobbing,
when they heard the bell toll
for poor Cock Robin

---

“I thought you wanted to watch a film.”

“Changed my mind. Is that a porno mag?” Thom has twisted around on the couch, his head dangling off the edge, hair brushing the carpet. His feet are kicking around dangerously close to Colin’s face.

“Get out of there,” grumps Colin, leaning down to swat away Thom’s questing hand as it tries to fish the magazine out from under the couch.

Thom makes himself go completely boneless and slides off the couch into a little heap at Colin’s feet.

“I’m bored.”

“I’m deeply unconcerned.”

“At least hand me my beer.” A hand shoots up from the gingery lump and gropes at Colin’s knee. Colin shouts; Thom knows he’s ticklish there.

“Can’t you just enjoy not having to do anything for once?”

“No. Haven’t you read the magazines? I’m a miserable, nihilistic git. The next great rock ’n roll suicide.”

Not for the first time, Colin curses the writers who pushed that article through. The Stud Brothers. Colin has committed that ridiculous moniker to memory, nestled it down into a wooden crate packed full of snakes and gunpowder. Melody Maker has done a number on Thom, one that he can’t seem to shake since it came out in March. Not that he ever shakes the cutting remarks easily, but Thom’s taken this one especially hard. How could he not?

"Difficult as it is to admit, especially for those of us who have met and liked Richey, we love our martyrs. And if Richey turns up alive and well, there will be some who will genuinely feel a little let
down. Not least the editors of the Sunday Times.

And if, God forbid, he doesn’t, then we’ll look for someone else.

There is clearly only one serious contender. Spindly, spiteful, wracked with self-loathing - and soon to be so before the eyes of millions. Another fiercely burning star, destined to go nova and implode."

The Stud Brothers, with half an eye on circulation figures, practically begging Thom to kill himself. Yes, if he ever crosses paths with Messrs. Stud Brothers. Oh yes. Even Phil has signed on to partake of that wholly righteous arse-beating.

In the here and now, very much so vibrating with life, Thom sits up to snag his bottle from the coffee table. He takes a swig, staring at Colin with slanting, measuring eyes, and Colin knows that Thom knows he’s waiting for Thom to say whatever it is he’s been dancing around since he came over.

“Coz, got a question for you. It’s weird.”

“Your questions generally are.”

“Hah-hah motherfucker.” Thom sets his beer down and, after a pause, removes his smoked purple sunglasses and places them aside as well. He scrubs his hands roughly through his bedraggled hair. Ah, this is it, then: the signal he’s ready to talk. As sure a sign of what’s to come as a dog turning three times before finally laying down.

“Okay, so here’s the thing. What’s it like? Ah, sex. With a man. Don’t you dare laugh at me.”

Colin quirks an eyebrow. “How the fuck should I know?”

“Oh, come off it. You’re…” Thom twirls a hand around, searching for a word.

“Worldly?”

“Slutty.”

“Into diversification. And straight.”

Thom barks out laughter. “Oh, come off it. We made out at that party! Barely six months ago, that was!”

“So what?” Colin huffs. “Thom, I’ll make out with anyone.”

Thom pouts, clearly flustered and embarrassed. “Oh, never fucking mind. Forget it.”

“Steady there, Ally Sheedy, remember you’re the one who dumped your purse on the couch.”

“I thought you could help! I thought you were—“

“—Slutty, yes, I’m well aware,” Colin throws his hands up. “I’m sorry! I’ve never slept with a man. You’re thinking of my brother. You do realise there’s two of us, we’re completely separate beings? There’s even a sister in the mix, and she’s not even in a band with you. We’re perplexing
like that.”

Thom sits up. “Oh, I should ask Jonny.”

“Wait wait wait. Rewind…why do you want to know?”

Thom looks shifty. “Diversification?”

Colin shakes his head. “No shit. Really?”

“Shocking, aren’t I?”

“Not really. You got an erection when I made out with you. I rather guessed then. You didn’t guess?”

“You fucking liar! I did not!” Thom is laughing, but Colin can see the red flush across his skin. “I was drunk. You were even more drunk. You’re full of shit.”

“And even wasted off my arse, I turned you bisexual. I’m feeling very powerful right now, Thom.”

“Bollocks. You wish, you great big numpty.” Thom tries to punch his leg in retaliation, but Colin pulls it out of reach.

“He, just because I am solely a lover of women doesn’t mean I didn’t take the job of snogging you seriously. Your ill-placed mockery is what led to it happening in the first place, if you care to remember. I’d have been disgraced had you not been turned on.”

“I’ve been solely a lover of women, too! That’s the problem, Coz. I’m completely lost here and it’s doing my head in!”

“It’s not rocket science, I’d think. It’s all just body parts. Tab A and, ah, Tab B. I mean, just…do what you’d…like? Done to you? You’re not an innocent. I’m sure you have an idea.”

Colin cannot believe they’re having this conversation. Why can’t Thom just go find some gay porn and crib notes, like any other normal man who has realised he’s got latent desires? Colin’s much too British to bear this level of explicit sexual honesty with any amount of extended seriousness. If he lets this continue, he’ll shortly crack under the pressure and say something that crosses the line past flippant, leaving Thom hurt and pissed-off. A topic change is in order.

“So I’m curious…”

Thom groans loudly and rolls up into a ball on the floor. “I know what you’re going to ask. You’re wondering who it is. If you’re not, start now, so that I’m not a liar. Go ahead, do it. Do it now.”

Colin kicks lightly at his side but plays along. “So who’s the bloke, then? Give it up.”

Thom peeks up at Colin from around the edge of his sleeve. He holds a basic, clean smile on his face, one that shines with the simple pleasure of having a crush. “I’d rather not say? Not quite yet. It’s still really new…I don’t even know what it is, Coz. If it’s going to turn out to be anything, really.”

“You like him a lot. You hope it turns out to be something,” Colin guesses.
Thom ducks his head shyly but sits back up and splays his palms: admission, acknowledgment, conceding a point. “I honestly don’t know. Pray for me, Coz.”

Colin chuckles. “My prayers would be with you, but they’re too busy getting wasted and making out with a bunch of younger, sexy prayers.”

Thom snorts and reaches for his beer, pushing those ridiculous sunglasses Michael gave him aside.

Colin feels a chill, a needle scratch down his spine that catches on the moment, stretching it long and taut. Oh.

He hears his voice as if it’s coming from outside himself. It’s like listening to a tape recording he has no recollection of making, “Thom? I wouldn’t ask Jonny.”

“Why?”

“I think…he wouldn’t be very nice about it,” Colin says, with modulated slowness.

“Yeahhh. You’re right. He’d have a field day. I really don’t want to go to your little brother for sex advice, anyway. Ugh!” Thom pulls a face and gets to his feet, stretches. “But actually, I have to get going? I’m expecting a phone call. Lost track of time.”

With some effort, Colin pulls himself together and lightly jokes, “You should get a mobile. All the cool kids are getting them. Like Tim Greaves.”

“Oh god,” Thom laughs. He’s already at the door, in a rush to leave. Still, he pauses. “But thanks, Coz. For letting me talk a bit about it. Um. And the beer.”

“Of course.”

“And the hard-on! I totally wanked when I got home from the party!” Thom slams the front door, and Colin can see him running down the front path through the window, cackling. Maybe he thought Colin might chase him.

Instead, Colin slowly walks to the coffee table. He stops; Thom’s forgotten his precious sunglasses in his hurry. Colin cocks his head and considers them as the scattershot pieces of his suspicions continue to topple like dominos into each other. If the premise is true, then the conclusion he’s considering must be true, as well.

Colin steps over to the telephone and quickly dials a number.

“Jonny, I need you to come over.”
- now, we're not SAYING Ed is a witch, but we'd just like to point out that he likes to go on at length in interviews about 'invisible energies' as he namedrops books on the occult. And there was that time he visited a South American witch-doctor for spiritual guidance. But, we're not saying he's pagan, just that the man is... *open to such ideas.*

- actually. Colin is the only member of Radiohead that has openly admitted he's bisexual. But this is our story, and in our fictional story he's straight.

- The Jamaica Inn exists, is supposedly quite haunted, and used to house Walter Potter's Museum of Curiosities... which Thom has stated he used to love to visit as a child. The collection was dismantled around 2003.

- The Death and Burial of Cock Robin
He chain-smokes as he waits, fretting. He knows he’s fretting. He should stop; he’s starting to fret over how he’s pointlessly fretting. But he’s feeling rather like the sleeve of ash about to fall off his lit cigarette, and the fretting is a distraction from that. Colin’s not entirely sure what he’s going to say once his brother gets here.

But when Jonny does, and when his eyes land on the coffee table, the look he shoots the innocuous sunglasses confirms every suspicion that’s been running through Colin’s head.

All right, then. He’s got some idea of how this is going to go.

“Thom’s seeing Michael. Isn’t he?”

Jonny’s eyes meet Colin’s; there’s a flicker of apprehension, and then it’s quickly paved over with disinterest.

“Yes. Well done. Surprised it took you this long to figure that one out.”

Colin settles himself onto the couch. “Um. Okay. Well. Listen, do you…do you want to sit down? I can put on the kettle, or—”

“Not really, no. What is your point, Colin?” Jonny crosses his arms over his chest. “Did you just want to gossip about Thom’s terrible decisions? That could’ve been done over the phone, and with someone else. Isn’t that Ed’s sole purpose?”

“So you don’t approve.”

Jonny rolls his eyes.

“Look, I know you don’t like Michael—”
Jonny makes to say something, but Colin raises a barricading hand.

“—and I am just trying to figure out why you’ve been acting so horrid lately. More than usual, I mean. I’m just—I’m just a bit over it, all right, and if it’s all been because of, well, this, then I’d rather you talked about it than continue to take it out on everyone around you.”

Jonny is silent. He stands in the middle of the living room, his arms still defensively crossed. His posture has turned slightly in on itself. He must see how Colin’s eyes are reading the emotional truth of his stance so he loosens his arms and slouches, shoving his hands down in his pockets as though good carriage deeply troubles him. His bored expression now pointedly suggests that nothing else does either, least of all anything Colin is saying.

“You’re always so very keen on making assumptions,” he observes eventually. “Does it make you feel clever?”

“Am I wrong, though?”

“I really don’t know what you think you know, but—”

Colin groans, rough and frustrated. “Oh, come on, Jonny! Come off it! Stop deflecting like a child!”

Jonny throws his hands in the air. “Fine. No. No, you’re not wrong. I don’t like him. I don’t like that he’s preying on Thom. There. Is that what you wanted to hear? Good. Can I go now?”

“Preying? Jonathan, it’s pretty clear to me that Thom is very much a willing participant in whatever it is they’ve got going. You said it yourself, it’s his decision. Just because you think it’s a bad decision doesn’t—”

“I don’t want to hear it.”

“Why? Because you don’t like Michael? I’m sorry, Jon, but Thom can date whomever he wants. And you know what?” Colin’s temper is rising. “I can date who I want. Just because you don’t like Michael, or you don’t like Rebecca—”

“Oh my god. You are so fucking thick.”

“Am I? Then please fucking educate me. You can’t pretend that nothing’s wrong and then expect me to guess at what isn’t wrong.”

Jonny just stares at him wrathfully.

“Okay. A bit of you still fancies him, then. Right? There, see? Not so thick. I didn’t forget. But I’ve got to be honest, I’d thought that ended years ago.”

“Yeah, well. You also thought Thom was straight. Your perceptions have pretty considerable limitations.”

“All right. Okay.” Colin takes in a deep breath, tries to ignore Jonny’s egging and calm himself. “So, I get that. I understand that this…this revelation of his has sparked up old feelings—”

“Old feelings? A, a… a ‘bit’ of me?”
Jonny’s face isn’t sarcastic anymore; it’s genuinely exasperated. Okay—Colin will admit to it—he’s a little lost. He’s not sure what to say, so he waits for Jonny to speak.

For a moment, he thinks Jonny is about to flee. Colin sees his foot start to swivel. But then Jonny straightens and faces Colin more fully, and as if flinging something dangerous away from himself—a scorpion, a grenade—he jerks his arms out towards Colin and hisses:

“I love him.”

The silence is strikingly loud.

Colin has gone numb. It takes him a few moments to say anything. And when he does, all he can manage is a dumbstruck, “Oh.”

“Yeah.”

“I thought…” What did he think? “I thought it was just a boyhood crush. You haven’t…mentioned anything about in practically a decade. And I thought…well, that Thom was strictly into girls, and that you’d…lost interest once you’d realised that.”

“Well, then I guess you were wrong on both counts, weren’t you?” Jonny sneers.

Silence befalls them once again. What else is there to say, really?

“Jonny…I’m so sorry.”

There’s a loud impact where Jonny’s foot kicks at the coffee table. Colin jumps.

“I don’t care!” Jonny yells. “Pity is fucking worthless, so save your precious breath!”

“It’s not pity, I just mean—”

“Shut the fuck up. Do you ever realise, the absolute drivel you spew—”

Colin snaps.

“No. You shut the fuck up, Jonathan. I’m trying to listen to you here. I’m trying to be your brother.”

Jonny’s bark of laughter is so forced it sounds animalistic. “You’re just—”

“Let me speak! I’m sorry, Jonathan. I deeply and sincerely am, and I don’t give a fuck if you don’t believe that right now. But you are not the first person on planet Earth to have their heart broken. And it doesn’t give you the right to shit on everyone else and drag them down to your frivolous level of misery.”

Jonny stares at Colin, a scornful frown the only indication that he’s still got plenty of ammunition left if given the space. Colin keeps on going before he can interject and shake Colin from what he needs to say.

Still, Jonny tries. “You dumb fuck. All I do is think about—“
“—about what you want and how unfair it all is? Yes, that’s bloody well obvious. You’re coming off like a child crying because someone else is playing with...with a toy they’ve sat on a shelf and never even taken out of the fucking package!”

Colin is on a roll now, and probably couldn’t contain himself if he tried. He continues, on his feet now, circling around his brother.

“He doesn’t belong to you, Jonathan, and his choices are his own. Thom seemed pretty well pleased with his current lot when he was over here earlier, I’ll have you know. Over the moon, even. He’s been better of late, goddamnit! Happier, more centered. Or haven’t you noticed in your rush to decree Thom a willful child that needs saving from himself, and even more so from the big bad wolf you’ve built Michael into? Do Thom’s needs and desires mean fuck all to you?”

“What do you know about—“

“—About what? Love? Apparently more than you, baby brother. Because that’s not any sort of love I’ve heard tell of.”

Jonny startles at that, with a sharp intake of breath.

“I’m sorry,” Colin reiterates, a little less volatile, already wondering if he has gone too far. But where’s the lie? He can only tell the truth as he knows it at this point. “But you need to stop.”

They stare at each other, breathing heavily—Colin more so—and both refusing to be the first to break eye contact.

Jonny is the first to calm himself, in any event. He steps forward. If he plans on abusing the coffee table again, Colin’s going to have to kick him out, he swears to god—it’s an antique.

But he’s not making a move to kick or smash up anything. His eyes still refuse to leave Colin’s, and it’s unnerving; Jonny is not one for sustained eye contact.

He bends. He gently collects Thom’s sunglasses. And then, without looking away from Colin, he snaps them cleanly in two at the bridge.

And then he’s walking away, and then he’s slamming the door.

And then he’s gone.

—

Thom’s hard, and Michael hasn’t even rung yet.

He’s going to, though. He said he’d call at 8:00 PM, Thom’s time. It’s 8:02.
Has he forgotten?

No, that’s silly. It’s not like he’s meant to call right on the dot. He’ll call.

But, fuck. Thom can’t wait any longer. He slips a hand past his waistband and, at the very least, tries not to go completely to town on himself.

It’s 8:05 when the phone rings.

Thom’s got the phone in one hand, and his cock in the other.

“Hi,” he says breathlessly. Sexily.

“Hullo mate. Listen, would you be up for a trip to the cinema on Thursday?”

Thom practically throws his penis across the room.

“Ed—wh—no."

“No?”


“Brilliant. Okay, so I thought we could see ‘Free Willy Two’. There’s a showing at—”

“Free Willy? What the fuck is that? What sort of cinema are you taking me to, O’Brien?”

“‘Free Willy Two’. It’s about this whale—”

“Okay, fine, yes. Whatever.”

“All right, so there’s a showing at seven, and one at ten-ten. I reckon ten is too late, though.”

“Either one, I don’t care.”

“Orrr we could do a matinee. There’s a noon showing and one at two forty-five. Is two forty-five too late for matinee pricing? When does matinee officially end? I never know.”

“Yes, that’s good, let’s do that.”

“So which time?”

“I don’t care, Ed! Whatever you want!”

“Hmm. Well, noon might be a little too early. Let’s call it two forty-five?”

“Fine. Fucking. Whatever.”

“Okay, cool. I’ll ring the others and let you know if that works for them.”

“Okay. Bye.”
Thom hangs up none-too-gently.

When the phone rings a minute later, he’s lost most of his erection. It’s disappointing. Still, he tries to make his voice go sexy again.

“Hello.”

“Hey, it’s me again. I forgot, Coz has a doctor’s appointment on Thursday. So unless we do a night showing—”

“Oh my god, I don’t care—”

“—so I was gonna suggest we move it to Saturday. Saturday probably works better for everyone anyway.”

“Fine, Ed. Yes. Good.”

“So I’ll call him and see what works, the times are the same as for Thursday—”

“Great, talk to you then. Wait. I can’t believe I’m asking this…but a whale? Is this that kid’s movie? I thought the whale escaped.”

“It did! That’s why it’s Free Willy Two. That’s where the drama comes in, I reckon.”

Jesus. “Bloody stupid whale, to get caught again. I’m going now. Goodbye.”

“Wait! So anyway, did you hear about Sheila?”

“For f— what? Who?”

“Sheila.”

“Who the fuck is Sheila.”

“Sheila! You know Sheila. That girl Stella’s always with. You met her at that party on New Year’s.”

“Ed, I have no idea who either of those people are.”

“Ahhh, come on! You’d remember Sheila! Amazing tits?”

“I really don’t give a—”

“—so get this. Tim says his mate Barry was down at the pub with Sheila and Stella the other night, and—okay, so let me just say there’s a ferret involved, Chris got one for Christmas from Angie, but Angie says it smells and she regrets ever buying it, but that comes in later. But anyway. So Stella was—”

Thom slams the phone down on its cradle.

When the phone rings a few seconds later—thank fuck he hung up on Ed when he did—Thom’s stiffy is entirely gone. Oh well. Nothing for it. Michael will surely be able to remedy that.
“Hi,” Thom sighs.

“Sorry, we got disconnected.”

Thom nearly breaks the phone’s cradle this time. His bedside table wobbles and his lip balm rolls away, falling down into the gap behind the table.

Then the motherfucking arse-titting thing immediately rings again.

“Ed, I do not give TWO. WATERY. SHITS.”

Silence on the other end. Then, a tentative query:

“…Thom?”


Thom laughs a little, despite himself. He should be terribly embarrassed, but he’s not. That’s nice, isn’t it? It’s nice not to worry so much around Michael anymore.

He’d intended for this to be one of those kinds of calls, obviously. But that’s not happening. Instead Thom complains. Michael laughs, and vents a little himself about small things like the water heater not functioning properly. They talk for hours, again.

Thom thinks that even in a world where Michael had never pushed him up against a wall, this would be enough.

--

The clouds are sketched afterthoughts across the blinding blue sky, and the surrounding woods are such a rich dark green they almost appear black in contrast.

It’s a gorgeous day in Dronten, Belgium, and Thom can’t actually find a single thing to complain about no matter how hard he tries. Sure, it’s a festival, but everything is clean and concise and catering has several veg options for lunch. The sound on their stage is as good as it gets for this sort of thing, and they have a private toilet, and even a little shaded area next to their dressing room plump with pillows that could only be described as a lounge.

And Thom is currently lounging.

He’s flopped back onto an oversized…beanie bag? Pillow? He’s not sure what it is, but he’s laying on it. The white canvas artfully stretched overhead is gently twitching in the light breeze, making
the shaded light shift and swim over Thom’s closed eyelids. The late-morning air slides fingers through his hair, caressing his scalp. He can hear the stop-start of a band soundchecking in the distance, the surrounding trees making identification impossible, reducing the clash of guitars and drum into a soothing oceanic rumble.

Life might be okay, at times like this. Life might be better than okay. Today’s honey, and warmth, and grace.

“Why is today such utter shit,” wails a distressed voice.

Thom raises his head and squints at Colin, who has come around the corner of their dressing-room-tent.

“What’s the matter, Cozzers?”

“Just everything, that’s all. I can’t find my camera, it’s just gone. Either I’ve lost it or someone’s stole it. And I left my toiletry bag at home…right on the kitchen table, a real rookie mistake, that.” Colin turns huge puppy-sad eyes on Thom. “And there’s something in the air here I’m allergic to. My sinuses are in agony.”

“You can use my bath stuff.”

“No, it smells bad.”

“Well fuck you, too. It does not smell bad.”

“It’s weird and musky. Maybe your aim is to smell like a pony languishing in an August rainstorm, but I’ll pass on sharing that adventure with you, thank you all the same.”

Thom sits up. “I don’t…a pony?…you’re just…”

Colin waves off his sputterings and starts to stalk away, heading towards the maze of the surrounding artist tents. “Don’t worry about it, Thom. I’ll handle it.”

Thom blinks, once, twice. Then he yells at Colin’s retreating back, “I wasn’t worrying about it, you wanker!”

Jesus. What the hell has gotten into Coz? He’s been in a mood of late and it goes beyond him just having a bad day. Thom flops back down onto his oversized pillow-thingy. There’s a lump now, one that wasn’t there before. He wriggles around, trying to get comfortable and recapture the blissful zen of earlier. A fly lands on his cheek, and he bats it away, repulsed. Gross.

He focuses on the semi-distant rush of the breeze through the treetops surrounding the festival grounds. Neil Young is playing tonight. That’ll be wicked. Tim must have pulled some strings to get them artist’s VIP access and tents today even though they’re scheduled for tomorrow. Tim’s the best.

The fly returns, worrying at Thom’s ear. He flaps a hand at it, annoyed. Wait, aren’t flies attracted to scents?

Thom does not smell like a wet horse. His shampoo and soap are posh, too! They contain oud, and maybe if Colin had some taste—
“Where’s my brother? Thom, wake up. Thom!”

He struggles up out of his squishy mess of a pillow. “I am awake. Calm the fuck down, Jonny.”

“Well?” Jonny just gazes down at Thom like he’s a badly-behaved servant or something. Like Thom didn’t polish the silver correctly.

“Hello to you, too. He went thatta-way.” Thom jerks his head in the direction Colin has vanished.

“You know, you’re the one who wanted to come here today. I would have preferred to stay in my hotel room or explore the town. But you were so pushy and now here you are, sleeping the day away. That’s really quite rude, Thom.”

Jonny slinks away in the opposite direction of the path Colin had taken.

“I’m not sleeping the bloody day away, I was relaxing and anyway, you didn’t have to come if you didn’t want to! And Colin went the other way, you idiot!”

Not turning around, Jonny flips him a wholly-unimpressed bird. Thom’s not sure how he does it, it probably shouldn’t be possible, but that is definitely a dismissive middle finger.

Thom sits there, fuming. Another band starts to soundcheck, from a closer stage.

Ugh, it’s Hole.

He shoves at the stupid pillow behind him. What is the point of these? Why couldn’t they have gotten simple lounge chairs? Does everything always have to be so bloody pretentious? Form follows function. Surely one of the assholes that designed these tents went to art school. They should fucking know better. Who knows what kind of creepy crawlies are burrowing into all this fabric. There could be an entire nest of millipedes in Thom’s pillow, for all he knows.

Fucking Greenwoods. Why are they so…so…

Did he bring sun cream? That sun is going to be brutal. Maybe he can find some weed somewhere. Ugh. But where? They’re in the middle of the stupid woods, the only way he’s going to find any is if he follows his nose around the crowds and talks to strangers.

Infuriating. That’s what the Greenwoods are.

“My god, a day like today, it really makes you appreciate life, you know? It’s perfect out here.” Tim wanders up, his hands shoved in his pockets. He leans back on his heels and smiles up at the sky. “You sometimes forget the sky can look like that.”

“Oh, piss off, Tim. I’m so fucking tired of doing music festivals. They’re always utter shit, and I spend the whole time corralled backstage in a fancy pen like…like a horse. I hate this, it’s doing my head in. I’m not a horse and I don’t smell like one, either!”

Thom stomps towards the entrance of their tent. There’s nothing for it; the only refuge he’s going to find in this manufactured, fun-factory abattoir is to hide away in the oh-so-thoughtfully provided chicken coop of a tent. He passes Tim, who has deflated into a glum little puddle.
As the tent-flap slaps shut behind him, he hears Tim’s voice, beneath the grind of Hole’s sound-check.

“I’m sorry,” he says, sad and small. “I thought it’d be nice.”

—

“Oh dear, it’s going to rain on us today. Mark my words.”

The clouds are hanging low, sponging the cityscape’s colour away and leaving behind a dull monotone. Colin presses his nose to the window, peering down at the sidewalk a couple floors below him. His breath on the glass is the same hue as the sky.

Ed grunts in response behind him, disinterested.

“Yeah, I’m talking about the weather. It’s not like you’re saying anything so very interesting either, you blackguard.”

Silence. The flick of a magazine page.

“Did you know there are decidedly more women than men in Helsinki? You’d think that’d mean something when it comes to the law of averages. Here we are, rockstars by several people’s accounting, and yet somehow it’s not going to matter. I’ll fall asleep tonight watching you drool into your pillow, and not in some Nordic goddess’s bed.”

Ed snorts and mutters, “You and your brother, man. I wish I had something juicy on Phil, so I could blackmail him into a sharing a room with me.”

“What?” Colin frowns, turning away from the window. The curtain falls shut, cutting the room off from the meager daylight. Drab, half-hearted shadows settle over the beds, their luggage. “What about me and Jonathan?”

“Always nagging like little bitches.”

“So you’ve said, multiple times,” replies Colin, not offended in the least. “For years now.”

“Hmmmm. I suppose it was too much to hope that maybe you’d have put some effort in over those years?”

“That’s a lesson in futility for you, I’m afraid. A just universe wouldn’t tolerate my existence.”

“You enjoy suffering. You try too hard. That’s why they won’t sleep with you.”

“To live is to suffer, to survive is to find some meaning in the suffering. Nietzsche understands me.”

“Nietzsche was a little bitch, too. I’m trying to read here, let me be.”

Colin stretches out on his narrow bed. At least Helsinki hasn’t gifted them the surprise of a shared
bed; there’s always that lady-or-the-tiger thrill when they open a hotel-room door for the first time, not knowing what they’ll find. Asking for two single beds is never a promise that’s what you’ll receive.

More than money or platitudes or gold disks, Colin dreams of someday reaching a level of success where they can afford to have separate hotel rooms. Just once he’d like to forgo needing to sneak back to the room for a mid-morning bathroom wank, nervous and rushed the entire time over the thought that a roommate will return. The luxury of being able to starfish out on a bed, with the telly pay-per-view porn on and his cock shamelessly out, is breathtaking.

Colin stares at the ceiling. Ed continues to flip through his magazine.

“Would you like to go get some food?”

“No. Shut up.”

Silence fills the room.

“I don’t see why we’re even here, what’s the point of these shows? We’re going to be in the States in little over a week. Why couldn’t we have just had the whole month off? We’re going to be in the States forever.”

“Coz…”

“It’s true, though.”

Ed sighs, long and hard and put-upon, but he tosses aside his magazine, accepting defeat.

“Yes, it is,” he concedes. “But what I want to know is, why are you being so fussy about heading back out with R.E.M.? You’ve been weird when it comes up—don’t try to deny it! I don’t understand why, it was a blast. This is good, Coz.”

There’s that sucking, drain-hole feeling around the edges again, the one Colin has whenever he thinks about the upcoming support leg of their tour. He’s been trying to ignore how the days are ticking away, distance himself from that part of his brain, stay away from the scene of the crime and, you know, work up various alibis. He’s been failing completely. It’s always scratching to be let in, little raspberry-soft cat feet studded with needled claws.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, everything is fine.”

“Bollocks.”

Colin weighs the whole messy situation and decides there’s nothing for it. This has proven beyond his abilities to parse and Ed has a way of putting things in perspective. Often addled, but definitely in a perspective. Maybe he’ll be able to infer things from the facts that Colin hasn’t. Mostly, though, Colin wants him to weigh down the flapping corners of his thoughts.

“Thom is fucking around with Michael Stipe.”

Ed doesn’t say anything immediately so Colin glances over at the other bed. Ed’s looking at him, his lips parted with amusement. This is good gossip. The best gossip. His brows rise in encouragement, avid for more dirt.
Colin sits up, fretful. “I just… I just have a bad feeling about it. That’s all. Thom’s so… you know. Hero worship’s a bad place to base a relationship on. Which is what I think Thom may be after.”

“Oh, Thom’s a big boy, he’ll manage,” counters Ed, dismissive. “But what about Jonny?”

Colin whips his head up. “What?”

“Well, does Jonny know? I wouldn’t want to be the one to tell him, but I guess it’s better if he’s not blind-sided, right?”

Maybe if he repeats himself: “What?”


Colin is buzzing and bewildered. “I thought it was a teenaged crush, okay!”

“Whoaaaa.” Now Ed’s sitting up as well, mirroring Colin from the edge of his bed. “So that’s why you two have been at each other’s necks since Tel Aviv? I thought you were just having a wobbly over Jonny getting fucked-up on dodgy pills.”

“One could only dream that cock-up was the worst of it, but no, it’s—”

“—Wait. I don’t even want to know,” Ed cuts Colin off. “But I’ll ask this: are you worried because you actually think Thom’s at risk of… whatever… getting his delicate little heart bruised, maybe… or are you just looking out for your brother’s best interests?”

“I don’t know! Both, I suppose.”

Ed chews at the inside of his cheek, looking thoughtful.

Colin tries to explain. “Jonny needs—”

“—Jonny has needed to deal with his shit for years. So now his hand’s been forced, and you know what?” Ed throws his arms wide, hands spread. “Good! The status quo is not in his best interest. You have to know that, right?”

“I know…”

“Yeah, you know. Me? I’m just happy I finally know why he’s been dancing around on cloven hooves, clicking his little tail. I’m going to have fun with this.”

“Don’t you dare!”

“He’d deserve it. He’s been terrible. Beyond his usual.” Ed is grinning deviously. Colin knows he should downplay it for fear Ed might go after the idea like a bull.

But that would assume he has the energy to put up a front. “Oh god. The worst animus you could imagine, Ed. But please don’t. I know he’s been a…”

“…say it.”
Colin gives a tired chuckle and hides his face in his hands. “…a nagging little bitch.”

Ed’s laughing now and Colin briefly joins in, albeit with less enthusiasm. He laughs from relief more than from any humour to be found in the situation. At least he’s not carrying this knowledge alone now.

Once Ed calms down (and has promised that he won’t pick at Jonny’s newly-exposed underbelly) he muses, “I’m not even surprised it took him this long to suss out he might like both sides. Remember how he never even considered that a band was a good way to pull? All that whinging that he couldn’t meet girls until we were like, Look around you, Thom! There’s so many fucking girls here! He’s not very self-aware in that area, you know that.”

The memory of Thom looking out at the tiny audience, eyes wide with the realisation that a dozen girls were all staring at him still makes Colin smile. Oh my god, how do I make the most of this, he had whispered, shy and frozen, as if he might startle them off and send them flocking away through the club’s door.

“He isn’t like you, intellectualising every single bloody thing,” continues Ed, flapping a hand dismissively. “He just feels whatever it is he feels and throws himself at it, head first. God help us all.”

“But that’s why I don’t necessarily feel good about this whole thing for Thom’s sake. I don’t think this is a game for Thom.”

“And what, you just assume it is for Michael? Don’t talk tosh. But fuck, Coz—Thom’s a grown man despite his efforts to prove otherwise at times, and if he wants to be led around by his cock, that’s his prerogative, you know?”

“I don’t assume anything right now. I know…I know,” Colin amends, when Ed looks at him skeptically. “I’m being an utter hypocrite. I told Jonny he was being a child, making Michael out to be some sort of fairy-tale witch who wants to pop Thom into his oven. Jonny has been acting out of jealousy and self-preservation, I’d imagine. It’s hard to snuff out a torch you’ve been carrying that long. But look at me here, talking like I am wondering the very same. But no, it’s not the same! I don’t actually think Michael’s a dirty old man.”

“Yes, he is, but that’s beside the point.”

“Thom’s twenty-six! Michael’s only in his mid thirties! He patently cannot be a dirty old man. Come off it.”

“Coozie, you can be a dirty-old-whatever at the tender age of sixteen. It’s a mindset. And Michael Stipe is definitely a dirty old slapper. He’s also a good guy. One doesn’t preclude the other. As for Jonny…well, Jonny’s always been possessive since Thom’s gap year, and…and hold on…how did you not notice the way he’d act whenever Thom brought girls around? It was so bloody obvious!”

“I’m just ill-disposed,” Colin quibbles. He ignores Ed’s question. So what if Ed noticed and he didn’t? What does he want, a bloody trophy for being tall, handsome and perceptive? Show-off.

He returns to the more pressing topic at hand, saying, “Thom might be looking for something that’s not there. Caught up in the newness and…and blind to reality, or something. I think what I’m really concerned with is what this could potentially do to the band. It’s nothing to do with Michael,
really. I’m not happy with the man, after those rubbish pills he gave them, but I don’t think he’s bad news like Jonny is convinced of. I just think…this could blow up into something awful.”

“You need to stop trying to manage people’s lives, Coz. Thom’s very perceptive of bullshit.”

“I know he is! But he’s not on equal footing with Michael. He’s a fun, Ed. We all of us have our blind spots.” He knows he’s being defensive, trying to clarify things that don’t need said. “I just think I need…to keep my eyes open. That’s all.”

“I am sure Michael will find you a terrifying foe, should he step one foot wrong,” Ed jokes, retrieving his magazine as he reclines back on the bed once more.

“I do think you’re right,” agrees Colin, serious and pensive.

Rain starts to patter against the windowpane.

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“I’m beginning to think Jonny hates me.”

“That seems unlikely.”

“He’s being awful. I mean, he’s always been snotty, always been sarcastic. It was funny, you know? But, fuck. These past few festivals. He was a nightmare. I mean, just flat out cruel. I bought these shoes in Belgium, and he told me I had the worst taste of anyone he’d ever met. And that I looked like Pinocchio in them.”

Michael snorts. “Did you?”

“No!”

“Were they clogs?”

Thom eyes the chunky, wooden-soled suede shoes sitting sadly in the corner of his room. “…no.”

“He was probably just having a bad day.”

“But it wasn’t just that!” Thom complains. “And it wasn’t just one day! It’s every day now, and it’s worse stuff. Like him telling me I’m useless on piano. And that I’m embarrassing. And laughing when this waiter forgot to take my order. I know that one doesn’t sound terrible, but it was, and…I dunno, just, all sorts of things! Snapping at Tim for no reason, telling Colin he should quit and teach secondary school English so he’s got an audience who are legally obligated to listen to him. And when he’s not being mean, he’s just ignoring us.”
“So it’s not just you. He’s treating everyone like this.”

“I…well, yeah. He is. You’re right. But it…it feels like I’m getting the brunt of it. Me and, well, Colin. And…well.” Thom’s words go clumsy with sudden guilt. Isn’t he always the one telling the others not to let word of in-fighting travel beyond the band?

“Well, then it sounds like he’s just an asshole.”

Thom frowns, feeling instantly and oddly uneasy. “He’s not, though.”

“Well, from everything you’ve just told me—”

“But he’s—he’s not normally like this. It’s just. It’s what he’s…become, lately. And I don’t understand it. And it’s wearing me out, doing my head in.”

“Then call him out on it.” Michael’s voice is even and confident over the line. “Or be an asshole back. Or just ignore him.”

Thom chews at his lip. “I think I’m…just going to keep on trying to be nice to him.”

"Why should you? If he keeps treating you that way in return?"

Okay. Michael’s got a point.

“That’s true.”

“Well, then, there you go.”

But Michael doesn’t know Jonny. Jonny’s had a pretentious, sharp attitude since the moment he learned to speak up for himself—though Thom thinks it was always there, he just kept his wee adolescent snark to himself before he was brave enough to speak up—but it has always been benign, for all of its clever bite. When Jonny teases you, you’re cozy and on the inside of things. It’s not meant to cut you down; it’s meant to make you feel like you’re standing together against the absurdity of life, and your place within it. Jonny, he wants to explain to Michael, directs as much abuse toward himself as he does at anyone else, maybe more, because he thinks he’s just as silly as anyone he mocks. Thom wants to explain that there’s been days when the only thing that’s saved him from a collapse or breakdown wasn’t kind words or offered solutions…it’s been Jonny whispering scathing commentary into his ear, or chiding him over his attitude. One raised eyebrow and a knowingly drawled Seriously? Thom, do get a grip, and it’s not just Thom against the world, it’s Thom and Jonny, and suddenly he can breath again, if only so that he can laugh with Jonny at his own ridiculousness.

Or at least that’s what it’d always been like. Until this year. This summer, really. Thom doesn’t want Jonny to be nice, precisely. He just wants to feel like he’s still in on a grand secret with Jonny, that’s all.

“But, I mean—like I said. This isn’t him. I don’t want you to get the wrong idea. He’s my best—my, er. Mate.”

“You’re telling me he’s calling you useless and stupid. And I’m supposed to get the right idea?”

“No, that’s not—” Thom’s sighs, closes his eyes. This isn’t going the way he’d intended. He’s not
really sure what he’d intended. “I don’t—I don’t really want to talk about it anymore. If that’s okay.”

“Of course it’s okay. But Thom?”

“Yeah?”

“You shouldn’t let anyone treat you like you’re not their equal.”

---

Colin spends at least two very long minutes fumbling with the groceries and the key card.

When he finally pushes into their rooms, it’s to find Jonny sprawled long-legged across the couch.

“Oh, don’t mind me,” says Colin, struggling towards the kitchen. “Don’t mind your big brother, who has clearly been at the door a millennia. Don’t think to open the door, heaven’s no. And don’t think to lighten your dear brother’s load, no, no, surely not.”

But Jonny is making a point to play deaf to Colin’s words. He’s twisting the phone cord between his fingers, laughing forced and strange.

“Yes, tomorrow is our last festival. Musikfestwochen. We’re in Switzerland. We get a week off and then we’ll be supporting R.E.M. for more tour dates. Yes, it’s brilliant. Yes, they’ve been lovely to us to far.”

Oh, god, it’s that interviewer with that magazine; Colin had completely forgotten. It’s a good thing Jonny was here to answer the call.

“Yes, this album’s been a breath of fresh air, if I’m to be honest,” he says. “I found the first one terribly lacking.”

His brother is doing something odd to his voice. He’s making it higher, more precious-sounding. Colin raises an eyebrow, an ingrained reflex, but goes about his business. Bugger, did he remember cucumbers for the salad? He can’t remember.

They’ve been eating out too much and Colin’s insides have been paying the price. He settles the grocery bags down upon the kitchen counter loudly, hoping it gnaws a bit at Jonny’s conscience. Switzerland has found Radiohead in a shared apartment-style rental somehow, so he’s going to cook tonight. He’ll be making chicken parmigiana. It’ll be nice. Maybe it’ll smooth things over with Jonny a bit. He’ll exchange the chicken with some aubergine for Thom; he’s not been eating as well as he should, either.

“…yes, I just thought it needed to be a bit more abstruse, a bit more of an exploration of the
ideological codes of tragedy, I went to Cambridge, you know, and I…”

Jonny’s words go sharp and buzzing in Colin’s ears. Bits and pieces of them float in and out of his perception as he unpacks groceries onto the counter. The lettuce is a bit wilted for his tastes, but needs must. The block of parmesan he found is lovely though, and that’s the important thing…

“…terribly plebeian, just disgustingly uninspired, and me! Me, in a pop outfit… I don’t mind telling you, I was very loathe to join…”

Colin’s fingers fist around the box of Hobnobs he bought as a last-minute guilty pleasure.

“…but, you know, I felt obligated to supervise them, if you will, the way a long-suffering foster mother or an underpaid social worker might, and you know, they turned it around—not on their own, no! Hah-hah, dear me, no, I’m afraid that was my doing. “You saved the entire band,” Thom is always telling me. Hmm? Yes, I often suggested renaming it early on, but then all the children who’ve bought Radiohead tshirts would get fussy. To ‘The Colin Greenwood Neoclassical Explosion.’ I thought it cheeky.”

The Hobnobs go flying.

A package of bread crumbs goes flying.

Tomatoes go flying.

Colin launches himself at Jonny. He is aware, in his periphery, of Ed opening the bathroom door, of his guileless grin twisting into something horrified as he drops the magazine he’d been reading on the loo. Before Colin is able to wrap his fingers around his brother’s throat, there are strong arms tugging at his waist.

“Whoa-whoa-whoa!”

“Let go of me!”

Jonny is finally looking at Colin now, smiling placidly as he tsks into the receiver. “Oh, never you mind, those are just the prostitutes I ordered. They’re fighting over what order they get me, bless.”

“I’ll kill you!” Colin grabs a wayward tomato as Ed drags him across the carpet and flings it wildly; it misses its target entirely and smashes into the framed Le Mépris poster to the left of Jonny. Red drips down Brigitte Bardot’s cheek. Jonny snorts.

Ed is lugging Colin towards the front door. And then he’s lifting him and Colin’s feet are treading air. Ed is carrying him—literally carrying him. The absolute indignity!

“Well, I have certain needs,” Jonny’s voice drifts through the apartment to Colin. He secures a hand around the edge of the door and tries to dig his fingers into the wood. Ed grunts and tries to shift Colin under one arm so he can pry his hand away from the door jamb.

“…and they’re very particular needs, mind. Your average woman on the street, for whatever rubbish reasons, seems disinclined to indulge me, so I’ve found it expedient to employ working girls instead of wasting my time on the unadventurous.”

Ed squeezes Colin’s grasping fingers hard and Colin lets go of the door with a dismayed bleat. Ed
immediately bundles them out onto the landing.

He can still faintly hear Jonny saying *vile and patently untrue* things into the telephone.

“Colin—Coz, you need to—”

Colin gets a good swing in. A great, satisfying wallop to the side of Ed’s head.

“*OW! Fuck, Coz!*”

“*Put me down!*”

“Not—*ow!*—happening!”

“He has to die.”

“Let’s—*fuck*, did you just *scratch* me? *Fucking hell*—how ‘bout that pub we saw ‘round the corner? Why don’t we—”

“He cannot be allowed to live any further.”

“Okay, well, why don’t you tell me all about it over a pint?”

It’s not like Colin, being carried down the stairs like a rejected bride, has any say in the matter. Fine. He’ll drink the pint Ed thumps down in front of him, but he’s not going to enjoy it.

One pint turns into three, which then turn into a series of scathingly-grasped gimlets.

“—and *then* he said, do you know what he said, *do you know what he fucking said*, Edward?”

“What did he say.”

“He said that to impress women I’ve a habit of regurgitating whatever article I’ve been reading on a topic, even if I’ve just read it the *once*, and then I carry on like I’m a professor in the subject, boring them to death. And ignoring anything they have to say on the matter! I have *never!*”

Ed hums. “Well. Except for all the times you have.”

Colin drunkenly gasps. “*How dare you!*”

Before he knows it, he’s on Ed again, knocking them both off their barstools.

“*Hey!*”

“And I do NOT speak in run-on sentences that long!”

“Coz—*stop it!*”

“I ADORE GRAMMAR.”

“*Ow—*”
“WITHOUT GRAMMAR WE’RE…..”

“—please—”

“…..AMERICAN!”

A loud voice cuts in and bellows:

“HEY!”

Ed and Colin freeze.

“I’m not having that in my bar,” gruffs the barman, his large hands splayed and solid on the counter. “Kindly pay your tab and leave.”

Ed turns to Colin gingerly.

“Hey, could you spot me?”

Colin draws back a fist.

—

They sit on a curb, passing a joint back and forth. Colin watches the smoke drift upwards and squints into the sky.

“There’s more and more light pollution these days, have you noticed? I can’t make out any constellations. There are maybe…five stars.”

Ed tilts his head back.

“No, look at ‘em all! You can see plenty.” He gestures upwards with the stubby joint.

Colin glances up at the shop awning he’s pointing to. “That’s a string of fairy lights.”

“Ah. That it is.”

Colin sniffs; he pulls the wad of tissue from his nostril and folds the bloodied part over. He rubs at his nose and carefully packs it back in.

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have hit back.”

“Nahhh, you’re all right. I’m sorry I pushed you into that trash bin and then bit your ear.”

“I barely felt it. You know,” Ed pulls at the earlobe Colin had sunk his teeth into. “I’ve been
thinking of getting my ear pierced. I was worried it might hurt too much, but now I think it’ll be fine.”

“I’m glad I could settle that for you.”

“What was gonna be for dinner, anyway?”

“Chicken parmo.”

“Oh, brilliant!”

“And a nice salad.”

“Now, do you bread the chicken first?”

“Oh, of course.”

“See, my mum made it the last time I was over, and she didn’t bread it.”

“What!”

“I know!”

“It’s not a parmo if it’s not breaded! That’s just chicken and cheese!”

“That’s what I said!”

Colin shakes his head. He kills the joint and watches while Ed starts to roll another. Ed has a purple bruise across one cheek and has to squint against the swelling a little so he doesn’t accidentally spill any of the crumbly leaves across his trousers.

“Anyway, you’ll have to give me the recipe.”

“Mm.”

—

“By this next time next week, you’re going to be here. Right in front of me. No more of this phone bullshit. I miss your face. I miss your body.”

Thom’s heart leaps hotly into his throat. He looks over at the calendar tacked up on the back of his closet door. It’s ridiculous, a wall calendar filled with happy kittens. A gift from Jonny. Thom doesn’t even like cats. There’s a smiley alien face the day they fly out, with yay! scribbled
“Me too,” he says, blushing.

“You too? You too, what?”

“I miss…you.”

“Oh, yeah? What do you miss about me?”

“Your…” Shit. Thom is rubbish at this. He’s not good at phone sex in general, but it’s always Michael who takes the lead. And by the time Thom’s into it, there’s no room for the nervous thoughts that whisper that this is silly and awkward. Michael’s never given him the reigns like this.

“…Myyy…?”

“Erm.” Maybe Thom’s overthinking this. He’s trying to mirror Michael, say something similar, something he thinks he’d like to hear. He pushes those thoughts away and tries to focus on the truth of the answer.

What does he miss? He misses playing with Kinder toys. But that’s not especially sexy, so he moves on to his next thought.

“Your mouth.”

“Mmm. Do you.”

“Yes. I miss…I miss kissing you.”

“Oh, kitten. I can do so much more with my mouth than kiss.”

Fuck. The words migrate over an entire ocean and dive-bomb right into Thom’s groin.

“Where should I start, do you think? Once I’ve finally got you in my bed?”

Okay. Thom can do this.

“My…my lips. My mouth. And then my neck.”

“You’re precious.”

“What?”

“Go on.”

The hollow of his throat. His chest. It takes some stammering and a lot of wheedling from Michael to get Thom to admit that he likes his nipples sucked (which is something he’s never told anyone — it had always felt oddly emasculating till now).

Along his ribs. Down his stomach. Past his stomach.

And, well.
“Say it.”

“My cock. I want you to suck my cock.”

“Good boy. I’ll suck you dry.”

“Christ…”

“You taste heavenly. I’ve been starved for it ever since. You’re addictive, did you know that? What you do to me…it’s all your fault, and you know it. Give me a fantasy.”

Thom’s hand fumbles a little on his cock. Fantasy? Isn’t that what they’ve been doing?

“Like what?”

Michael laughs indulgently. “Give me something dirty. Something filthy.”

“I don’t think…”

“Of course you think. You think, Thom, and I wanna know what you think and exactly to what extent. Tell me the worst thing you want me to do to you. Something you’re shy to tell me, because it’s so…depraved.”

Shy? That’s not hard. But the other…

Well. There is one thing.

It’s something a one night stand had asked Thom to do once. And he’d refused. It had felt…wrong and debasing. And repulsive. But he’d thought about it the other night, for the first time in years. And he’d finally understood her. Maybe. He’d wanked to the thought, in any event.

But—no. That’s too much. What if Michael had meant some other sort of depraved, what if Michael’s disgusted or worse yet, laughs at him?

“I…”

Michael laughs again. “Spit it out, darling.”

It takes everything to say it. It really does. It’s like leaping off a cliff into waters that could either be very shallow or very deep.

“I…want…you to…maybe, er…come on my face.”

Thom feels himself flush instantly. It plunges hotly down his neck and he cringes. His cock twitches in his hand, the perverted traitor.

“Oh,” Michael gasps. “You really are precious.”

There’s that word again. Precious. What does that mean, exactly? Thom’s confidence begins to waver. He gets it; he’s inexperienced in comparison to Michael. Michael’s probably sat around at fancy avant-garde parties with people who wear black clothing that looks like origami, drinking
cool-people wine and calmly discussing the times they’ve ejaculated all over each other and it’s probably quaint and passé to them all, who the fuck knows? Thom’s embarrassed. Really, horribly, properly embarrassed. Until—

“Of course I’ll come on your pretty little face. How beautiful you’ll look. So wrecked and defiled. But I’ll make you clean again, don’t you worry, baby. I’ll clean up every last drop.”

Thom has just enough time to think how cheesy Michael’s words are before he climaxes abruptly. The shock of it rips a loud cry from his throat.

“Oh, I am going to have fun with you. I’ll see you in less than a week. And then we’ll work on expanding your horizons. Though you’re not off to a bad start. Don’t go to sleep until you’ve made yourself come again. Goodnight, Thom.”

The line clicks and disappears.

**Chapter End Notes**

**Colin, Select Magazine, April 1995**

“I suppose I’m the most gregarious member of the band because I don’t like spending time alone. I like having meals with friends and staying up late drinking. Hardly rock ‘n’ roll. But what is? Pissing in hotel rooms? Doing cocaine? I used to share a room with Ed on tour until he refused to, I kept on waking him up at all hours of the morning. So I had a room to myself, which was a shame because Ed’s very entertaining. He talks in his sleep – actually it’s more like sleep shouting. He starts having conversations that you just wish you could hear the other half of. He sometimes does accents too. He once came out with this thick Irish brogue, started shouting ‘HELP! THE BUILDING’S ON FIRE... AND TERRY WOGAN’S UP THERE’. It was hilarious.”

- Quote from Thom, he's spoken variations of this over the years:

"I hadn't figured out that bands and girls went together. I went to a boys' school, and I didn't realize that most guys join bands because they wanted to get girls."

- from **Slitz Magazine, Sweden, 1995** (aka - the interview where everyone is terribly mean to Colin):
"Colin and Phil are opposites. Colin is the only one in the band who is single. He is hyperactive and suffers from insomnia. In the taxi-limo to the Palladium he devotes two minutes to explain how convenient it is with electronic windowpane openers. Little brother Jonny gets tired of him first and asks him to shut up."

"Just Ed can compete with Colin’s gift to gab, but he’s better mannered and doesn’t talk to people who don’t listen. By the way, Ed’s the only one in the band who looks really healthy for the moment."

"Colin puts his eighth toothpick in the flame of a candle that stands on the table. “There are almost never toothpicks in English restaurants,” he complains.

“Stop nagging, you little bitch,” hisses Ed."
Chapter 12 - Playing Chicken

“I’m in a band.”

“Oh, really? Would I have heard of you?”

“Radiohead.” Colin smiles at the girl and when she twists slightly on her barstool, his heart gives a hopeful little leap in his chest.

“Oh my god, I love Radiohead!”

“Oh, thank you.” This is going quite well, if he says so himself.

Maybe things are looking up. Today was one of the smoothest recording sessions he’s ever experienced; they went in, recorded ‘Lucky’…and decided to go with it. No second, or third, or twelfth takes. They had all stood around after, blinking at each other with almost comical disbelief. Thom had looked especially distrustful, as if not quite believing it could be that easy. But Nigel had swung into the room, a big grin splitting his face. That’s it, no more, don’t you dare go for another and mess this up, he’d said. And that was that. Thom had cracked a sunny grin, and even Jonny had looked pleased when Colin had snuck a glance his way. Ed had let out a big whoop, handed a bemused Phil his guitar, and ran out of the room. You heard the man! Let’s get out of here!

Maybe they’ve cracked the code. Maybe future recording sessions for their third album will go smoothly and quickly, if ‘Lucky’ is an indicator. Nigel had even said they should consider it for the next album. Nothing could be harder than recording The Bends, anyway. At least there’s that.

And now, because they’re not stuck recording all bloody day, Colin has found himself free to have an unexpected afternoon pint in the company of a delightful young woman whose attention he has fully commandeered.

She leans forward, biting her bottom lip and grinning mischievously. Oh, he is looking forward to seeing what might make her repeat that expression in bed.

“So, this might be forward of me…” She blushes, prettily.

“Please, push onwards.” He mirrors her, leaning slightly forward as well.
“Is your brother Jonny here, too? I have to admit, I think he’s rather fit.”

Pinning Jonny down has been hard but when Ed invites Thom out for pre-tour drinks at their pub, Jonny’s there, trapped awkwardly on the inside of the booth next to Ed and already at least one sheet to the wind, if Thom can read his flush correctly. He usually can; beer always shows itself on Jonny’s face.

“Thomas Yorke! You’re late. Godrich had to leave to catch the train back to London. Said to ring him up tomorrow. We ran over some final details for ‘Lucky,’ did a post-op on the War Child thing. He literally just left. Shall I catch you up?”

“Ah, shit, really? I got stuck on the phone with me mum.” That explains why Ed and Jonny are still crowded together into one side of the booth. Thom slides into the empty side and luxuriates. Usually he’s sat next to Ed since he takes up so little space. “I’ll call him later, I don’t wanna talk band. I wanna drink.”

“Good, because I’ve already ordered us shots. Your punishment.”

“Some punishment. Twist my arm. Talking to my mum for an hour was punishment enough. If you want the dirt on anyone born between the years of 1950 and 1975 that we’ve ever even slightly crossed paths with, I now know all.”

“I should go, I really don’t need more to drink.” Jonny shifts around in his seat. “I have to get up early tomorrow.”

“Jon-Jon, nooooooo. I haven’t seen you in ages, you prat.”

“You saw me literally the other day,” Jonny points out. “You need to make your own friends.”

“You have nowhere to be tomorrow, you don’t have friends either,” Ed also points out. If Jonny is going to break their unspoken rules and call Thom’s kettle black, Ed is apparently going to make sure that Jonny’s aware he’s the pot. “If you think you can get by me, go for it.”

Jonny huffs and rabbit-punches Ed in the side, hard. During the ensuing scuffle, the waitress comes over with a tray of shots and beers for Ed and Jonny. Thom takes a shot and liberates Ed’s pint.

“Oi! That’s mine!”

Ed tries to pull the glass out from under Thom’s nose, but Thom has already downed nearly half. “Too late! It’s all full of my backwash now!”
“Gross.” Jonny picks up his shot and peers at it like it might be able to tell him why Thom is such a pig. “These are doubles, Ed.”

Ed hoists the last shot glass and asks, “So what’re we toasting?”

“Me!”

“I couldn’t care less.”

“You’re both terrible at this.” Ed scrunches his face momentarily, then smiles to himself as if at a private joke. “Ah! I know: to the next month, and to R.E.M.”

Cheers to that. Thom happily tosses back his whiskey.

He catches Jonny do the same from the corner of his eye. His face is screwed up in distaste. Preemptively, for the burn, Thom thinks. Baby.

Pounding the table, Ed coughs. “Damn. Okay, I’m outta here, I actually do have someplace to be tomorrow. I’m going with Colin to…I don’t rightly know. Some place where I’ll be forced to learn something, I reckon. As long as it’s not something pointless.”

“If it’s pointless and idiosyncratic, Colin knows or is in the process,” Jonny mutters into his beer. “He knows Thom, doesn’t he?”

“I’m not idiosyncratic,” Thom says, earnestly. “And we’re all a bit pointless.”

Ed smiles at him warmly. “I’ll send over the waitress with a couple more pints.”

“Ooooo, big spender. Cheers.”

Jonny is less gracious. “We’re not all lushes,” he grouches.

Ed claps a hand on Jonny’s shoulder. Jonny sags under the weight. “We don’t all have to deal with you.”

“Ohhhhhh, burn!” Thom cackles and Ed winks at him as he turns to leave.

“Have fun.”

Ignoring Ed’s departure, Jonny starts drawing patterns through the condensation rings his beer has left on the table.

“Jon-Jon.” Thom misses Jonny. Who cares if he’s been wretched towards Thom. Who cares if it was only four days since he saw him last. Besides, Jonny always seemed to be busy on the last run of gigs, and the two weeks off before that he hadn’t seen him at all.

“How’ve you been?”

“Fine. I should go.”

“Oh, don’t be like that. Stay. I miss you.” Might as well say it. Michael’s blunt honesty might be rubbing off.
“Do you?” Jonny’s brows raise, as if genuinely surprised. Or alarmed. Or maybe he’s just winding up to release a barb.

“Well, yeah. You’re my best mate.” Maybe he shouldn’t have downed a pint and a double shot on an empty stomach. His tongue is already loosening. Ah well. It’s only Jonny.

“I’m fine, Thom.” Each word enunciated like the closing words to a book.

“If you say so,” Thom says dubiously. Thom has come to recognise that delivery. Anything Thom might say from this point on will on fall on flat features, be greeted with a cool tone of voice.

With a frenetic little growl, Thom decides that won’t be the case tonight. It’s now a challenge. Keep Jonny from diving deep, keep him bobbing along the surface, next to Thom.

“Are you looking forward to the States? Getting back with R.E.M.? Only a couple more days left now.”

“Delirious.”

“We can use next month to work out a bunch of the new stuff live.”

“Wonderful.”

“Do you like the south? I like the south. Except the people that try to convert me. Though that usually happens in the midwest, doesn’t it.”

“Fascinating.”

“Did I ever tell you the time your brother came this close to getting us arrested when we were fifteen?”

Jonny’s eyes blink up at Thom finally, the alcohol making him nod a little. “I beg your pardon? No. Was it your fault?”

Thom slaps the table. “No! That’s the brilliant part.”

He launches into the story. They’d been fifteen, leaving the dregs of a party and absolutely blasted drunk. Thom in his grandad coat and hat, Colin in a catsuit. So young, so impossibly young still, young and unscathed enough to say things like I don't believe in regrets. And it had been Colin’s idea to lie down in the middle of the street, to play chicken with oncoming traffic.

They had stretched out on the slightly damp road, giggling. For a while, nothing happened. Thom started to drift off, the cold of the pavement centring him, keeping him from getting nauseous. Faintly, he had heard Colin’s voice, shrill with nervous excitement, alerting him to the headlights rounding the corner towards them. Thom still remembers the way the light had played over Colin’s form next to him, washing out his features into a stark, simplistic screen print of a boy’s image. He felt Colin reach out and grab his hand. Frostbite's like this, he had thought, randomly. Or so he'd learned; heat far away, just pressure. Thom closed his eyes and waited.

“And?”
“And it was a police officer.”

*What the bloody hell? What are you boys doing? Get up, get up from there right now.* They had staggered to their feet. Let off, finally, with a warning, but not before the officer’s threats had reduced Colin to humiliated tears and Thom had thrown up cheap swill all over the footpath.

“It was a good time,” he says now. “It was brilliant, actually.”

“It sounds terrible. What were you thinking. Death wishes are not brilliant, Thom.”

Thom smiles. Jonny never gets so upset at something as he does after the fact. He gets offended at past events, that history doesn’t mould itself to his ideas of how it should have been. He’s likely personally offended that Pangea ever split.

“I didn’t have a death wish. That’s what was so great about it.”

He doesn’t know how to explain it to Jonny. It’s almost as if, back then, he was not an active participant in his own life. His body was more a small toy, one that he’d laid out, giggling, on the little street of a model village. There were no consequences yet. Not real ones. The worst thing that’d ever happened to him was nearly getting expelled the year before, having the headmaster force him to ring up his parents and admit to what he’d done. They were kids; nothing could hurt them. But there’s no use in trying to make Jonny understand if he hasn't experienced that feeling, is there? He’s doing a shit job of explaining it even to himself.

“You need a keeper. I cannot believe Colin.”

“Colin is your keeper. Ed watches out for Colin. Phil is his own keeper. Tim has Ed’s back, and Tim is on a payroll somewhere so no one has to have his,” Thom has counted off all the fingers on one hand, and so raises the index on his other hand up to Jonny. “And you’re my keeper.”

“No, I’m not.”

“Sure you are.”

Jonny stares at him and Thom wants to laugh but Jonny’s brow is furrowed and he's doing that thing that's not quite pouting. Thom wants to smooth a finger over that crease, press it into the whole like a misplaced mark in clay. Jonny parts his lips, but nothing comes out. Then, finally:

"I know you've been...seeing him."

“All right,” Thom says, because it is.

Even lightly drunk and with an aim of eventually getting utterly pissed, he doesn’t need time to connect Jonny’s words to any meaning. He grasps whom Jonny is referring to immediately.

“Well…what do you think?”

“Thom…”

“No, your opinion means a lot to me! Stop being so bloody obstinate. I really did mean it, you’re my best mate.”
“I can’t possibly answer that question.”

“Sure you can! At least…give me something…are you surprised? About the whole sexuality thing. Or any of it, really. It’s wild, I know. Do you like him? You have to like him, Jon-Jon. Still can’t believe I pulled him. Or he pulled me. I’m not sure which it is.”

“He pulled you.”

“Did he? Okay. That makes more sense,” Thom nods agreeably. “Hey, you don’t have a nickname for me. If you had a nickname, what would it be?”

Jonny peers at him. “If I had a nickname for you, you’d have heard it. I don’t know. Your name already is its own nickname.”

“Oh, come on! Nothing?”

“No, Thom. You are infinitely yourself. You don’t need another name.”

“Oh.” Thom feels faintly pleased and flattered at that, though he can’t say why. The waitress swings by, and he orders them another round of double shots, more beer.

“Does he have a nickname for you?” Jonny narrows his eyes, as if he’s daring Thom. At what, Thom hasn’t the faintest clue, but he knows when he’s under a microscope.

“Erm, no. I was just curious. Unrelated.”

Jonny snorts. He doesn’t believe him. Of course Thom is lying, but why doesn’t Jonny believe him? Jonny used to believe almost everything Thom told him, and now all Thom musters from him is a snort.

Thom rather covets Jonny’s snort, though. Even his snort is somehow graceful and appealing. Thom doesn’t know if this grace and precision are utterly manufactured, learned by rote in front of a mirror until permanent, or if this was something that needed to percolate, innate and dormant until Jonny outgrew his awkwardness. Thom wonders at his levels of self-absorption to not have noticed the changes until now. Jonny has been at his side this whole time; he should be able to answer these questions. So how come he’s not able to trace the path Jonny has taken over the past few years? Is it that he’s only valued the advancements in Jonny’s musical talents, the way they’ve leap-frogged past everyone else’s? Is that it? No wonder Jonny is so mean to him. Zero interest in the dull, quiet cocoon except when it was underfoot or maybe of some basic use, but now mesmerised by the glittery thing that has hatched from it.

Thom only pretends he doesn’t worship beauty.

“What do you see in him?”

Jonny is staring at him now, eyes slightly narrowed. Maybe letting Jonny dig at this topic wasn’t so smart. It should probably be flattering, to know that he cares about Thom’s happiness and is being protective as a result. But Jonny has an unsettling way of showing it, a real ghoulish bedside manner, because Thom’s feeling like he’s being clinically dissected and whatever Jonny’s found has been deemed lacking.

Thom shrugs. “I dunno. He…understands. Erm, things. It’s like, everything that’s been trying to
tear me to the fucking ground, he’s been there—or he’s got an answer, anyway. Mostly. I think. He’s just—he makes me feel like I’m not going mad. Like I’m not alone. I swear, sometimes it’s like we’re connected telepathically. I mean I know we’re not, I’m not Ed, but—you know what I mean. It’s…spooky, sometimes. In a good way. In a great way.”

“So he’s your mentor.”

“Well, sure, I guess. But it’s not just that.”

“What else is there to it, then?” Jonny asks, before tossing back his shot.

“Well, he’s beautiful. His voice. Not just when he’s singing, but when he’s talking to me. Not just the sound of it, but the words he uses. He talks the way he writes music. And when he smiles, it’s just…knowing that I can make him smile…that just kills me. I want to make him smile. And laugh. Because those things are beautiful, too, and I can’t believe it’s me making them happen.”

“It makes you feel useful, you mean.”

“No, it makes me happy.” Thom shrugs and smiles ruefully down at his hands. “I don’t think I’ve ever made someone that happy. Not just by being myself.”

“You truly think that?” Jonny asks, his voice sounding thick in his throat.

Thom nods. “He wants me, and that’s…that’s just mad. He isn’t shy about it, either. He wants me and he lets me know, all the time. I’ve never had that before, either.”

“Oh…I see.”

Jonny goes silent and tears at a napkin, rolling the shreds into little balls as Thom watches. He hadn’t noticed how boisterous the pub has become; the voices surrounding them have grown so loud as to render the emotion behind them unrecognisable. Thom realises he’s been leaning forward to catch whatever Jonny says under the babble. Or maybe Jonny is just being extra quiet, his lisp made pronounced by the booze. Not for the first time, Thom wishes Jonny knew sign language. Maybe he wouldn’t feel so at odds with Jonny if their words were robbed of cadence, stripped down to literal intent.

Jonny’d still be making that face, though, so Thom doubts it.

“You don’t like him,” he accuses, dismayed.

“I don’t know him,” Jonny says softly.

“You know me, though, and you don’t like him with me.”

Jonny says nothing. He slowly divides his collection of shredded napkin into two piles.

“…right?”

But Jonny is completely unresponsive. Thom watches his profile. A swooping strand of hair frames his jaw like a painting. His eyes look strange. The room is tilting slightly. Thom realisees he’s finally drunk. So, so drunk.
“Well…can you give me anything? Any advice?”

“Oh, fuck.” Jonny sits back and laughs, reckless and slightly hysterical. The transition is jarring. “Sure, Thom, sure. You want advice? Here’s some advice: I think you’ve got your hands up and you’re praying to him like he’s a god, but he’s no god. He’s just a man.”

Thom blinks, taken aback. “…I don’t know what you mean. I don’t think he’s a god. Bloody hell.”

“You think he’s better than you. He’s just a man. Don’t settle for him only loving you like only half of one. Don’t you dare.”

But Thom has no answer. What’s he supposed to do with that? Everyone is better than him. Jonny is better than all of them, in every way that matters, so he couldn’t possibly understand. He doesn’t know what it’s like to be the runt of what feels like the entire human race, to have to work twice as hard to compensate. Thom doesn’t even know how he got here; he’s flying by the seat of his pants. He wouldn’t be here without the others. Especially not without Jonny.

And where the fuck does love come into it, anyway? Does Jonny think Michael could love him? Does he see something Thom doesn’t? The thought makes something clench in his heart, something weird and foreign and not wholly comfortable. He opens his mouth to ask, but Jonny’s suddenly shaking his head and exhaling heavily.

“I’m sorry. Colin’s right. Colin’s always so bloody…right.”

“What?”

Jonny shakes his head again. He’s rubbing at his face with one hand, fingers pushing at his temple and over his lips. His palm comes to rest over his eyes.

“I shouldn’t…I mean, I. It’s not my place. And it’s not my…well, it’s. Nothing to do with me, really. Is it.”

Thom is having a very difficult time following. The words hitting Thom’s brain want to just slide right off. The din of the crowd isn’t helping. The drink isn’t helping. Jonny isn’t helping.

“Don’t listen to me,” he continues, responding to Thom’s confusion. “I’m just…stupid. I’ve been stupid and blind.”

“But…I always listen to you. I’m serious, your opinion matters. It always has.”

Jonny laughs a little, briefly. Quietly. Thom can’t even hear it, only sees it. Jonny’s grimacing at the table.

“Jonny?”

“It doesn’t, though. It shouldn’t. Not now. Not with this. What matters is that you’re happy.”

“Oh. Okay. But—”

Jonny is very suddenly sliding out from the booth.

“And you seem really happy. You actually do.” Jonny smiles at him, but it’s a strange smile. He
sways to his feet, the coloured neon lights behind the bar giving him an orange halo. “I...well, good luck? I hope it works out. I hope...you’ve found someone worthy. Someone who makes you feel special and cared for. I really mean that. It’s...it’s vital. The most..."

Jonny trails off and stares down at the floor under his feet, looking lost in thought. He eventually sighs and looks back up at Thom. Firmly and sounding much more sober than he is, Jonny says, "The most important thing."

“Thank you.” Thom says, and then because it’s the truest thing, “You should have someone special, too.”

Jonny shoots him one last look, and walks out of the pub, leaving Thom to wonder why he looked so sad.

—

Colin’s new Diskman has decided not to work. It won't even turn on. He has changed the battery three times, all new batteries fresh from the package. No luck. He smacks it a few times and for good measure calls out, "Who's your daddy?"

Not Colin, evidently.

He hears a knock at the door: it’s Jonny, because Jonny never uses the ringer and always pounds on the door, four thumps from the side of his fist.

Accepting that the Diskman is a lost cause and he won’t be listening to any music on the flight out to the States tomorrow because that obviously would be asking too much of the universe, Colin goes to let his brother in.

“Jonathan.”

“Hey.” He slouches into the room, picky as any cat, and blinks around at the state of things.

“Colin, this place looks like a bloody Bookmobile crashed into it and hemorraged everywhere.”

“Yes, well, hello to you as well, dear sibling of mine. How may I be of service? Are you here to berate me over the various aspects of my life that you deem lacking? Oh joy.” Colin doesn’t feel the need to try to hide his waspishness after everything that’s happened concerning his brother over the past month.

“No,” says Jonny, moving to sit on the very edge of the couch. He picks up a book to make space. "Wuthering Heights?"
“Ever read it?”

“No, I suppose I should do, it’s a classic.” Jonny is fretting, but Colin assumes it has nothing to do with his reading habits. But then, being Jonny, it could.

“I’ve only read about half. I skipped out of it in school, on a bet from Thom. If I could pass the test on it without cracking it open once. I did, of course. It’s full of mad crazies who seem to delight enthusiastically in the craziness. I can only hope that it all will come to a happy end.”

“Hmmm.” Jonny isn’t listening. His knee is jiggling.

“What is it?”

Jonny immediately starts to talk, as if he’s worried he’ll forget what he’s saying mid-thought. “Look, I’m sorry I took my idiocy out on you. I never…I never should have said the things I did, last month. About who you choose to date, or fuck, or whatever. About pretending to be you on the phone. All of it. I never apologised. And I should have. There’s…no excuse. I’m ghastly. I know I am. You deserve to be happy, Colin.”

“Oh, god. Has someone died? Are you dying? Do you…do you have the chilblains?”

Colin might be trying to make light of this. All of it. It might be a character flaw, but it’s simpler than confrontation. They’ve had enough of that of late, thank-you-very-much.

“What? No! Jesus, you’re impossible to talk to.” Jonny shakes his head at Colin, but exasperated affection is warring with the anxiety on his face, loosening its hold. “You want me to take on the chilblains. You just want an excuse to bring the word up in conversation.”

“Well. Thank you. For the apology.” Colin sits down next to Jonny, but doesn’t look at him. Jonny often doesn’t like to be looked at directly and his hair is looking especially Cousin It-ish today.

They sit in silence for a few minutes until Jonny says, calmly, “I love Thom but I’ve decided I need to move on.”

“Oh. Okay.” Not knowing what else to do, he offers up the traditional port in a British storm. “Would you like a cuppa?”

“He deserves to be happy, too.” Jonny continues as if Colin hadn’t spoken, picking up steam, the words speeding up but still colourless. A schoolboy reciting a book report to the class, in a rush to just get through with it. “I can’t keep doing this to myself, nor is it fair to him. You were right. You were right, Colin. I…I project. It was bound to happen, sooner or later, him meeting someone…important. What did I think was going to happen? I’ve been looking at this as a child does. Yes, just as you said. Maybe I’ve even been using Thom as a shield to hide behind. As long as I love him, safely unattainable, I can’t risk myself on someone else, right?”

“That’s a very…reasonable outlook.” Colin picks his way through what words he should use like he’s sifting through sea-smooth rocks on a beach, discarding the ones with divots and fractures. Looking for the ones that have been worn down into simple, practical circles that feel calming to the touch. “You deserve to be happy, too. I am very sorry that you’re hurting. I think…it’s a good idea. Making yourself move on. You shouldn’t spend your heart on someone who doesn’t love you back. But I am so, so sorry.”
“Loving a person means that sometimes you have to let them go. All those beastly clichés say it’s so for a reason, I can only assume. It’s all terribly dull, though, isn’t it?”

“What is?”

Jonny turns to him, eyes large and sad.

“Loving someone.”

“I wouldn’t know, I’m afraid. I’ve not been in love yet. Thought I maybe was, once…but no, not in retrospect. I don’t think it’s supposed to be dull, though, Jonathan. Are you sure it’s love, what you feel for Thom?”

“Yes, I am quite positive. You say ‘yet.’ You’ve plans to, then? I definitely advise against it.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

“It’s not the love itself that’s dull. It’s that it’s so dreadfully common, being in love. And everyone tries to explain and describe it, and the results always turn out appallingly.”

“Leave it to you to be deeply offended that they’ll let just anyone have basic human emotions, unless it might possibly lead to high art,” Colin says wryly. “Your pretensions, Jonathan, are amazing.”

“No, that’s not what I meant!” Jonny’s visage finally cracks and his voice gains a rough, sawed-off edge. “God, I don’t know how to bloody say what I mean to say. Do you think I don’t know how I sound? Fucking hell, Coz.”

Jonny drops his head into his hands. His voice, muffled, issues from somewhere under all that hair. “What I mean is…why don’t they teach you? Prepare you in some way so you can protect yourself. You learn cursive and the Napoleonic Wars and how to measure acute angles, but not the stuff like love that actually matters. Then you’re handed the empty platitudes and ghastly torch songs and the stupid rubbish people say to each other, like ‘there there’ and ‘this too shall pass’ and ‘there’s other fish in the sea.’ And you’re supposed to make due with that? What a joke.”

Jonny raises his head and looks at Colin. His eyes are rimmed in red, his lashes clumped. “And it’s all so dreadfully dull because it’s like being handed a children’s book when you need an encyclopaedia. None of it can do a single bloody thing to actually tell you how to fix a broken heart.”

“Oh, Jon.” Colin reaches out to him, and Jonny’s face crumbles, the last shreds of self-control falling away like debris from a cliff face. He sobs into Colin’s shoulder.

“I don’t even know who I’m supposed to be, if I’m not loving him. It’s the only part of me that feels real. I’m really scared, Colin. It hurts so fucking bad.”

Colin very carefully doesn’t offer any words of empty comfort, as his brother’s thin body shakes under his arms. He simply plays witness.
They really stand out amongst the people waiting to board the direct flight to Miami.

Colin reckons the average age of the other passengers outstrips Radiohead’s by a good forty years. From the overheard snippets of conversation drifting past him, he’s sussed out that most are American retirees returning from holiday. At least twenty of them are already lined up for boarding; Colin can’t understand to what purpose. Perhaps when you’re that old you need to rush around a bit more, in case you die before you get where you need to be. Still, someone should tell the old dears they still have at least thirty minutes to wait and should give their knees a break.

Ed’s been cornered by a group of four elderly women. They are fussing and chirping over him, their overlapping voices a seamless flow honed by a lifetime of friendship. They inform Ed they’ve known each other since they were teenagers, and Ed performs flawlessly, exclaiming how marvelous that is. How long ago was that? Only ten years, surely?

Colin can’t help but smile down at his book. Who can’t Ed pull?

The women all titter, charmed. One asks if Ed is traveling alone. He points everyone’s positions out in turn, finishing on Colin, who is sat the closest to Ed’s little group.

“Oh, young man! You should come join us. Your friend is probably feeling a bit overwhelmed, all these women prying at him. Come, come help your friend out.”

Well then. Colin isn’t really feeling it, but shoulders his bag and shuffles over to join them.

Introductions are made, and one woman—Paulina? Colin’s not even going to try to differentiate them in his mind—asks him how long they’ve been friends.

“Oh, dear, as long as you ladies have been friends. About a decade now, I’d say.” Don’t let it be said he can’t charm elderly American women as well as Ed can. “Longer, even. Nearly fifteen with that one over there,” he points at Thom, “and twenty-two with that one. He’s my little brother!”

Jonny must only be pretending to listen to music on his headphones, because even sat a couple rows away he shoots Colin a look that says don’t you bloody dare even try to make me come over.

The women find that wonderful. And taking vacation together! What do their wives think? Almost regrettably, Colin tells them that it’s technically on business that they’re traveling to the States. They’re in a band together.

Yes, yes, just like the Beatles. There’s five of them and they’re British, so yes. Precisely like the Beatles.

“You know,” says maybe-Phoebe, “Don’t let your jobs get in the way of your friendship. Or family.” She gives Colin a very pointed look and he is suddenly four again, grumpy and needy, his
grandmother pulling him into her lap and telling him he needs to be nice to his baby brother, he’ll be the best friend you ever have, love. Family is all that matters in life. You’ll learn that.

The other three women nod and hum in agreement. One adds, “Friendship can be family. Look at us. You’re all every bit my sisters as if we shared blood.”

“But it must be especially wonderful to work with your own brother! He looks like a lovely young man,” warbles another woman. “I can tell you are close. Did you take care of him as a baby? You never stop taking care of them, they’re always your baby brother, I’m the same way with mine. I bet he was a lovely baby too, wasn’t he.”

“No, he was a huge fat baby with slug-like appendages and a giant lolling head,” Colin replies truthfully.

Ed looks like he is prepared to kiss Colin in gratitude for that apparently delightful mental image.

Colin, however, is about ready to slip from his chair onto the floor and pull a Thom. Just roll under the seats and hide. He’ll even spout the appropriate gibberish if they’ll leave him be.

Penny – or Patricia or maybe Pearl or Petunia or Petroleum or whatever it was – turns to Ed. “And make sure you tell each other that. Men are so bad about expressing love to each other. It’s silly. Waiting until you’re drunk, falling all over each other, suddenly it’s ‘I love you, I don’t mind saying it’ as if admitting to being a Communist, and then throwing up in the laundry hamper.”

Ed darts a guilty look at Colin, who raises an eyebrow. Colin wouldn’t know what that’s like, having someone stumble into your shared room at two in the morning and loudly declaring I love you, yer a good mate, no no noooooo I love you, I bloody love you Cozzie. Oh shit fuck, ‘m gonna be sick.

Boarding is announced. Thank god.

Ed and Colin say their goodbyes, bravely enduring another round of fussing and elderly arms thrown about their necks (Colin notes the arms cling a little longer to Ed’s). They herd themselves off to the side, the rest of the guys joining them by unspoken habit.

Thom is cheerful, laughing at the things said to him, even if not meant to be very humorous. A rare sight indeed; he should by rights be sullen, with the air of a person facing the guillotine. He’s not even engaging in his favorite pre-boarding ritual of digging through his carry-on to make sure he has everything he could possibly need, shoving the most important bits into his pockets and under his arms. Because god forbid he have to wait thirty minutes for the seatbelt sign to go dark to pull a notebook down from the overhead. Colin notes Tim is looking at Thom uncertainly, like maybe he’s about to pull a prank and throw an especially magnificent tantrum at the last minute. He doesn’t blame him; this new, beatific Thom would have had Colin trying to sniff out the reasons only a short while ago.

The new, less-than-beatific Colin knows why Thom is so happy and full of impatient energy: He’s going to see Michael Stipe soon.

Jonny turns to Thom. “Did you remember to pack your ugly swim trunks? Florida beaches, they’re legendary. Think of all the opportunities for embarrassment.”

Thom cackles—eyes screwed shut, mouth in that funny curl of his —and seesaws his weight on
antsy feet. Jonny smiles, at ease, making eye contact as if Thom’s not crushing his heart under his heels with each frenzied little bounce. Colin can’t help but feel a painful sort of admiration; Jonny is *breathtakingly* good at this. It’s the sort of deception that gets hung on the wall of the Louvre as thieves carry away the original. Colin silently forgives Thom for never having clued in that it’s been a ruse. Jonny’s masterful performance makes Colin feel a bit better—if guiltily so—about not having sussed out Jonny’s feelings towards Thom on his own. Even knowing what he knows now, Jonny’s aplomb is enough to make him question if last night even happened.

Colin narrows his eyes at a new line of thought: What else has his little brother lied about over the years? If he can be this convincing over something with such high stakes, Colin just bets he lied about all sorts of smaller things over the years.

“*I have to buy new sunnies,*” Thom is lamenting, his cheeriness on pause. “*I can’t find mine anywhere. I’m really bummed.*”

“You have about five million pairs,” Ed points out as they file past the ticket-taker and troop down the gangway.

“These were my *favourite,* though, the ones with the purple lenses. And they have, um, sentimental value. And were bloody *cool.*”

“Has anyone ever died from thinking they lost their favourite sunglasses?” Ed ponders. “Can I have your stereo when you pass on to the great Sunglass Hut in the sky?”

“That really sucks, they were cool,” commiserates Jonny. “Maybe they’ll show up somewhere still? I always misplace my sunglasses everywhere. I’ll look around my flat when we get back?”

Oh, but it’s so hard suddenly to feel empathy for his brother, let alone sympathy. Colin knows he needs to stop glaring at Jonny; if he looks daggers any harder he’s going to give himself an aneurysm as he quite literally stabs Jonny through the power of thought. He busies himself with shoving his bag into the overhead with more force than probably necessary.

“No,” says Thom, glumly. He drops into his window seat and makes a face at his seatbelt as he buckles in. “I wasn’t at your flat anytime recent. I went bonkers, trying to find them. Turned the place upside-down. They’re *gone.*”

“Ugh, I’m sorry. Maybe you can buy a replacement pair? We can find them when we hit New York, I bet. Or, wait!” Jonny exclaims, sounding inspired. He slides next to Thom. *“Michael can probably tell you. Just ask him where he bought them.”*

“Yeah…I guess. ’S not the same though, is it?”

“I suppose not.”

Colin slouches down in the seat behind Jonny. Tim looks down at him as he passes and huffs, shaking his head just slightly. Colin can just imagine his train of thought: *Oh, so it’s a tradeoff, I see. One member of Radiohead must be a suffering, moody git at any given time.* He can’t bring himself to care that his face must be doing terrible, worrisome things. *Fuck off, Tim.*

Colin starts to make a list of everything he’s ever suspected of Jonny, starting with that never-named bully Jonny always claimed took his pocket money, leading Colin to hand over a chunk of his own allowance at the sight of Jonny’s piteous face. And ending, perhaps, with Jonny telling...
Colin you’re a criminally underrated bassist and no, no one thinks the faces you make on stage are daft.

Colin scoots further down so that a couple hours later, when Jonny tries to recline his seat, his knees dig through into Jonny’s back. Jonny cranes his head back to glare at Colin, but Colin feigns sleep and doesn’t shift his knees even though his back is an aching knot.

Another hour further into the flight, though, he drops his knees.

*They’re always your baby brother, after all, as Patricia had pointed out.*

Chapter End Notes

- Thom and Colin playing chicken and nearly getting run over/consequently arrested by a police officer is a true story.
No, he can’t wear his “Street Spirit” shirt; it’s trying too hard. It’ll be immediately obvious that he’s trying too hard.

Thom sheds the shirt and digs through his suitcase. Maybe…a t-shirt? T-shirts don’t try too hard. T-shirts are the very picture of casual, yeah? Thom sniffs at his pits yet again before pulling the shirt on. Okay, yes. This is fine. He doesn’t care. Oh hey, Michael. Good to see you, how’ve you been? Oh fuck it, who is he bloody kidding. Why did he pack these clothes?

Jonny is lying on the other bed, watching him with a dispassionate eye. “Are you trying to look nice for him, then?”

“Shut up, Jonathan,” Thom mutters. He stomps to the mirror. His hair is all wrong; it’s so apparent he just re-dyed it the morning of their flight here. Oh god, what if he missed rinsing away a patch of dye behind his ears when he recoloured it? He always does that; he’ll scratch behind an ear and come away with what looks like dried blood under his nails. He shouldn’t try to do touchups himself, he should go back to that girl who always did his hair when it was blonde. She was nice. He liked the way her breasts would rub against his arm when she was shampooing him. That was nice, too.

“Wear the other shirt. It looks good on you.”

“Yeah? You think?” Thom is already pulling the t-shirt back off and wadding it back into the suitcase.

“Yeah.”

“Thanks, Jon-Jon.” Thom shoots Jonny a thankful smile as he buttons the first shirt back up. Jonny smiles back, wanly. He looks bored. Ennui. Petty little twit; he should be enjoying himself in a proper hotel room while he can. Tomorrow begins the bus grind.
As if reading his thoughts, Jonny sits up and stretches. He frowns at Thom, eyes taking in everything. Thom knows he’s acting like a gnat on speed. He turns his back on Jonny and starts to look around for his shoes.

“Thom, I’m rooming with Colin tonight. He needs a break from Ed. It’s your turn.”

Ugh. “It’s just one night, can’t he just suck it up?”

“No. His insomnia has been bad of late. He needs a good night’s sleep. It’s your turn.”

“Fine. Whatever. I get insomnia, too, you know,” Thom mutters, reflexively. It doesn’t matter, though. He might not…well, he might not be back tonight. Anyway. He might be somewhere. Else. Elsewhere. Michael’s elsewhere. But he’s not going to let his mind wander down that path. He’s already crawling out of his skin at it is. If he starts to think about the things they discussed on the phone, he probably won’t ever leave this room again. Why did he try and talk such a good game to Michael? It’s going to bite him in the arse. Idiot. Idiot. What if it’s really obvious that Thom has zero clue what he’s doing? Of course it’s going to be obvious. He doesn’t know what he’s doing, beyond theory. What if Michael is disappointed? What if Michael laughs, or thinks he’s bad at…whatever might happen.

He needs to get a fucking grip before he goes completely mad.

There’s a soft rapping at the door. Thom bounds over and yanks it open. Tim’s standing there, hand raised to knock again.

“Hey!”

The pleasant and easy smile on his face is annoying. How can everyone be so calm when Thom is a gradually-melting nuclear disaster inside?

“Transport’s here. You guys ready to go?”

“Yeah,” says Thom, shouldering his bag and looking as disaffected as he can manage.

Yeah. Right. Might as well be calmly asking him if he’s ready to jump out a bloody plane with a parachute that may or may not open.

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He stares out the van’s window at the passing strip malls and fast-food restaurants, though he takes in none of it. The van’s air conditioner is blasting, but the sun is pouring through the passenger
window, blast-burning the bare skin of his forearm where it’s lodged against the door’s armrest. He doesn’t move or roll his sleeve down. The near-pain is centring and gives him something to focus on instead of the churning nerves in his stomach.

He experiments with the thought of sex.

Sex with Michael.

It’s going to happen. After everything they’ve discussed, it is definitely going to happen. He’s not sure if he’s relieved that Michael had been so explicit on the phone. Is it better or worse knowing that Michael’s solely a top, for example? On the one hand, he doesn’t have to ask himself how far this might go; he knows precisely. But on the other, he’s a fucking virgin again, years after he thought he’d conquered that label.

He’s been floating in a weird pool of mental and physical arousal for days now. It’s ridiculous. Scenarios have been constantly flitting through his mind, nipping and lapping at him in abrupt waves. His skin has felt uncommonly sensitive—or maybe he’s just been more aware of it. He’s felt sensual, which is laughable if he considers it for too long. He’ll chalk that up to the long string of nights spent with Michael whispering into his ear, making him slow down, making him notice how his body responds as he skates a hand across it. He’s never viewed his body as something to eroticise in his own mind, as something to experience and savour for his own pleasure. You just get hard and wank and that’s it, innit? Or, if you’re lucky, you get one off with another person. Or maybe, he amends, if you’re really lucky, two.

So in theory he’s ready for whatever comes next. He’d gotten a finger in the arse from an ex-girlfriend during a drunken blowjob one night a few years ago. It’d been unexpected, but it hadn’t hurt. It’d just been weird, until his orgasm had started to build, and he has to admit it’d started to feel pretty good at that point. But it hadn’t turned some switch on for him; he hadn’t really thought about it one way or another since then. In fact, he’d nearly forgotten it entirely.

About a week ago in the shower he’d tried to do it to himself. He’d been sloshed that first time and it’d been so long ago – he should probably remind himself, right? The angle was awkward as he reached his hand down, one foot precariously lodged on the edge of the tub. Even with the soapy water to aid him, he’d given up after pushing in a single finger up to his first knuckle.

It burned a little, and wasn’t erotic at all. His cock continued to hang limply, not remotely interested in what he was attempting to accomplish. His anus clenched tightly at the small intrusion, angry and unhelpful.

He had the brief thought flash through his mind…what if he went out and bought a…a sexual aid. But then Thom saw himself browsing through a sex shop, trying to resolve which dildo, exactly, might be on par with whatever Michael might present him with and he immediately nixed that idea.

He'd rather die.

Fucking hell. He’ll just get really pissed tonight. Vodka will be enough of a sexual aid. It’ll have to be. He likes Michael, he really likes him, and god knows he loves the idea of being with him…and he can’t stop thinking how it felt to kiss him…but honestly, he imagines Michael smiling at him with pleasure—or pride—more than he daydreams about Michael’s hand on his cock.

He sometimes wishes sex wasn't a big thing, wishes it wasn't in the same capital-letter category as Love and Death.
The van dumps them out at the back entrance of the Miami Arena, a cream-coloured, squat cylinder on the waterfront. Colin is asking them if they all used sun cream, because *we’re so far south that the sun burns you more quickly than you’d expect, it’s because of the latitude*. Ed responds by pulling his t-shirt off.

"Bring it on!" He strikes a heroic Spartacus pose and yells at the sun above them. "*I’m ready for you, you carcinogenic arsehole!*"

Several venue staff loading cases through the bay doors stop to stare at Ed.

Colin pushes past him. "If I have to listen to you tonight on the bus whinging about how painful your sunburn is, I’m going to tell the driver to leave you behind."

"We don’t *have* a call-time for the bus tonight," interjects Tim, grumpily. "Saint Petersburg is only a four-hour drive. We’re actually heading out at eight tomorrow morning. Don’t you guys read the itineraries? I spend enough bloody time preparing them for you, you could at least *glance* at them…"

Thom signs at Tim, *I read it*. He never reads the itinerary, but he carefully looked this tour’s over several times when Tim passed him an information bundle last night. He doesn’t want the rest of the guys to wonder why he’s broken with tradition suddenly, though. The next month is a long string of shows, two or three in a row and then a day off before starting the cycle anew. He wishes the schedule was more like the European Monster dates—they’d had a day off following nearly every show. He’s at war with himself; on the one hand, he’s got an entire month with Michael stretching ahead of him. But on the other, it’s going to be a brutal fucking stretch of gigs.

They file into the venue and Thom starts to feel an all-too familiar tightening of his chest as his palms start to grow damp. He’s not going to have a panic attack, is he? Oh god, please, anything but this. He begs his brain to give him this one thing, to just please not do this to him, *not now*.

They’re led to the lounge area, where they find Peter Buck with his wife. There are happy exclamations—*good to see you again, man*—and introductions are made with his new bride.

Peter’s here. That means Michael is, too. When it’s Thom’s turn to greet Peter, he casually asks where he might find Michael. On stage. He’s out on stage with their manager, Peter thinks.

Thom nods, jerkily, and sets out to find him. Everything feels a little strange, like his body is propelling him of its own volition. He passes Colin, who gives him a concerned look; Thom shoots him a thin smile in return. If Colin hasn’t sussed out who his fledging relationship is with, he
surely must realise now. If Jonny hasn’t told him already, that is.

Two wrong turns and a detour through the kitchens, and Thom finally sees arrows leading to the stage. On unsteady legs, he pushes through the final set of doors and finds himself looking at Michael.

He’s talking to Bertis, their tour manager Dave, and a man Thom can only assume is their band manager. Michael is slouched with a jutting hip and crossed arms, and is nodding thoughtfully, which Thom has come to learn is how he holds himself when he’s really listening to someone talk. Thom feels a shiver and suddenly his body is very nearly swaying from the vacuum his anxiety leaves behind as it vanishes.

This is Michael. There’s no reason to be freaking out.

He feels a smile cracking open his face as he trots over to join the men deep in discussion. Michael’s wearing a threadbare, unbuttoned shirt over a skin-tight yellow t-shirt that shows off a strip of stomach above the edge of his low-slung trousers. Fuck, but he is looking fit. Thom has the simple hope that Michael likes what he sees, too. Despite the fact that the man is wrinkled everywhere and Thom is almost hopelessly tidy, Thom is pretty sure he’s the one who looks like a bedraggled squirrel. He draws up to the group and Dave sees him; he nods and smiles in greeting.

Michael flicks an indifferent glance at Thom, and then returns his attention to whatever his manager is saying.

Oh.

Thom pauses, waiting for their manager—Jefferson?—to finish his thought, and for Michael to greet him and welcome him into the group.

It takes a while as Jefferson is going on and on about the logistics about something or other; Thom’s not paying attention. He idly lets the words wash over him, concentrating more on hearing the change in tone that signals a person is about to bring their comments to an end and let another person interject. Thom’s really good at listening for that verbal denouement in conversations. His management would have a fit if they knew how often he zoned out in meetings.

Ah, and here it comes—Thom perks up and looks up at Michael. Michael opens his mouth and Thom nearly steps forward, but Michael is responding to Jefferson, and now Bertis is interjecting as well.

No one is even acknowledging him standing here.

It’d be rude to just walk away without saying anything, wouldn’t it? They know he’s standing right here.

Maybe they want him to leave, though. Maybe they think he shouldn’t be listening? Maybe this is their polite way of letting him know this is private R.E.M. business? God, Thom had bounded up to them like a great big puppy, without even stopping to think that maybe this was a conversation he wasn’t welcome to. But Dave had smiled at him? Dave was a tour manager, though; Thom’s pretty sure they all have that same hopeful, welcoming smile handed out with their first receipt book. Doesn’t mean shit, basically.

Thom feels about three inches tall, and can’t see how to get out of this with any semblance of
grace. Maybe it’s that Michael thinks Thom is being deeply unprofessional, acting like a kid with a crush in front of his management. They’re not in Miami on a romantic getaway; this is work. Thom should know better. Michael is probably trying to spare Thom some humiliation by ignoring him, actually. Maybe he saw something in Thom—something Thom wasn’t aware he was transmitting—as he approached that screamed he couldn’t be trusted to keep his cool?

Anxiety is climbing his spine again, vertebrae by vertebrae.

But now he’s been standing here too long to just walk away in a manner that’d seem casual. It’d be a very obvious retreat if he left now. They’d see his embarrassment, his awkwardness. That’s not acceptable, either. They might be treating him like an unwanted little ghost—like Casper wanting to play games; ignore him and he’ll vanish—but he’s not going to give them the satisfaction of seeing they’ve got under his skin.

But they’re still bloody talking.

That’s enough. Thom’s done. It’s not the first time he’s been the freak stalking about the oblivious object of his dogged affection. He wrote a whole bloody hit song about his modus operandi, didn’t he? Did he think on some level it’d exorcise that particular demon of his? He supposes he did. But no, it’s the same as it ever was. And isn’t that just lovely.

“Cheers,” he mumbles, before turning heel and stalking off. He very purposely doesn’t listen to see if anyone acknowledges his departure.

He finds himself in the greenroom and crawls under a long banquet table that’s piled with buckets of ice and sodas. The tablecloth conveniently reaches the floor. Once he’s tucked away and hidden from view, he drags his notepad from his satchel and starts to scribble.

iam
The
chuff of a Ghost in
the room with no
lights on.

—

There’s no vodka, but there’s a metric ton of beer. That’ll tide him over until the transport van comes to gather them up and then he will finally retreat to his room, where there’s a bottle that he bought at the Miami airport’s duty free. It’s almost like some part of him knew to expect this.

Thom pops the cap off of a Rolling Rock and meanders around the afterparty. So many of these things are wretched. He’s pretty sure every amphitheatre venue like this had one good afterparty in 1987 and they’ve been making bad photocopies of it ever since, passing them out for each band that comes through. Another five years and these things will be a blank white sheet of a gathering.
Maybe he’ll be allowed to skip them finally. He supposes he could now, if he wanted. But there’s free beer and he’d have to call his own cab.

Maybe he’s getting used to the idea that most of life—the good as well as the bad—is waiting for whatever you’re at to be over.

The show was fine. Thom had enough energy left over from his frustration and embarrassment that it fueled his performance and overrode the dejection lurking around the edges. He feels he’s about to hit the wall however, and when he does he worries all that will be left is a sludge-pile of angst, dragging itself from his bunk on the bus to the stage and then back again. Set to repeat for the next month. It’s going to be delightful, he’s sure.

But in the here and now, Thom will focus on euthanising today with the bottle of Smirnoff waiting for him on the dresser; he’ll roll today’s bones into the recycling bin, and he’ll drunkenly convince himself that tomorrow maybe he’ll birth something new, something flushed and squalling, something handsome and charming, something-something-brave-new-world-something, something vast, and, above all, something where Thom is not quite so much the person who exists today.

“Hey. Great set.”

Thom glances up at Michael. “Thanks.”

They stare at each other, saying nothing and taking everything in. Thom suddenly wants to smash something, to cry, because this is not how he imagined them meeting up again. Everything is ruined, and he’s sure it’s somehow his fault. It always bloody is, isn’t it? He shouldn’t have come on so strong. He shouldn’t have pushed. He should have just let it happen naturally, instead of being so fucking needy all the time.

“You want to get out of here?” Michael smiles at him hopefully.

“Why?” Thom asks slowly, suspiciously. Is this where Michael takes him aside and tells him this isn’t a good idea, but hey, no hard feelings?

“Because I want to be alone with you. I’ve been wanting to be alone with you since the moment I saw you today. But Jefferson and Bertie, jesus, they get going and you can’t escape. I’m sorry for that, by the way. I figured if I kept nodding and let them say their piece they’d let me go sooner. But then you left and I didn’t have a chance to hunt you down. There’s so much fucking press here today, with it being the first stop of the US leg. You know how it is.”

Thom rubs a hand through his hair and shrugs. “Oh. ’S all right. I didn’t think anything of it.”

“Hey now, it’s not all right.” Michael steps up close to him. Thom can smell that he’s just showered; he smells clean, and of a light musky aftershave, and male. Michael leans in and whispers against his ear, “It’s not all right what I did at all, because I can tell you’re pissed off. You got me back though, because do you have any idea how hard it was to have to stand there and watch you? It wasn’t fair. You looking like a fucking piece of candy I wanted to eat, and I couldn’t even talk to you.”

Michael reaches a hand to run his fingers down the inside of Thom’s forearm.

“Couldn’t touch you.”
Thom opens his mouth but nothing comes out.

Michael moves even closer, nearly chest to chest, and slowly moves his arm around Thom to rest a hand on the small of his back. To anyone watching, it probably looks like he’s just trying to make sure Thom can hear him over the din of the people trying to make this gathering into a real party. Friendly Michael, touchy-feely Michael. That’s all.

“So can we please get the fuck out of here? This party is a joke and I’m going to lose it if I’m not alone with you soon,” Michael breathes against him. “I’ve been thinking about pretty much nothing except you, I can’t get you out of my fucking head. You’re not gonna make me wait any longer are you, Thom? Say you won’t.”

Shivers, like phone-wires vibrating when a flock of birds takes flight, snap and hum all the way through Thom. It takes him a moment to find his voice.

“Yeah. Yeah, let’s get out of here.”

Michael plucks the nearly full bottle of beer from his hand and sets it aside. He turns back and beams at Thom and Thom can’t help but smile back.

“Perfect. I’ll have a car brought around.”

—

Everything about Michael’s penthouse suite is so monochrome and measured that Thom feels insufficiently postmodernist to be standing in the middle of it.

He feels dirty and small and decidedly unsexy, despite what Michael had whispered in his ear at the venue, had continued to whisper into his ear the entire ride here.

Thom had almost needed to disconnect at a certain point—he’s never had anyone say things like that to him, at the least never directed at him. He’s used to being seen as cute, or maybe even as interesting in terms of looks. He’s not objectively sexy. He’s learned he can play-act sexy on stage, but that doesn’t really count, does it? Sometimes a photographer can catch a certain angle that makes him think if he could only ever present that very specific pose to people, and have a crew following him to carry around the lights that lend him that studio glow, well, then sure…he’d be sexy. Maybe. Questionable.

How is this his life, where Michael Stipe thinks he’s sexy in all his red-faced, rumpled, grubby-nailed glory? No one has ever accepted him like this. In every relationship he’s attempted, it feels likes he’s had to work so much harder than other people do to simply present himself in a light that’s found acceptable. Acceptable, and then begrudging.
Maybe that’s one of the reasons he’s admired Michael for so long. Maybe he’s sensed that Michael can see beyond the surface of things, things like Thom. Maybe he’s projecting, as usual. Maybe he can’t tell the difference anymore. Maybe he’ll worry about that later.

Michael is moving calmly around the room, setting his watch on the nightstand next to the huge bed (that Thom is refusing to look too closely at), shifting through a pile of memos and messages, and then calling the front desk to set a wake-up call for 6:30 AM. He pulls a bottle of water from the mini-fridge and hands it off to Thom.

“Have a seat. Make yourself comfortable.”

Thom moves toward the posh couch lined up against the floor-to-ceiling windows. Outside and far below, the ocean they’re butted up against is an inky abyss that might as well be the view from a space capsule as it hurtles towards a black hole. Thom sits gingerly. The leather feels alive and almost oily under his fingers. He wonders if he sat still and quiet enough, would it start breathing beneath him? It’d sound like an accordion, an old organ with broken bellows, dust and sighs and no music.

There’s an impressively well-stocked minibar across the sitting room.

“Um, would you mind if I mixed myself a drink?”

“I’d prefer if you didn’t.”

Thom shoots Michael a look.

From across the room, Michael looks back at him, levelly. His face shifts then, and he abruptly appears a little unsure. Thom realises it’s easy to forget the man is deeply shy at his core and has, by his own admission, learned to compensate with aggressive charm. Thom has the random thought that Jonny doesn’t get that and that’s why he doesn’t like him. Michael usually seems so sure of every little thing he does, like he’s been premeditating for a week beforehand.

“I guess I’m not really comfortable with the thought that maybe you can only be with me if you’re a little fucked up.”

“Oh.” Thom thinks about the strawberry hash, the little blue pill. “It’s not that at all. I’m not…no.”

“That’s…good to know.” Michael still sounds unconvinced.

“I’m nervous,” Thom says plainly.

Michael looks at him like he’s done something right yet once again, rewarding him with that one specific smile that seems tailor-made for Thom and warms him down to his toes. Michael sits down on the edge of the bed.

“Come over here. Sit next to me.”

Thom stands on legs he can barely feel, his heart pounding, and crosses the room. He may as well be crossing the Rubicon.

He sinks onto the bed next to Michael, and stares at his hands in his lap. He is already half-hard
beneath them, despite his trepidation. Michael is silent, waiting. Thom knows he’s waiting for him to make the next step.

He’s already lost control of the situation, but he can dictate how this begins and claim a single moment as his own. He turns his head and looks up at Michael, and into his eyes.

Michael smiles down at him, slow and rich as cream. “There you are.”

Thom has just just enough time to think he’s heard that line from Michael before and is trying to remember where, when Michael leans forward and captures Thom’s mouth with his own, his hands already moving to frame Thom’s face.

Michael wastes no time and kisses him deeply, his tongue pushing past his lips to map the shape of Thom’s crooked front teeth. He groans into Thom’s mouth appreciatively, drawing an answering sigh from Thom. His mouth leaves Thom’s and starts to explore the hollow under his jaw, nudging Thom’s head up as he draws a tongue down into the sharp dip of his clavicle.

Thom has the faintest sense of their first kiss; it’s a rough sketch across the top of his memory of that night in Tel Aviv. Was it anything like this? Michael’s mouth is back on his, demanding that Thom participate. Thom doesn’t know if Michael is teasing out his own hidden skills, or if Michael can kiss in a way that’s akin to a dancer leading his partner, making them look better than they actually are. All Thom knows is that he’s never felt so graceful when kissing someone before. He’s used to spit and teeth and bashed noses.

Leaning back, Michael pulls Thom down along with him to the bed. Thom lands on his side, but then Michael is over him, covering his body with his own. Michael is thin enough that his bulk isn’t intimidating, but it’s still an uncertain sensation. He’s solid and grounding, flat planes pressing against Thom where he’s used to feeling soft curves.

Michael abruptly rears back onto his knees and stares down at Thom, his lips wet and parted as he catches his breathe.

“Still nervous?”

“Not so much,” admits Thom. “Kiss me again.”

Michael grins and pulls his t-shirt over his head, tossing it away from the bed. His torso is a collection of sharp white angles and shadowed hollows, with sinewy muscles flowing beneath a furred chest and stomach.

“Demanding brat, aren’t you?” He resettles himself over Thom, urging Thom’s legs open with his knees so he can nestle between them.

“Oi!” A giggle leaps from Thom’s mouth, distantly surprising him. “I’m told it’s one of my most endearing traits.”

Thom lets himself be bold and runs his hands over Michael’s chest. The hair could be the patterns on a map of the ocean’s currents. Maybe it should feel unsettling, a chest so obviously masculine under his fingers. But he thinks it mostly just feels really nice.

“It certainly is.” Michael runs a pointed tongue along the seam of Thom’s lips, nips at the corner of his mouth. He then kisses Thom chastely, his teasing smile pressing against Thom’s own.
“Let’s get rid of this,” he murmurs, running a hand under Thom’s shirt, across the sudden inhalation that caves in his stomach. Michael withdraws and starts working on Thom’s buttons.

Thom can only lay there, watching as those large, sure hands spread his shirt open and familiarise themselves with the expanse of his newly-exposed skin.

“You’re lovely, Thom.”

He won’t be so lovely if he starts to blush and his chest goes all mottled. Thom shakes his head and pulls a face. He feels like he can only handle so much competing pleasure before it will start to make him feel unsettled and ill, and having Michael pet him with words as well as hands is pushing at his boundaries.

“Shhhhh. Shut the fuck up. Don’t even open that mouth.” Michael rubs his thumbs over Thom’s nipples, plucking at them, causing Thom to squirm and hiss at the sparks that radiate across his chest. He continues, lightly, playfully, “Not if you’re going to disagree with me.”

“But…”

Michael suddenly thrusts up, pushing Thom’s legs wider as their groins come into contact, their cocks rubbing together through the fabric of their jeans. Thom cuts himself off with a grunt as his erection twitches and strains at the friction.

“Like I said…shut up. You,” Michael moves his head down to Thom’s chest, and gently places a kiss over his thundering heart, “don’t get to fucking tell me what I think is hot, got it?”

“Got it.” Thom has gone breathy. Is that really his voice?

Michael starts to kiss his way down Thom’s chest, choosing spots seemingly at random to lick and lightly run his teeth over. He hums agreeably into the notches of Thom’s ribs, dips a tongue into his navel. He backs his way down Thom’s body until he’s off the bed, crouching in the space between where Thom’s knees are bent over the edge of the mattress.

Thom tilts his chin so he can look down at Michael; Michael turns his face towards Thom in return, his stubble a gritty sweep against the vulnerable skin of Thom’s stomach. Michael’s eyes are hooded and dark, and he looks up at Thom like a predator hunched over its kill.

He holds Thom’s gaze for several long moments as his hands move to Thom’s zip. Thom more feels than hears the pop of his top button, and bites down on his bottom lip as he fists the sheets near his head when Michael starts to work his jeans and pants down over his hips.

When Thom’s erection pops free, the head emerging leaking and red from its foreskin, Michael smiles down at it wolfishly.

“Oh, I’m going to enjoy this. I’m going to take good care of you.”

He finishes stripping Thom’s clothing down his legs, catching Thom’s socks on the downward slide and then dumping the whole pile off to the side. Thom feels pinned down by his own near nudity, his open shirt serving to only make him more conscious of the room’s air currents moving over his naked flesh. He’s empty of words; is it okay if he just watches Michael and doesn’t say anything?
Michael is now hovering over Thom’s groin and Thom can’t help but inch his legs further open, offering himself up to the man eyeing his cock like he’s trying to decide where to take the first bite.

(Thom’s pretty sure he’s not actually going to bite him.)

Michael decides on all of it; in one smooth motion he takes Thom in as far as he can, rolling his tongue against the sensitive underside. Thom gasps, and though he tries to be polite he can’t help but thrust a few times to test the waters. Michael hums a negative around his cock and secures Thom’s hips down on the mattress. He slides Thom out of his mouth except for the very tip and then plunges back down the length. Thom is grunting, panting, questing for more suction, needing more of that hot-wet-tight mouth—but Michael has taken to teasing him, running his tongue up and around his shaft. His fingers follow, dragging through his public hair, scratching around the base of his cock before sliding down to cup his balls.

Thom hasn’t gotten a proper blow job in what feels like forever, so maybe Michael only has Thom’s rusty sense-memory as competition, but Thom thinks he’s probably just that good at sucking cock. He’s used to having a mouth working him over as fast as possible to get him to completion. He’s always assumed it must not be a very fun thing to do, no matter what girls had assured him in the past. Having Michael lick and fondle and suckle at him like it’s his new favourite hobby is outside of Thom’s realm of experience.

Thom tries to thrust up into Michael’s mouth again, and is pretty sure he just mouthed please at the crown of the head bent over him. Michael is parceling out pleasure to Thom at a glacial pace, tending to the glowing pressure deep in his guts as if it’s banked embers. It strikes Thom that he must have a tell, because any time those embers start to flare Michael eases up and returns to amusing himself by teasing at Thom’s flesh.

As he is doing right now: He lets Thom pop from between his lips and blows wetly on the head. Thom twitches with frustration in Michael’s hand, a drip of precum oozing from the slit. He bangs his head back against the mattress.

“God, fuck,” he rasps, maddened and no longer quite in control of himself. “Please Michael…I keep getting close…I just need some more, okay? Just a bit more.”

“We’re in a hurry, are we?”

“Nooo, but fuck, Michael, your mouth…”

Michael has a chuckle like chocolate drops. It’s such a cliché, Thom thinks wildly, a laugh like chocolate, but it’s still true; that laugh is melting in his overheated brain, oozing warmly over his thoughts, a sticky sweetness he wants more of.

“Mmmmm,” Michael sighs, managing to sound sated and anticipatory at the same time. He shifts from his spot at the end of the bed and crawls up next to Thom. “Roll over for me.”

Thom pulls himself up further along the bed, his legs fully on the mattress now. He rolls over, and feels as Michael pulls his open shirt down his arms and then it’s gone. He feels body heat as Michael leans over him.

He starts to place wet, open-mouthed kisses along Thom’s shoulders. “Freckles. I love freckles.”
Thom giggles for some reason. Freckles are cute, moles are gross, Jonny says in his memory, looking over his shoulder to examine his own back in the mirror. *You're lucky, you have freckles. I look like I have four spots of mould. A mouldy constellation, that's what it looks like.*

Michael has reached his lower back. He kneads the muscle there, his hands making Thom groan and relax into the mattress. His erection is trapped under his body, and is still insisting it needs more of Michael’s attention, but *fuck* if he’s not a sucker for a back rub.

Michael nips at a buttock and Thom shivers. That’s a new one; he’s never had someone place teeth on him there. Michael’s hands smooth down the dip of his lower back and join his mouth, rubbing soothing circles onto his backside as he mouths more kisses all along the curves of his arse.

Thom feels fingers slide into his crack and despite everything he’s mentally prepared himself for, he starts to tense up. He expects to feel a finger poking at him, but instead Michael spreads him apart and Thom has a moment to feel confused—

—Then a tongue is swirling across his hole. Thom shouts a bark of alarm; he’s somehow got his knees mostly under him and he’s scrambling towards the head of the bed, his brain animal-shrill as it urges his body to move.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Michael’s hands are on his hips, fingers fitting neatly around the jut of the bones there, and he’s then pulling Thom easily back down the bed towards him.

“What…what the fuck was that…you can’t do that…” Thom’s babbling.

“It’s something that’s gonna feel really good,” Michael admonishes as he crawls up Thom’s body and lays a kiss behind his ear. “And I can *definitely* do that.”

“But…but it’s…”

Michael settles his weight fully along Thom’s back. Thom can scent the heat of his body. Michael says, simply, low voice barely an inch from Thom’s ear, “It’s what I want.”

Thom can feel his eyeballs popping. He must look like a spooked horse. And just like a spooked horse, Michael is petting a calming hand down his flank. “Have you liked everything I’ve done so far?”

“Yes,” Thom whispers, suddenly shy and overwhelmed. He feels naive.

"Good boy. Let me have you."

Thom feels himself shake and rustle, tiny inner vibrations like his bones are forks and knives shifting in a drawer that’s been pulled out too fast. Michael moves off his back and returns into position behind him. It’s not like he hasn’t heard of what Michael wants to do to him—he just didn’t think many people *actually* did it. And if they did, it had to be some sort of dark kink they hid from everyone. Michael’s acting like this is the most natural thing in the world.

But then, what does Thom know about being natural. Everything he does feels like a stretch. His natural tendencies always seem to end up being the abnormality. It seems like people actually do all sorts of things Thom never thought they might. Is he actually some sort of a *prude* and just never realised?
Michael settles down and hooks his arms under Thom’s thighs, which serves the dual purpose of slightly raising Thom’s arse and forming an entrapment, should Thom try to wriggle away again.

That tongue returns and Thom inhales sharply as it starts to slowly lap at him. *Oh my fucking god* is all his mind seems to be able to supply, repeating itself in a malfunctioning loop. Thom has never felt a sensation even close to this before, and his mind can’t parse it. It’s wet, and it’s *filthy*, and it’s warm, and it’s…it’s…

The tongue sharpens to a point and starts to delve insistently at him.

Thom wails, huffs, tries to kick his legs out behind him. Michael just tightens his hold and continues to work Thom over, his tongue in turn a flat and soothing wash, and then a darting pressure at the tight muscle of his hole.

Thom’s exhausting himself with his struggles. He finally succumbs and lays prone, his pulse pounding in his temples and his hips moving with little spastic twitches. Michael’s tongue is winning against Thom, pushing more easily at the loosening clench of his muscles as it starts to breach him. And it’s beginning to no longer feel weird and invasive, at least not in a bad way.

It’s starting to feel good. *Really* bloody good, to be honest. He whimpers, simultaneously thrilled and mortified.

Thom feels a part of himself starting to let go and give in, cobwebs against the hailstorm, and he remembers what it felt like when he sang for Michael. How he had torn at his clothes in his wantonness. He started something that night, a gear was set to grinding, and this is the culmination of its crude clockwork. He hadn’t known precisely what he had hoped to achieve other than gaining Michael’s attention. And now he has it—Michael is taking him apart, making him feel good, turning him into the sole focus of his desire.

Thom becomes aware of the throaty little cries he’s beginning to sound out. He thrusts back at Michael, and his trapped cock rubs against the mattress beneath him. It’s delicious friction and suddenly the tongue at his entrance feels completely *right*—the perfect counterpart to the rough drag of his erection over the bedspread.

“There we go, perfect, that’s so good,” Michael is pulling back even as Thom continues to arch and thrust. Michael places a steadying hand on the small of his back. “Shhhhh, stop moving now.”

It’s easier to follow his directive than to think about it, so Thom does. He’s water poured from one vessel into another by Michael’s steady hand.

There’s the sound of a zip behind him and Thom fuzzily realises Michael is finally shedding his jeans as well. He expects to feel Michael’s body immediately pressing against him again, flesh-to-flesh, but instead he hears Michael shifting around. Thom doesn’t turn to look. He doesn’t know why. It’s not like he’s not curious. He’s just trapped in the amber of the moment and doesn’t feel like he needs to.

He feels a hand on his arse once again and arches back unselfconsciously. He’s decided he likes Michael’s mouth on him and wants more. But instead of a tongue there’s a finger, slick and cool with lube, piercing him easily.

“Oh-my-god-MICHAEL!”
“You like that?” His voice is amused.

Thom just buries his head in his arms. There’s no burn, not like in the shower, but even after Michael’s mouth his body is wanting to rebel. It’s only a single finger, he tells himself… but Michael’s are much larger than Thom’s. He hears the snap of a lid and flinches when more wet stickiness slides down his crack to pool around Michael’s slowly questing finger.

A second digit joins the first, slowly easing in and out, then pushing even further in with a twist.

Thom moans and gnarls, trapped between fight and flight yet unable to choose either.

The fingers start to scissor and suddenly it’s too much; he gasps, his muscles clenching down, hard. It’s much too much and maybe he thought he could take this but his body is awash with immediate panic and it hurts.

“No no no no no no no no, I can’t, I can’t, please Michael, stop!”

“Yes you can, you can take this, you’re doing so good, you are taking it, just relax. Can you do that, can you relax for me?” The fingers stop scissoring but don’t retreat; Thom tries to do as Michael has asked, forcibly relaxing as much as he is able. Michael continues, soothingly, a near sing-song, “Breathe. Trust me, Thom. Shhh shhh shhhhh, I have you.”

It no longer hurts; the burn has retreated to an ache that throbs in time with his heartbeat. The alien feeling of being stretched and impaled so thoroughly makes his breath stutter and catch. Thom shakily, carefully exhales. He nods. He’ll try. He wants to try.

“That’s right, so good for me,” Michael’s strokes his free hand through Thom’s hair before trailing it down his body, and he then slides it under his groin. He fists his hand around the very tip of Thom’s cock. “Fuck my hand.”

It’s hard to start moving, knowing what Michael is essentially asking of him. Thrusting into Michael’s fist means that in doing so he’s also going to be fucking himself back onto Michael’s fingers. But he tries, and while his brain might be in shambles his cock is still very much hard and at the first skittish roll of his hips, he lets out a low grunt. He eases backwards, willing himself to not clench, and as he does Michael curves his fingers, brushing across his prostate.

He doesn’t even know what sound he must have just made; all he is aware of is a white-hot shard of pleasure shooting up through his spine and belly, unexpected and overwhelming. When he comes back to himself Michael is chuckling, urging him to continue.

Thom slowly cranes his head to the side to look back at Michael. Michael is much too composed—whereas Thom is covered with a sheen of sweet, his ribs fanning with exertion—and he quirks an eyebrow at Thom.

“Not bad, huh? Getting the picture now?”

Thom nods slowly and when Michael urges him to start moving again, he pushes back harder this time, chasing the sensation Michael’s fingers had produced. Michael obliges by pressing again and again at that spot within him and before long Thom is moving more easily, his body knowing what to do even if his brain doesn’t. He’s starting to feel like he’s flying, or maybe floating, which is impossible as he also feels pinned, grounded by Michael’s hands. Even more so when Michael
starts to scissor his fingers again, working him further open. It’s stunning how much those two fingers change the intensity of everything.

After a while he releases Thom’s cock and stills Thom with a hand on his hip, once more knowing, somehow, that Thom is edging dangerously close to a point he won’t be able to return from. Thom snorts with frustration, but complies.

The fingers are suddenly gone from his arse as well, and Thom mewls at the loss. Michael smiles in response.

“Turn over for me. I want to see you.”

Bonelessly, Thom manages to flip over, his legs akimbo. He stares at Michael, feeling strung out but present in a way no drugs could ever recreate. He is drifting, but only as the moon to Michael’s planet.

“Look at you,” Michael breathes. “You’re practically begging for it. It’s sexy as hell, by the way.”

Michael soon presses into him again and Thom now takes his fingers warm and easy, like he’s been custom made for it. Michael presses damp, earnest kisses onto his shoulder absentmindedly as he works Thom, hitting that bitter-bright spot inside every few strokes. Michael is patient; he doesn’t rush his pace, just continues to rock his fingers into Thom, back and forth. He doesn’t touch Thom’s achingly hard cock, instead leaving it to strain and twitch, to spatter droplets against Thom’s stomach. Thom knows if he relents, it will only take a couple strokes to bring him off.

When he adds a third finger Thom takes it with only a slight hiss, finds he welcomes the extra fullness, throws his legs open as wide as they’ll go. He’s lost all sense of shame now, but also thinks that maybe Michael likes that, that he wants to see Thom offering himself up like this.

Michael’s eyes are burning bright on him, his cupid-bow lips parted slightly. Thom shivers; it’s not being stared at—that, he’s used to—it’s that he’s not used to being orchestrated like this. There’s really no other word for it. Michael is tuning him up, breaking him in, getting ready to…to play him.

“There, I think you’re more than ready. I’m going to give you what you need now, okay?” Michael leans back, releasing Thom and then tearing open a packet and rolling a condom on. Thom turns his head and watches, almost disinterestedly. He’s still floating. Michael slicks himself up generously, and straddles Thom to kiss him, gently yet lavishly. He whispers into Thom’s mouth, “I knew the moment I saw you that you needed this so badly. Tell me you want it.”

“I want you,” Thom breathes back.

“I know you do, baby.” He eases back between Thom’s legs and lifts one, placing it over his shoulder. He licks along the crease of Thom’s bent knee.

Michael’s cock is sturdy, a contrast to his lean figure. It’s average in length, but thick and purple and curved.

He makes the angles of their bodies slot up like some sort of arcane puzzle, and then Michael steadies himself with a hand at the base of his shaft and starts to push into Thom.

Thom throws his head back, mouth wide, eyes seeing nothing. His throat clicks but no sounds
escape. He arches, tries to buck. Michael continues to press his way in, slow and inevitable.

“Sweet, you’re so fucking sweet.” Michael croons. He has finally cracked his veneer of composure as he sinks into Thom’s body. “You feel so good on my cock.”

Thom can feel when he bottoms out, Michael’s balls flush against his arse. Michael stills, holding himself in check, and asks, “You okay, kitten?”

“I…I don’t know,” Thom moans. “It’s…it’s…”

It’s a lot more to take than fingers, even three. Michael’s penis is a molten rod that feels like it’s twining past his innards and plugging directly into his spine. He can barely think, let alone speak. “It’s you.”

“Mmmm.” Michael starts to pull out, which Thom thinks is harder to bear than the push in. He can only trust that as before, his body will adjust and Michael will take care of him, make it feel good. Thom’s exhausted, though, and has the faint realisation that Michael has been edging him this entire time, keeping him mere steps from free falling into orgasm repeatedly.

A rhythm emerges as Michael continues to gently shift inside of Thom. And as Thom suspected, his body is already adjusting, quickly opening up completely for Michael’s use. He lets himself be taken, lets Michael pull his other leg over a shoulder as well. Michael tilts Thom’s pelvis up off the bed, his hands spanning across his arse, fingertips digging in. The new angle leaves Michael’s cock rubbing over his prostate, and Thom sinks even further under the waves of this strange new pleasure, voicing throaty cries in time with Michael’s pace. There’s nerves firing in places they don’t normally do, and he’s quickly restructuring his idea of what sex can be.

This is now proper fucking, Michael twisting his hips as he jerks and grinds against Thom, each thrust a matchstick striking flint deep inside of his body. Michael is now as sweaty as Thom, his sinewy muscles limned and slick. The shape of his bald skull glows in the soft lighting and Thom is once again reminded of a bull, a minotaur, some rough beast that exists only to accept the sacrificial.

Thom is nearly howling now, his lips bruised from his own teeth, his fingers aching from fisting the bedcovers as hard as he can. He can almost feel the bones grinding, the phalanges and metacarpals colliding, as some faint memory from college, an anatomy figure drawing class, nonsensically swims to the surface to supply him the names.

Michael reaches down and circles Thom’s cock with strong fingers, squeezing and stroking it to match his thrusts.

It’s as if Michael is holding him there, not quite letting him drop, waiting until Thom can’t bear it another moment. Then Michael tightens his grip just so and then it’s too much, it’s death, it’s every nerve finally igniting; It’s Thom, coming undone. His orgasm strips away all adjectives, all metaphor, and for once Thom’s thoughts are just one clean line.

He can’t even mark the moment that Michael comes, only feels a body dropping down on top of his own like hot wet kindling. He hisses as Michael withdraws, his anus clenching at the shock of loss. The hair on Michael’s chest is damp, sweat caught delicately along the sworls. Thom reaches a weak hand up and skims it along Michael’s similarly slick scalp.

Michael rolls over onto his back next to Thom, their legs still tangled.

“Yeah.”

They just lay there for a while, catching their breath, as the air conditioning dries the sweat and cum coating Thom’s stomach like a filmy second skin. Ugh. If he’s thinking about that, he must still be alive, he supposes.

He checks in with his brain, asks if this is when he should start freaking out, or if he still has a little bit of time left to enjoy this tranquil afterglow. His brain must still be offline though, as there are no warning lights on the console yet as far as he can tell.

Michael slings a heavy arm out and pulls him into his side, turning and curling into a spoon around Thom. He kisses the nape of his neck and twines their legs tighter.

“You know,” he rumbles drowsily into Thom’s hair, “I think I’m going to have to keep you, kitten.”

If Thom’s answering purr is real or a figment of the hazy, soft dream he’s already slipping into, it’s all the same to him.

Chapter End Notes

- Thom did indeed wear his Street Spirit shirt to that first US Miami show :)
They all wait off to the side of the bus, unintentionally looking like a posed advert for the various travel gear dumped around their feet. They’re waiting for Ed to finish up in the loo.

Rule the first of the tour bus: You do not, under any circumstances, ever take a shit on the bus. Not ever.

Colin is still nursing a chasm of humiliation—three years in the past but yet still too garish of a memory to contemplate straight-on—over making that very error on their first bus. The recriminations from the bus driver, a huge, surly man named Grif who looked at them like they were zoo animals (and the boring sort like llamas or fancy weasels, at that) were enough of a trauma that he now often can’t shit at all for days while on the road. That the incident has since engendered a healthy fear of all tour bus drivers is merely a given.

Ed exits the hotel lobby and marches towards them; they all start to shift around, shouldering backpacks and hoisting the gear they want along with them in the bus. But they still huddle, waiting for Ed to enter first.

He makes a beeline right for the bunks while the rest of them stay back, watching as he investigates. Colin exchanges a look with Phil.

There are twelve bunks; two berths laid end-to-end on either side of the aisle, stacked three-high.

“Oh fucking thank god,” Ed exclaims, turning around and grinning at them. “They’re six-footers.”

“Huzzah!” Thom retorts, darting forward to claim a bottom berth now that Ed has proclaimed all to be well.

Ed drops his bag on the bed above Thom’s. “Hey guys,” he says and Colin immediately spins to
Phil and holds up a finger. *Wait for it.*

“Remember the bus in Mexico? Those beds—” Colin pantomimes along with Ed, raising his eyebrows in mock horror at Phil as he mouths the words he knows are coming “—were **five-foot-six inches**.”

Phil looks scandalised and raises a finger of his own. *Hold up, we’re not done yet.*

Thom, who’d crawled into his bunk, pops his head out and cranes it up at Ed. Phil grins at Colin and mouths, in perfect concert with Thom, “I thought they were perfectly cozy.”

One can only assume that this exact conversation will be repeated *ad nauseum* for the next five, ten, or (god forbid) twenty years. Colin estimates one year remains before it loses its charm.

He drops his bag into another bottom bunk and moves back so Jonny can stake his territory. Jonny always goes for the very top bunk above wherever Colin has chosen. He claims that no one *ever* picks the bunk between them, not even Duncan, so it becomes the Junk Bunk and he can keep all his books there within the easy reach of one downward-groping hand.

“Okay mates, give me your ears for a minute, if you would.”

Tim is near the doors, in a stance like some sort of plaid, button-down sea captain, looking in his element. It’s much easier to subjugate a band when they are trapped in a hurtling cage of metal, Colin supposes; no wonder Tim likes the bus tours the best. There’s a big bearded man standing behind Tim, arms crossed, a rough-looking first mate to Tim’s captain. Those crossed arms are like fattened slabs, marked over with amateurish tattoos that have blurred and gone green with age, and Colin already knows this will have to be their driver. Colin *could* choose to feel shame at the way he ducks down behind Ed as they all file up to the couches near the front, but frankly, he doesn’t give a fiddler’s fuck. Do bus drivers gossip? They surely do. Great, he can just imagine the talk. *Radiohead? Yeah, watch out for the bug-eyed one; they have a shitter in the band.*

“Okay, this is T-Bone.”

They always have names like T-Bone, or Big Joe, or Scrapyard Mike or Giant-Man-Who-Will-Crush-Colin-Like-A-Bug. *Always.*

“Hey guys. So yeah, here’s how it goes. You treat me well and I’ll treat you well. You know the rules. Pick up after yourself, pile your sheets in the basket in the morning if you want them clean, if you forget tough shit ‘cause I’m not your housekeeper. I’ll toss the clean ones back on your bunk. I ain’t washing your clothes though, don’t try and sneak your shit in or it’s getting tossed. That’s what you get. Also, I’m not gonna stop at every station we pass because you want cookies or some shit. If you get off, leave a note on my seat or you’ll get left behind. I’m not gonna remember what you look like. Bus call is at one AM, your Mister Greaves says. So yeah, that covers it. Don’t shit on my bus.”

Ed turns and bloody *twinkles* at Colin, shooting him an enthusiastic thumbs-up.

“What’s yer outfit’s name?” T-Bone doesn’t really seem that interested, but his beard and hair are both so bushy and curly that it’s rather hard to say for certain.

“*Radiohead,*” pipes up Thom.
"Like that Talking Heads song?"

"Oh…yeah, exactly!"

T-Bone nods, looking, possibly, pensive beneath all that hair.

"I had ‘em on a bus once."

"Oh my god…what were they like?"

"Told you kid, I don’t keep a scrapbook. You’re all the same to me. But I like their music, so I remember one interesting bit, yeah.” T-Bone grins yellow teeth at Thom’s avid curiosity. He waits silently until Thom hesitantly speaks up again.

"What was that, Mister…Bone?"

"I left that singer of theirs behind in Tulsa. Got off for cookies and he didn’t leave a note."

He turns towards his cockpit and thumps down into the seat, settling in. “So leave a goddamn note, you hear me?”

Tim smiles at them contentedly, and winks.

Thom stares out the window at the poles pressed up against the freeway their bus is traveling. His eyes follow the electrical cables slouching from pole-to-pole, black lines of swooping ink against the blinding blue (blinding if it weren’t for the tinted windows, that is) Florida sky. He’s not thinking about much; his brain is idly picking a percussive beat out of the visual tempo of the power lines marching past.

_Swoop-thump-swoop-thump-swoop-thump_. The thump’s the snarl of cables coming together at the apex of each post, and maybe the twinkling green glass conductors are an asymmetrical cluster of xylophone beats. What’s the swoop of the cables, then? A brushed snare? The posts are the bass drum, of course, the poles holding the whole thing together…

Thom sighs and rolls his head away from the world outside their bus.

His arms are goosebumped braille; it’s always freezing on these things. It’s somehow worse knowing it’s muggy and nearing ninety degrees Fahrenheit outside. He trails a finger over the bumpy skin above his elbow; what does the braille say? What’s the story of him?
Anything there about last night?

Thom doesn’t feel any different. He feels so completely unchanged by last night’s events, in fact, that he’s kinda disturbed by how undisturbed he is. But, that’s good, right? He has fallen straight back into the grave of his previous sexual orientation, and he’s feeling at peace with where he finds himself.

For all of his faults, he’s never been unable to move past former assumptions about himself. He’s never felt like he’s made of bedrock.

*Did you want to be just another dull cliché about some sad wanker having a crisis of sexual self-identity? Well then, what’s the problem? Why are you moping? Stop looking for things to freak out over, Yorke. Last night was good, great even. When’s the last time you had such a great shag?*

Well. Well, then.

*Well, then* but shouldn’t he at least be feeling *something*, anything at all?

*Maybe you’re just so fucking sad you can’t let yourself be happy. You’re, ummm, disassociating or something. Yeah, because something good is finally happening and you have to pick it apart looking for the shoddy bits.*

Thom shakes his head and catches Ed looking at him quizzically. Thom stares at him blankly until Ed rolls his eyes and looks away. Thom turns his head back towards the window again and pretends he sees something beyond his thoughts.

Anyway. Thom realises that one inner voice (out of the many) has gone silent, the one that’s been frantically tugging at his sleeves and whispering that Michael thinks he’s a joke, a game. All these many weeks of second-guessing every interaction, waiting for Michael to step back and…it’s been shaken loose.

So what the fuck? He’s feeling some sort of actual security in regards to Michael’s intentions and had amazing sex last night—so that’s the prostrate, fuck, that’s brilliant—and he really likes being around Michael…and…

And he feels like he’s just mistranslated some sort of foreign-language manual that’s leading him to build a dresser wrong. Like he already knows the moment he sets a pair of socks in the drawer the whole bloody thing will come crashing down. Bolts shooting from their holes to bounce against the walls, *Slot A* splintering away from *Tab B*.

And he feels right now like maybe he can’t be arsed to care, and he can’t figure out *why*.

Ah fuck it.

Thom gets up and calls out to Jonny, “Oi, Greenwood, wanna work on that Electioneering song?”
When Jonny chooses to sit next to Thom in the diner, instead of walking past their booth to join Tim and Plank and Ed in theirs, Colin feels his back prickle.

Thom doesn’t look up from his laminated menu, but asks him, “Do I go with the chips…or the chips? Sorry, french fries.” Thom’s voice screws up into a purposely terrible American accent.

“I’d say mix it up a bit.” Jonny snags Thom’s menu from his hands and gives it a cursory glance. “Go for the…hash browns.”

“Ugh, I can’t. They fry it up on the same griddle they use to cook bacon and hamburgers. I’ve watched. I’m serious.”

“Then french fries it is.”

“Yeah,” says Thom glumly. “It’s always chips. Deep-fried potatoes and tortilla crisps and salsa, that’s all that’s safe to eat. It’s making me sick. I guess I could get a fruit bowl. But it’s always that green melon, I hate the green melon…”

“—Honeydew,” Colin interjects, automatically. He’s ignored.

“Hey, how about mozzarella sticks? And…” Jonny flips the menu over and his hair out of eyes, “…strawberry pie. Its unorthodox, but it’s an escape from the starchy foods.”

Thom looks shifty and mutters, “If I eat that much cheese I won’t shit for days.”

“Sure, but you’ll be given the gift of something new and exciting to whinge about instead of the same old dreary shite.”

Colin narrows his eyes at Jonny, but Jonny isn’t paying attention to Colin.

Thom levels an imperious look at Jonny. He makes a big show of preparing his coffee: carefully measuring out the sugar (much too much, in Colin’s opinion) and then slowing stirring it so the spoon clangs loudly (and annoyingly) against the insides of the cup. He finally takes a slow and considering sip before speaking again.

“But Jonny, I’ll never get tired of talking about you.”

The corners of Jonny’s lips curl up, and then so do Thom’s, and Colin is ready to throw his hands up and then throw both of them into the nearest rubbish bin.

Phil chooses that moment to arrive and sits next to Colin. “What’s so funny?”
“Nothing. Jonny. He’s being mean to me, Phil. Beat him to death with a drumstick, please.” He turns to Jonny and says, solemnly, "You're so bloody mean."

"I wouldn't have to be if you weren't such a begging masochist,” Jonny retorts. “Yeah, c’mon, Mad Dog. Show me what's what.”

Thom giggles. “Yeah, Mad Dog, kick Jonny’s arse. Protect my honour.”

“That suggests you have any honour to besmirch. You’re a twerp.”

“Twerp! Do you hear that Phil? I’m being brutalised. Um. Verbally molested.”

“Oh, please, you like being molested. Tell me, does Michael give you the lolly before or after?”

Colin can feel his eyes literally bugging from their sockets.

Thom just cackles. “God, you’re fucking nasty, Jon-Jon. You’ve scandalised Colin; look, he’s clutching his pearls.”

Plank passes by them and raises a hand in a combined greeting and farewell, and Phil cranes his head back to the other booth. “Oh, look. An empty spot at a table not quite so full of loonies. Bye.”

Jonny smirks at Thom. “Mad Dog’s gone.”

“He’s not impressed with us, Jonny.”

“I’m unquestionably fantastic though, so I can only assume he judged us as a whole and your lack of character is so dreadful that it brought our median average crashing down into an all-time recorded low.”

“Yup.” Thom looks pleased. “It’s you and me, against the entire world.”

“How thrilling.”

Colin doesn’t understand their friendship. He never has and he never will, but at least Jonny is trying in his own bizarre, caustic way to feel out the edges of a new world; one where he’s moving past his feelings for Thom.

He’s trying.
They did soundcheck early, and Colin’s having difficulty deciding on what to do with himself. He mulls about the venue and tries striking up conversation here and there with tonight’s set of busy backstage strangers. He’d thought it would be nice to try and get to know them, however briefly… they work so hard, and Colin rarely even gets their names. They deserve more than that. They deserve appreciation.

“Mm, now that’s interesting! What is it that you’re doing, exactly?”

The woman hunched over a tangle of wires on the floor looks up and stares. She’s crouching like a well-seasoned baseball catcher, eyes amber and curious, and—she’s rather pretty, isn’t she? Her long, straight hair is gathered into a utilitarian knot and she’s got a striking mole on her cheek. Colin could write poetry around that mole.

“I’m just trying to survive until my lunch break.”

Ah.

Colin nods, once, and turns gently on his heel.

He wanders into the dressing room and retrieves a book from his satchel.

“Colin,” asks Jonny, “Is it fair to say that all art is about sex and death?”

“Mine isn’t,” alleges Thom.

“Isn’t it?”

“Nope. Some of it’s about jeans.”

Colin sighs. He hugs his hardback to his chest and leaves Thom and Jonny to discuss how “Faithless, The Wonderboy” could’ve earned them millions. The world just hadn’t been ready yet, Thom reckons. It never will be, concludes Jonny. They’ve had this very same conversation more than once.

It’s difficult to find a quiet spot. Colin finally settles upon a lonely folding chair that’s sitting absentely in a corner, behind a large stack of equipment cases. This chair resonates deeply with Colin; this chair is the Colin Greenwood of chairs. He settles into it like it’s an old friend and crosses one leg over the other. He cracks the book open and rests it against his knee. This is nice.

He’s fifteen pages past where he’d left his bookmark and nearly fully immersed in another reality when two sets of footsteps wander from the adjacent throng of activity and choose to stop right on the other side of Colin’s gear-case-cum-fortress.

Colin groans under his breath, softly.

“…oh, god, my blood pressure has skyrocketed since coming onboard, I’m not kidding. My doctor put me on medication.”

It’s Dave, R.E.M.’s tour manager. Colin hears whoever he’s with let out a gasped grunt of commiserating horror.

“Yeah, man! It’s no joke! I’m probably shaving off at least five years of my life by being crazy
enough to stick with this job, but...hey, it’s what I signed up for. God help me. And, like, it’s not even the touring itself at this point—it’s the little things that get to me. Like...god, I don’t even know. Just little things that have slowly gnawed at my sanity over the years. Like—oh! Like when Michael eats; sometimes he’ll take a bite of something, and while he’s chewing he says, ‘Mmm.’ Like...he actually goes, ‘Mmm!’ Who does that? Nobody actually does that. It’s weird, dude, it creeps me out.”

Blimey. Thank god Tim doesn’t go spilling all their secrets. He may be overworked, but he’d never be so rude as to complain at length to an outsider like this.

“Colin does that!”

“What—?”

“You’re shitting me.”

“No!”

“What is that?!”

“I have no clue!”

“It’s like...are they fuckin’ cartoon characters, or what?”

Tim laughs; Colin has to stifle his affronted intake of breath. Betrayal shoots an arrow straight through his heart.

“And the coffee! I used to love coffee. Now the smell of it gives me PTSD. They should honestly be paying me for the gas I burn up driving around looking for coffee shops every other second of the day.”

“At least someone else is making it. All I do is make tea. I have a recurring dream about making tea and forgetting to put enough milk and sugar in Thom’s and facing an unholy wrath.”

“Oh, fuck that. Let me ask you this: How many times do you have to tell your guys to say ‘This is off the record’ when they say dumb shit in interviews?”

“Oh my god. Once Ed talked about how he nearly went home with a college girl...this girl, pretty little lass, she gets right up in his face and is like, ‘my parents are out of town and I have a bunch of coke.’ A right shameless tart, she was! But Ed bloody told an interviewer this, and I’m sitting right there, and all I can think about is how now Radiohead will be seen as a band of dirty predators, out shagging coked-out teenagers in every city. Mind, Ed didn’t go with the bird, but my god. The damage was already done by him talking about it. Oh, and then Colin wanders by at this point, and says Ed should have done.”

Dave cackles.

“All right, man. Gotta go on a coffee run, I’m not even joking. Apparently the coffee here is shitty and not fit for consumption.” They laugh again. “I’ll catch you later.”

Colin listens to the sound of retreating footsteps; they soon become distant and mingle with the backstage white noise. He lets out a stilted breath he couldn’t help from holding. Time to get out of
here and find a proper hiding spot; maybe he’ll dig a nice, deep grave. Colin bids farewell to his friend the folding chair and slips out from behind the stacks of equipment.

And there, crouched and doing up a shoelace, is Tim.

Colin freezes.

Tim freezes.

Their wide eyes lock.

And then they go their separate ways; too English to acknowledge or ever speak of this for as long as they both shall live.

—

Thom’s thin white button-up is completely soaked. He still hasn’t gotten his breath back, and his ears are ringing, and the crowd’s cheering sounds strange and uncanny from back here. It’s always an odd transition, this weak-kneed walk back into reality. Thom comes gradually to his senses much like he does after a particularly devastating orgasm.

Ed claps him on the back and pushes a bottle of water on him.

“Cheers, mate,” Thom huffs through heavy breaths. He stops to screw open the little cap and tilts his head back, eyes closing to see undulating constellations. When he opens them again, the bottle is empty and Ed is following the rest of the band into their dressing room.

Thom needs to wash all this fucking sweat off. Fuck. He feels like he’s breathing through a wet towel. He tosses the empty plastic into a nearby bin and trudges down a hallway that looks promising.

He turns a corner and nearly collides with Michael.

“Where are you headed?”

“I’m looking for the shower.”

“Mm, no you’re not.”

Michael spins him around like a toy top, guiding him back down the hallway with a gentle pressure to his shoulders. He massages them a bit, and Thom feels him lean in close, feels his breath on the
back of his neck, feels him inhale.

Thom pulls a face that Michael can’t see. He’s positive he must smell absolutely rank. “I’m—
disgusting, really I should shower before—”

“Before what?”

“Before whatever it is you’ve got in mind.”

“Didn’t have anything particular in mind. Do you?”

“Well, a shower would—”

Thom gasps; he hears the slap before he feels it. His right arse cheek stings and prickles and the
warmth radiates exquisitely into his groin. Michael’s hand makes contact again, gentle, soothing
the pins and needles. Fuck. Thom needs out of these jeans.

"I like you like this."

“You have to do a show.”

“So don’t make me late.”

Thom grins; he’s always performed best under a challenge.

—

Colin forgoes the dressing room in favour of castoff little backroom he’d discovered and plops
down on the ratty couch inside. He cracks his Raymond Carver book open again.

*She went into the living room and turned on the lamp and bent to pick up a magazine from the
floor. He watched her hips under the plaid woolen skirt. She moved in front of the window and
stood looking out at the streetlight. She smoothed her palm down over her skirt, then began tucking
in her blouse. He wondered if she wondered if he were watching her.*

He wondered if she wondered if he were watching her.

Story of his life, that. Except, they never wonder anything about him at all, do they? He finds he’s
been wondering less and less if they’re wondering.

He buries himself back into his book and hides between the words. Faintly, the rumble of R.E.M.
taking the stage filters unwelcomely through the walls.
The audience’s springs are uncoiling, their clockwork winding down, shoulders slumping, heads held at awkward angles. Michael has orchestrated a great gig, and is now leading them like a pied piper towards its conclusion. It’s time to let them breathe now, after the fury of the last few songs. Before he pulls out something to end the show with, something to send them soaring with emotional catharsis. But yes, Thom thinks, something low and easy is called for next.

Michael launches into “Star Me Kitten”.

*Keys cut, three for the price of one*
*And nothing's free, but guaranteed for a lifetime's use*

Michael doesn’t play this one all that often, and Thom hasn’t given it the care he’s given so many of R.E.M.’s other songs. He settles back to watch, taking a loose-armed swig from the half-full bottle of wine he stole from R.E.M.’s catering table. The rotted pucker rolls over his tongue, and he contemplates the man swaying at the front lip of the stage.

*Hey, love, look into your glovebox heart*
*What is there for me inside, this love is tired*
*I've changed the locks, have I misplaced you?*

Thom stares at the hand holding the mic, and he thinks about those hands on his skin, and suddenly he doesn’t know what to do with his own hands. He grips the wine bottle like it’s the only tangible evidence that exists in the whole wide world that he’s present in this moment.

Michael turns to pace along the edge of the stage and he catches sight of Thom in the wings of the stage. His chin lowers and his lips curl, and suddenly he’s singing at Thom, to Thom.

*The brakes have worn so thin that you could hear*
*I hear them screeching through the door from our driveway*

Thom remembers the feel of Michael’s hot breath and lips moving across the tender spot behind his ear, right there, a place that makes him mewl a little bit but not care. And those hands, sliding down his body, finally coming to rest where Thom’s all ribs. A firm grip and grounding fingers. Deep kisses while Michael unfolds Thom carefully and lays him out, spreads him wide and smooth.

*No gasoline, just fuck me, kitten*
*You are wild, and I'm in your possession*
*Nothing's free, so fuck me, kitten*
Thom watches as Michael stalks so close to where Thom is standing hidden he momentarily thinks Michael is going to continue, going to step right up to him and do something while the audience wonders where he went. But Michael pauses the last few steps and Thom wonders if the audience wonders what Michael is looking at. Then Michael turns and slowly walks away.

In his mind, Thom is watching as Michael pours his body over Thom’s like hot wax. Michael parts his lips just so, parts Thom’s thighs just so, and what option is there but to play the supplicant? You’d think there were an audience of a thousand tiered above them because Michael moves like the world is watching with its hand down the front of its trousers. There is sex and then there is sexual, and one is an action while the other is an embodiment of purpose and Thom is only now intuiting the difference twixt the two.

In his memory, Michael whispers kitten into the shadowed hollows of Thom’s body like it’s a hex.

In the here and now, Michael slings that word into the audience like it’s a promise Thom made in secret, but that Michael’s decided to share.

*I'm in your possession
So fuck me, kitten*

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Chapter End Notes


Ed: "This absolutely beautiful girl comes up and says: 'My parents are away; do you want to come back with me and do loads of coke?' I didn't have a girlfriend at the time and we had a day off the next day, but I was just flabbergasted. I was very polite, but I thought of us a very moral band and I said 'no' because I wasn't sure what the others would think of me."

- *Alternative Press*, October 1995:

Parked outside the club, Radiohead have a bus-a great white behemoth of a bus, splashed with cheesy airbrushed Western scenes, a churning air conditioner on wheels. It sleeps twelve, which, since Radiohead tour in the same vehicles as their roadies, will fit just fine.

Radiohead are very proud of their vehicle, and greet with tight lips jokes about the possibility of it being sold for its parts before the night is over.

"Imagine us," says Ed, delicately playing pool with Jonny and still emerging from the cloud of his hangover. "I'm 27 years old, I'm on a bus with eleven other men, plus a
driver, we're living in 45 feet of space. That's fairly strange. When my dad was 27, I was two years old, he'd bought a house and was raising a family. And the stranger thing is, it feels very natural, as well."

In fact, however, Radiohead do not really have a bus. They have an air-conditioned clubhouse on wheels. It is a place where foot odor is not questioned, nor is the daily memo, tacked to a corkboard at the front of the vehicle, drawn to resemble a set of breasts. It sports blinds covering opaque windows, a microwave, two televisions with VCRs, sofas, and beds resembling coffins cut out of the side of the walls. It is a sacred place, and visitors are not looked on kindly.

"Your bus is like your inner sanctum," says Ed, "and people get very nervous with strangers on the bus. It's like the nerve center, like going into someone's bedroom. It's a place where you can just chill out. There are these unseen rules, or etiquette about the bus. We've had good friends before on the bus and it just is not a good idea."
They’re bunked down, and Colin wants Jonny to turn off his little reading light soon. For about the billionth time, he reminds himself to get one of those eye masks that block out the light. For the billionth time, he makes due by pulling the top of the blanket up around his head and twisting it around so his eyes are covered but his nose and mouth are free (he hates hot, stale, undercover air). And, for the billionth time, he knows he’s never going to get around to buying one of those masks. This is just the way it is.

Ed’s already snoring.

A giggle issues from the semi-darkness; Thom’s in one of his frenetic moods. Colin knows that in about an hour he’s going to get up and wander to the front of the bus, to read or scribble in a notebook.

But for now, Thom’s pretending he’s tucked in for the night...and he’s not ready to let the rest of them be.

“Do you know,” he whispers, “how dangerous snoring is? A ghost could just stick his ghost-prick right in there. Should we tell Ed, or do you think that’s, like, what he’s hoping for?”

Plank snickers and Tim sighs. Everyone else ignores Thom.

Emboldened, Thom continues, slightly louder but still in a kids-camping-in-the-back-garden stage whisper, “You know how sometimes as you fall asleep, your whole body jolts you awake? That’s a ghost finishing sex with you.”

“Shut up, Thom.” Jonny groans. The bus grows darker with the click of his little battery light going off. “Go to sleep.”

“Okay, okay. Sorry.” He’s aiming for contrite but Colin hears how wound up Thom is underneath the apology.

“Just…try and sleep.”

The bus rumbles on, and they’re like little plastic figures put away for the night in their cubbies. Like Colin’s sister’s Barbie case. It was pink and vinyl and had a white handle, with a picture of an auburn girl in a blue peasant dress on the front. Open it and each doll had a slot, and space for all
their accessories besides. It was printed on the inside so when you unfolded it, it looked like a dressing room. *Their* case is a shaped like a bus, obviously, and when you open it there’s a band, bent into rock-star poses. Little hands folded over eternally, moulded so the miniature guitars jumbled together in another section of the carry-case can snap into place as needed. Their frozen plastic hands are useless for anything else; they’re single-purpose toys. Ed’s too big for his cubby —maybe he’s a different make than the rest.

Colin faintly realises he’s drifting off, easy and gentle for once, and he tries to let it happen.

“Ghosts are fingering your arsehole RIGHT NOW, Jon-Jon.”

Colin’s eyes snap open.

“I hate you,” Jonny mutters above him, so that Colin doesn’t have to.

Nothing more is said after that, and as Colin starts to drift again he idly thinks about how he knows Jonny was smiling even though he couldn’t see his face in the bunk above him. He could hear the smile in Jonny’s voice, could hear how it had made his slight lisp a little thicker.

*I wish I could talk to Jonny about this. When he tells Thom he hates him, he’s really saying, I love you so much. Even if Jonny doesn’t realize it.*

With that last thought, Colin falls asleep to the sound of Ed’s snoring.

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When Michael answers the door, it’s in a polo shirt. *Just* a polo shirt. Thom very nearly stops breathing. Michael’s cock is thoroughly hard and…it…well, it’s right *there!* Thom glances about himself furtively, but the empty hallway does little to abate his shock. He’s doing a rubbish job at hiding it. He *knows* he is. But—

“You ever fucked in Tennessee?”

Thom opens his mouth; it stays open.

“Me neither. Seems about the only thing worth doing here, besides Graceland. And I’m bored of Graceland.”

Michael grabs a fistful of Thom’s t-shirt and pulls him across the threshold. The door snicks shut, locking automatically.
Thom takes in the suite: It’s nice, but nothing compared to some of the other places Michael’s
invited him into. Michael wanders across the main room and turns the television off, some local
news program fizzling to black. He picks a generic hotel tumbler up off a small table and turns
back to face Thom.

“Take those off,” he instructs. He takes a sip of water and nods at Thom, eyes raking down his
body.

Thom obliges.

He kicks his trainers off first and pulls at his socks; the socks should always go fairly early on.
Very important, that. He tries to remind himself ever since he overlooked the damned things once
at uni and the dark-haired girl he’d been trying to pull for months nearly laughed him out of her
dorm.

By the time he’s dealt with his t-shirt and moved on to his belt, Michael makes a disapproving
sound into his glass.

“Not those, actually. Let me.”

The way Michael sets his water down and meanders up to Thom is unfair. Unfair because he’s got
an erection that looks practically painful yet he seems completely oblivious to it. Unfair because
Thom is breathing quickly and shallowly and can feel his skin going patchy and he’s not even out
of his **jeans** yet.

Michael’s beaming down at him.

He can’t be *that* much taller than Thom, but it feels like he towers. He slides his hands lightly
down Thom’s sides and grasps his hips, rubbing slow circles into the skin just above his jeans.

“I want you to suck my cock.”

Thom’s heart skips a beat and his eyes snap up to meet Michael’s. He’s still smiling. With his eyes,
and everything. How does he do that? It seems he never stops.

Thom swallows, his throat dry. This is new territory. Michael’s hands migrate to his belt.

“You think you can do that for me?”

Thom nods, just barely.

“Good boy.”

Michael slides the belt from its loops; the dull *clunk* it makes as it hits the carpet sounds distant.
Next he’s working on Thom’s button and zip, and then he’s guiding Thom backwards, and the
backs of Thom’s thighs hit the bed, and Thom’s sitting, and he’s then he’s lying back, and
Michael’s pulling his trousers and pants down his legs for the second time, and Thom’s pulse
spikes at a thought: *This is how it is now.*

Michael kisses the space between Thom’s thigh and cock, licks and nips his way up his belly and
settles on mouthing at his chest. He peppers it with quick kisses and licks; he runs his tongue
across a nipple and stares Thom down.

“You’ll be perfect.”

Thom must make a face at that; Michael gets on his hands and knees and smothers Thom deeply with a kiss. From there, he moves to Thom’s neck and starts to nip and suck. Thom twists his neck to give him better access. Michael seems to lose himself, his teeth starting to test the flesh.

Thom groans; the pleasure-pain is going straight to his cock. The sound is apparently all the invitation Michel needs, and he sets teeth and tongue more firmly to work. Thom thinks faintly that Michael is going to leave bruises—right now he couldn’t give less of a fuck, and if anything the idea of being marked so brazenly is sexy.

Let’s see how you feel when everyone’s giving you the side-eye later. You’re not fourteen anymore, you know.

Yet the thrill he feels at the thought that he might be judged for this indiscretion has him squirming.

“Touch me,” Thom whispers and Michael bites his jaw, makes him say please, makes him wait then makes him say please again.

Michael does touch him then, but it’s not enough, he’s greedy and he wants more. But Michael rolls over, bringing Thom with him, and then he sits up, forcing Thom to lean back on his knees between Michael’s spread legs. Thom remembers their first time together, and scoots back off the mattress. Michael hums in approval and slides down to the edge of the bed. Thom kneels down on the carpet.

Michael cups the back of Thom’s head. With his other hand, he steadies his own cock.

“It’s all right,” he says, his thumb massaging the base of Thom’s skull. “It’s nothing to be afraid of, I promise.”

Which is very easy for Michael Stipe to say. Thom isn’t scared, but he has zero clue what he’s doing. What if he’s terrible at it? What if he gags and vomits? What if he bites Michael, what if—god, what if something goes horrendously wrong and he bites the whole thing clean off? Is that possible? Surely that’s not possible—

Michael chuckles, and Thom is startled into meeting his eyes.

“Whatever it is you’re thinking, stop. You do way too much of that, by the way.”

Michael strokes himself, once, twice, and he’s slowly drawing Thom’s head closer. Michael’s cockhead bumps at Thom’s lips, and it’s far less strange than it ought to be. It’s just…a fact. There it is, at Thom’s lips. And now Thom is opening his mouth. And now he’s tasting it. And now he’s letting it slip along his tongue. And now this is happening. This is all fact. This is how it is now.

It’s not so difficult to suss out, is it? Especially not when you’re increasingly more and more terribly turned-on. Thom knows what he likes, and that should be clue enough.

Simple.
Here’s a man who enjoys driving Thom mad.

And here is a man, for reasons Thom will never grasp, who is apparently driven mad by Thom.

*Simple.*

Inconceivable, but simple. Once you’ve managed to get yourself out of your own head.

He explores Michael’s cock with his tongue, and wonders at all the writers of terrible pulp-smut who compare scandalous skin to velvet. It’s tacky, probably. But that doesn’t make it any less true.

It’s soft, and it’s luxuriously pleasant. And it’s easy to suck at, to draw further into himself. He hears himself moan, once, unwittingly, and a tug at his hair tells him the vibration is something *done right.*

“I knew it,” breathes Michael. “I knew you’d love it.”

He does. It’s a shock, and not one he’s able to process right now. Right now, it’s just Michael’s body and Michael’s words. Michael’s pleasure and Michael’s approval. It’s just…Michael.

“That’s it. And your hands.”

Ah. Of course. He knows this. Michael’s hand guides his, but Thom already knows what to do with it: he wraps it around the base of Michael’s cock. He ducks his head and takes him in, further, *deeper,* experimental and instinctual. Michael laughs, a little choked.

“You got it. *God,* you got it.”

Thom twists his right hand, brings it up Michael’s shaft with a flourish, the way he himself likes it. His own fingers bump his lips, and he lets them slide down and back up again. It’s a simple but ruinous rhythm.


Thom does as he’s told. He grasps them, rolls them like an uncertain hand of dice—and with his index and middle finger, he dares to creep further—

Michael laughs again, gasped and half-choked:

“*Fuck. You little slut.*”

Thom gags a bit when Michael bucks his hips sharply; it sends a terrible thrill straight down his core.

Michael breathes a quick apology, “*Sorry, sorry, sorry baby.*”

He recovers the part of himself that is thrown off-balance and breathes in deeply through his nose. He makes no sound of upset; his fingers dare to continue, rubbing along Michael’s perineum and stopping just short of what Thom isn’t quite prepared to tackle. He works up a rhythm and his head follows, bobbing uncertainly but determinately. Michael’s fingers tighten further in his hair.

There’s something about power, and there’s something about relinquishing it. This is both. This is
holding all the cards and tossing them carelessly in the air at once.

Thom swallows Michael as far down as he can.

“*Fuck, good, good,* just like that. So good, keep—”

It’s too far—too guileless, but he recovers quickly and, honestly, Michael may not have even noticed. Thom wants to try again. He wants to be good at this. More than that, he *wants this.* He thinks of his first time tasting wine; balking at the sting but chasing the feeling. Tackling a simple speed bump with an ingrained sort of overconfidence.

It’ll take a bit to grow accustomed to it, but the message his own cock is sending him as it twitches between his legs is clear:

He *loves* this.

He’s hard and straining and—*god, fuck!* He never knew he could get off this much on getting someone else off. He never knew how good a hotel carpet could feel against his knees. He never knew this was a possibility, and yet here he is, feeling it now as a blind certainty.

“You were…*fuck, like you were you made for me…*”

And maybe he was.

Maybe—

Thom doesn’t attempt to take Michael into his throat again, but he pushes himself as far as the clash between his desires and abilities will allow him.

He draws Michael’s cock along the roof of his mouth. He feels its length and weight as something solid but more-than-fucking welcome. He lets it bump *just* at the back of his throat and pulls back before his body revolts, letting his saliva-slicked hand do the rest of the work.

Thom’s good with his hands.

His eyes have been closed, he realises. It hasn’t been out of shame, or—well, whatever reticent feelings could get in the way of this. Maybe he’s been too caught up in his own indulgence.

He blinks, and is drawn into Michael’s blue stare.

“I need to fuck your pretty mouth,” he groans.

Thom whimpers.

“Can I fuck your mouth?”

Thom doesn’t know any communication beyond the hummed assent he gives.

And it’s a little much—*a lot* much—and he’s struggling, and gagging a little more, and Michael’s slowing, concerned, but Thom is up to it, he is, and his hands leave Michael’s cock and the duvet altogether and instead grip at whatever flesh they can.
One hand lands on Michael’s thigh, and the other on his hip. Thom holds eye contact—holds that face, its strong jaw and cupid’s bow—and he delves forward, meeting each thrust with a renewed boldness.

Michael’s mouth falls open. And, for the first time since Thom picked up an R.E.M. record, he looks just like any other man.

Something rustles awake in the back of Thom’s mind:

_You’re so fucking stupid_, says Jonny, years ago. _You never know what you want till you’ve got it._

Thom is neither here, there, nor anywhere.

_“Grab yourself. I want to see you come with my cock in your mouth.”_

Thom grasps himself as an afterthought. _Oh_, he thinks. _Right_. What happens to him is abstract. What happens to Michael is definite by design; Thom aches to give.

Bringing himself off is historically quick work, but put Michael Stipe looming and cursing and panting above him and he is a guaranteed goner. Michael swears in invocations, like Thom is some salvation; it’s enough to bring them both to destruction.

Michael bucks. He is almost-ugly and barely-contained, and Thom comes unexpectedly.

The taste that floods his mouth is a balance of salty and sweet acid and hot and _too much_, and it’s beyond his control when he coughs—

He spills the bitter seed down his chin, his neck.

Michael chuckles, catching his breath. He leans in and swipes away the mess. “That’s okay, baby. You’ll get used to it.”

He rises, and Thom scrambles backwards. Michael wanders into the bathroom and Thom hears the tap go; he quickly reemerges with a small towel in hand. He returns to his spot at the edge of the bed and motions for Thom to come back forward between his knees.

_“Here, let me see you.”_ He cups Thom’s face in one large hand. _“I’d apologize for the mess, but, well, that was fun.”_

Thom snorts a giggle. Michael bunched a corner of the towel in his hand, turning Thom’s face to the side and wiping gently at his cheek and chin; it’s been dampened with warm water. He swipes it gingerly across Thom’s mouth, and Thom closes his eyes and leans into his touch.

_“You did so well, Thom. Do you know that?”_

_“I bloody…thought I’d had it.”_

Michael gives him a curious look. _“What do you mean?”_

_“I fucked it up.”_

And then Michael’s laughing, like he always is.
“Are you kidding me? Precisely which part did you fuck up?

Thom just gives him a look and says, “It didn’t match what I saw myself doing in my head. It wasn’t as good as I was capable of. I know it.”

“This,” says Michael, moving the damp towel to Thom’s neck, “is why you are going to do great things, Thom Yorke. You can’t even be pleased with your first BJ just being great. Oh no, you wanted it to be worthy of the porn-awards. Which, for the record—I’ll be replaying it for the rest of my life, so maybe don’t beat yourself up too harshly, okay?

Thom smirks and says, “Just you wait till next time, then. You’ll see.”

“I don’t know if I can survive the next time, with that look on your face.” Michael tugs at Thom until he gets the hint and climbs up on the bed next to Michael.

“I’m supposed to be meeting the guys for breakfast, you know. I’m going to be late,” he says with mock consternation. “And you fucked up my neck.”

“Do you care? About either?”

“Not even one bloody bit.”

Thom purposely doesn’t think about the guys being mad when he shows up late. He specifically does not let himself think about the way Jonny will look at him, cool and unimpressed.

Why should Jonny—or any of them—care one way or the other, anyway?

---

“Sorry we’re late.”

Michael saunters up to their group. They’ve been waiting for Thom outside of the brunch-only restaurant the venue promoter had recommended to Phil and…no, Colin doesn’t think Michael is sorry at all. He’s smiling like he’s gotten one over on them, like he’s just stolen their jewels in some overly-dramatic and convoluted heist scheme.

Thom is trailing behind him, looking like he’s just...well, why even pretend? He’s just had sex. It’s not even subtle. He’s rumpled and his t-shirt is on inside-out like he’s just stepped out of some sitcom. There’s a spot of worked-over red skin under his jaw, a love bite on unsophisticated
“It’s okay,” says Jonny from where he’s hunkered over on the bench. Colin sees his eyes skitter away from Thom under the drift of the hair covering his face.

*Of course.* Is that artless bite meant to be an empirical claim? Colin thinks that’s certainly plausible, especially when paired with the expression on Michael’s face. Apparently there’s no room allowed for a priori assumption.

Colin hopes it was pleasurable for Thom even though it was, in all probability, delivered for Jonny’s benefit.

He wonders when he stopped giving Michael the benefit of the doubt. He’s proud—proud, and sad—to see how Jonny has been working towards freeing himself of his feelings toward Thom, and it would all be very fine and well…but does Michael need to be so obvious? Jonny never said outright, but Colin has strong suspicions that Michael is aware of his brother’s feelings towards Thom.

“Oh, I *figured*. Still, my apologies. We lost track of time.” Michael is casually standing over Jonny, too close—or maybe just American-close—but he’s looking at Thom as he talks. “You’re all so…accommodating.”

Thom blushes and one of his hands twitches up to touch the spot on his neck. He licks his lips.

Colin waits for Jonny to say something—something cutting and vicious and brilliant, but he just shrugs and awkwardly gets to his feet.

Jonny says, “Well, shall we then?”

His voice is carefully polite and Colin can’t think of a more obvious way Jonny could be showing his throat without actually doing so.

Thom has already wandered away towards the entrance and for a moment Colin hates him, hates that he’s so damned oblivious to this drama. Yes, it’s really fucking unfair of Colin to think that, but for the first time he wishes that Thom *did* owe Jonny something of his heart.

No. Stop it. Thom doesn’t owe Jonny *anything*. But Michael, now. Michael is perfectly aware of every nuance and should be fucking considerate enough to know what he’s rubbing Jonny’s nose in. There’s no need to be so bloody cruel about it.

Colin narrows his eyes at the very moment Michael glances up at him. Their eyes lock and Colin comes to an immediate, unplanned decision when he sees the awareness in Michael’s gaze.

Fine. So be it. Jonny always learned his lessons best by mimicking Colin. While he may have improved upon this specific one a bit too much for Colin’s comfort, the original plans were traced directly from his older brother’s book. And even though it’s been placed in storage for years now, Colin never throws *any* book away. He blows the dust from its cover and breathes in its scent.

“We didn’t know you were coming along,” Colin says, letting his features smooth out. “This is one of those places that doesn’t seat people until the entire party is present. I suspect there will be quite a long wait now.”
“Oh, I’m sorry. Really, I am.” Michael’s little smirk hasn’t left his face, but looks more confused now than self-satisfied. His eyes have gone wary—perhaps he is finally realising his brazen dominance-play isn’t visible only to Jonny.

“Oh, it’s fine,” Colin waves a hand dismissively and leans in cosy-close to Michael, his face wreathed in convivial warmth. “Generally, I’ve learnt that if you’re going to show up uninvited, the best way to do so is by arriving thirty minutes late with an invited hostage in tow, and then acting as though you were the one everyone was actually waiting for. It makes people forget you weren’t even invited in the first place! Well done, you’ve kept us waiting nearly forty. You’re the guest of honour now by those metrics, bless.”

Colin grins and winks and it’s impossible to know if he’s joking or being serious. The dirty little smirk is completely gone now from Michael’s lips.

Colin’s remains firmly in place.

Game on.

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It’s miserable out. It’s a different type of heat than Thom is used to; the air is as still as a held breath. It feels like it’s bonding to his skin, a painted sheen of copious sweat that won’t evaporate. It just clings repulsively to his entire body like the wettest sneeze of the gods themselves. If it’s managing to go anywhere it’s only into his arse crack.

“Jonny, let’s go back. This is stupid. Let’s go back to the hotel.” He’s actively whinging and couldn’t care less.

“No, we said we weren’t going to just spend our day off laying around the hotel,” Jonny throws back over his shoulder. He runs a hand through his hair. He’s just as sweaty as Thom, and the damp strands cling to his fingers. The back of his neck is flushed and looks amphibian-moist under the green cast of the leaf-filtered light.

“There’s a pool at the hotel. If I have to spend the day marinating, why can’t it be in pool water instead of sweat?”

“Swimming pools are dreadful. Children urinate in them.”

“Hiking is dreadful. The woods are dreadful. All sorts of things urinate in them.”

“You like hiking, Thom,” Jonny points out, placidly. “You’re the one who said you wanted to go
do something today. You’re the one who wants to go camping some day.”

Thom does like hiking. Thom does want to go camping. Back home. This is different though. This is a death march through Satan’s forested armpit. “I thought that meant we’d go into Nashville and go shopping. I dunno. Try on cowboy hats. That sort of thing.”

“We’ve already bought too many records this trip. Don’t you ever get tired of visiting shops, anyway?”

“No.” They start to scramble up a hill, pine needles crunching under their trainers. “You’re walking too fast for this heat. Slow down.”

Jonny pauses once they reach the summit of the hill and waits for Thom to join him. “I just wanted to hang out, the two of us. You’ve been spending so much time with Michael that I’ve not seen much of you outside of the venues. The bus doesn’t count; we’re always too busy respecting the vague fiction of privacy that exists on the bus.”

Thom looks at Jonny suspiciously, but there doesn’t seem to be any hidden trapdoor to his words waiting to catch Thom. Jonny isn’t even looking at him; he’s scanning the landscape spread out below the hill they’re perched on. They’re now higher up than Thom had realised. Jonny stabs a hand out suddenly towards the sky and Thom follows his finger until he sees a hawk sluggishly circling some distance away that Jonny has sighted.

“Yeah, we kinda have to get our time in now, while we can. Once this leg is over, who knows when our next chance will be.”

“You can call each other. The long-distance thing is working for Phil.”

“Sure, but he’s always moaning about the size of his phone bills. Maybe I shouldn’t buy more records. Or hats. Start saving up now.” Thom feels oddly wistful remembering his long, meandering phone conversations with Michael. They only just happened but already feel distant, like something he maybe saw in a film once.

Jonny chuckles and now points in a different direction. At a clearing, bright green in comparison to the darkness of the surrounding woods. “Come on, let’s head down to that field.”

“It’s starting to look like rain. Don’t you think so?”

“No, stop stalling.”

They clamber down the other side of the hill, sending small rocks scattering, and soon enter another thicket. The extra shade offers no relief and the trees lining their path soon feel claustrophobic.

“So, it’s going well then?”

“Is what going well?” Thom mumbles as he tries to sop away some of the moisture trickling down from his hairline with the hem of his sweat-soaked t-shirt.

“Is it going well with Michael, you twat. Do you think you see it going someplace? Someplace at all serious?”
Thom opens his mouth to respond, but pauses. He honestly has no idea. It’s one of those moments where he’s been asked something and his head locks up and instead of thinking about the answer he thinks about how he's not thinking of the answer and then he thinks about how much time has gone by and how simple and gormless he must look just standing there and not answering. And is his mouth still hanging open?

Jonny misinterprets his silence, or maybe just takes pity and gives him an easy out. “I’m sorry. That’s none of my business, is it? I’m bad at this sort of thing.”

“No, no, it’s okay.” He kicks a pinecone out of his path and into the underbrush; overhead a squirrel chitters at them for disturbing the peace. He tries to consider the question again. Finally he concedes that the only possible answer is completely anticlimactic. “I don’t know. We’ve not really talked about that.”

“Oh. Okay. It’s early days, anyway, right? That’s fine.” Jonny slaps a mosquito against his neck, then smears his hand across the front of his jeans, grimacing. “Come on, let’s keep moving. We’ll get eaten alive here.”

Thom is suddenly—if vaguely—annoyed. “I know it’s fucking fine. Why does it need a label at all? I like him. Full stop. Seriously, Jonny, can’t we go back and find air conditioning? This is rubbish.”

“No,” Jonny seems to be doggedly ignoring Thom’s sour attitude. “Anyway, we’re almost to the field. And calm down, I’m just…making conversation. It’s not like I’m suggesting you elope, though god knows Michael seems the sort to suggest a weekend in Vegas if you caught him in the right mood. The Elvis thing, you know.”

Jonny speaks lightly, teasingly, like maybe it’s okay to run off to Vegas and party with a fake Elvis. Like he’s already forgiven Thom for doing something preposterous.

Thom shrugs, still annoyed and now feeling lonely and misunderstood as well. The tell-tale, faint stirrings of anxiety start to prickle through his chest. Or maybe it’s just the oppressive mugginess, sliding thick as spit down his throat. Jonny seems to be trying really hard to be nice, like treating Thom kindly is a peace offering. For what offense, though, Thom has no bloody clue. It’s unsettling...he’s bemused to realise he’d rather have his difficult, snarky friend with him instead of this painfully lenient duplicate. He suddenly wishes Jonny would say something terrible and make everything feel normal again.

They stop at a T in the path. Jonny tilts his head for a moment and states, “We need to go east.”

“Did you just say ‘go east’ instead of ‘turn right’, you pompous little direction shitlord?”

“No.” There’s a flash of grinning, happenstance teeth before Jonny has turned his back to Thom, and is already loping easily down the dirt-packed path. Thom scurries to catch up, his purposely-lobbed barb having been handily dodged.

Oh, would you like to lead us? I’m excited to see how long your vegetarianism holds out after you vanish us into the wilderness and we’re reduced to eating squirrels. So please, do lead the way. This is going to be fascinating.

…and then Thom would say something in return like, a sharp tongue is no indication of a keen mind, Jon-Jon and Jonny would snort and snipe back at him. And then Thom would retort, you’re
a delicate flower...you’d not make it out of the woods, either, you swoon when you aren’t happy with an airport coffee. And Jonny would quirk an eyebrow and look at him in that way that he has, haughty and secretly delighted, and say you’re the only flower here, Thom...to be snipped off and worn as a buttonhole by men of cruel wit. Thom would tell him that his concept of what constitutes wit is completely off. At this point they’d be back at the hotel and they’d flip on the telly and a dumb comedy would be on, and they’d order pizza and argue for an unreasonable length of time about the toppings before settling on what they always order: half olive and half red pepper. They’d watch the film, and Thom would grouse at Jonny that he was getting crumbs all over his sheets and to move his arse over to his own bed if he was going to insist on eating like an animal. They’d end the night surrounded by pizza bones and empty beer bottles, talking about nonsense (the serious kind, the kind that matters) until one or the other of them finally drifted off mid-thought, leaving their conversation, as always, eternal and boundless. They’ve been in the middle of it for years now.

Jonny stops in front of Thom, who nearly crashes into his back. He’s yanked from his reverie, with the half-formed thought that it’s probably bonkers to be having a daydream about hanging out with your best mate when you’re currently hanging out with your best mate. He’s pulled up close enough to Jonny that he gets a nose-full of his scent.

“Bloody hell, you smell rank. I hope I don’t smell like—”

“You were right. It’s definitely going to rain.”

Thom edges around Jonny. They’ve reached the clearing. There are a few lonely-looking picnic benches clustered near them along with a padlocked park-district shed of some sort. Beyond, the open field stretches out, hemmed in by woods. It all looks surreal, and it takes Thom a moment to understand it’s because the glowering sky has an abnormal yellow hue to it.

“Wow, those clouds came in fast,” Thom remarks, for something to say. “Do you hear that?”

“Hear what? I don’t hear anything.”

“Exactly. No birds chirping.” The yellow gloom, combined with the utter stillness of the air and lack of鸟鸣, is deeply ominous. A gnat buzzes near Thom’s ear, sounding impossibly loud and crisp.

“Wellyellll...” Jonny hums, stepping from under the trees to stand next to the nearest picnic bench. He gazes up inscrutably at the low sulfur-and-grit-coloured clouds. “...maybe if we turn back now we can beat it?”

Suddenly a low rumble answers Jonny and a gust of stale wind pushes itself against their bodies. The thunder seems to radiate from a spot directly above their heads. Dust kicks up in small spirals and the clouds hunch in on themselves, as if they’re folding their edges over the quickly-fading daylight. Absorbing it. Devouring it.

The hairs on Thom’s arms prickle. The whole forest pauses, strung tightly around them.

“Jonny, I—”

Thom’s thoughts shatter with a thunder-crack so loud it sounds like the universe has malfunctioned.
Without thinking—it’s unthinkable to even try to think, as another deafening thunderclap goes off, one of such intensity that maybe his thoughts will never return to normal, will be shrill and bleached for the rest of his life—Thom’s lizard-brain has him sprinting for shelter under the overhang of the small utility shed’s roof. Jonny is right behind, and they press themselves against the cement wall, shoulder to shoulder.

“Well, this is just fucking great, now what?"

Jonny shakes his head in mute response. His face is tilted towards the sky, a nearly feral look of awe on his face.

As if on cue, the sky opens up with another earsplitting crack as the clouds are snapped in two, the contents pouring down on the earth below. It’s an immediate deluge.

Lightning is in play now, illuminating the field. Thom feels the same way he sometimes does when he’s in the pit of a concert, when his senses are overwhelmed in every way and all he can do in response is give himself over to the experience.

Still, he tries to press closer against the wall at his back, the overhanging roof just barely providing protection against the rain.

A hand clenches his shoulder. Jonny grins at him, unselfconscious and glowing.

“This IS BRILLIANT!” He shouts over the storm.

He releases Thom’s shoulder and steps out into the rain.

“Jesus…Jon—JONNY, YOU’RE FUCKING MAD! YOU’RE GOING TO GET ZAPPED!”

Ignoring him, Jonny walks further out into the downpour. He pauses when another flash of lightning illuminates the clearing, making the trees around them stutter like a stop-motion animation. He turns back to Thom and, raising his arms palms-up to the sky, laughs joyfully. He’s already drenched; his thin t-shirt is a colourless second skin against his heaving sides, and his hair is plastered streaks of ink against his cheeks and neck. And he laughs and laughs up into the sky.

Oh, thinks Thom. Oh. But he’s beautiful.

The thought isn’t a shock. It doesn’t feel like a revelation or a sea change. It’s like Thom is considering a console of dead lights on some great, silent machine he’s been living with for as long as he can remember, its hulking case now familiar to the point it has become an overlooked aspect of his everyday existence. He’s been living intimately with it; setting mugs of tea on its dusty ledges, draping his discarded shirts over its mysterious angles, stubbing his toes on its protruding bolts in the middle of the night.

It’s like Thom has simply, finally gotten ’round to flicking on the switch to see what it looks like when set in motion.

The lights blink into life easily, a dot-matrix pattern emerging. And as he stares at Jonny—rivulets coursing down the planes of his face, gesturing to Thom to leave his meager shelter—Thom isn’t confused by what he’s seeing. He’s not misinterpreting what picture the lights are connecting together to form.
Jonny’s beautiful and I’ve always thought so, haven’t I? I’m...attracted to him. He’s my favourite person, after all. Maybe in different universe, we would have...been together. I’ve been blind to it. I’ve been hiding from it. Maybe we’d even have loved each other, in another universe.

It’s certainly interesting, and maybe later he’ll want to gently freak out a little. But right now it’s just a calm, warm acknowledgement of a basic truth. This life is what it is, and it’s just not a universe where their paths led them in that direction. Maybe if Jonny had not been Colin’s little brother, maybe if they’d not formed Radiohead, maybe if Thom had understood his own complicated sexual yearnings, and maybe if Thom was the sort of person Jonny Greenwood would ever look twice at...then, maybe. If there are any thoughts of attainability—of chance—they’re contained in some other dead machine, one shoved firmly underneath a tarp that Thom will never pull back.

Knowledge isn’t a directive to act.

So Thom shakes his head and laughs at Jonny, with Jonny. There’s nothing for it; he joins Jonny under the pounding rain. Jonny whoops and yells up at the heavens in reply to another peal of thunder. Thom starts running towards the centre of the field, the long grass whipping against the sodden fabric of his jeans. He can sense Jonny running next to him, even though he doesn’t turn to look. He doesn’t need to. Jonny’s always next to him.

They reach the centre of the field and they’re both laughing now, and soon they’re yell-screaming taunts up at the clouds, daring the sky to strike them down. Thom can feel the ghost of cold pavement at his back, can sense the touch of his fifteen-year-old self as he challenges fate, waiting for a car to bear down on him and stop, miraculously, before it can do the unthinkable. Because children can’t die. Thom thinks maybe now, if asked, Jonny would understand why he and Colin lay down on that pavement. Maybe now.

Under the turbulent sky, and with his best friend, Thom feels cleansed.
Chapter 16 - As the Poets Say

Oh, this is not on. This is so very much not on.

He can only blame the road. There is a world that only exists on long bus rides, and the road to Texas is obviously paved with insanity.

It started with Jonny’s neck.

Thom wonders if Jonny is aware of how his hair frames his face in such a way it accentuates the strong, graceful muscles along his neck.

Thom’s sure as fuck aware.

He’s been staring while Jonny naps, his brain a spanked beehive of activity, hell-bent on trying to convince itself for the last thirty minutes that Jonny’s stupid bloody neck is not nearly as appealing as all that.

Okay, get it together, Yorke. What happened? You were all oh this is fine, this is okay, this changes nothing. Attraction means nothing. People are attracted to each other every day without it meaning anything, it’s just a friendly appreciation, that’s all.

Basically what happened is his resolute acceptance of the practical reality of things evaporated along with the stormwater that had drenched his clothes. By the time they had made their way back to the hotel, Thom was already finding himself revisiting his memories of Jonny like they were a quick-shuffle of playing cards. Everything was so bloody obvious when taken as a whole like that.

Oh fuck, Jonny has probably known for years Thom is attracted to him.

He’s doubtlessly been amused this whole time.

At least, Thom tells himself, at least Jonny has been really kind and decent about it. He’s never once teased Thom, never once made anything Thom unwittingly may have expressed into a game for those clever little claws of his.
As long as Thom doesn’t let anything slip about his newfound awareness there’s absolutely no reason things can’t carry on. It’s okay that Thom knows that Jonny knows that Thom’s been subconsciously attracted to him for years. It is definitely, one hundred percent not okay if Jonny knows that Thom knows that Jonny knows, however. If Jonny was to figure out that Thom is now completely aware of his attraction…actively sitting here contemplating his neck…

Oh god, does Colin know? Do they sit around gossiping about Thom?

_Colin, remember Thom’s gap year, when I came down with the worst flu of my life? Thom walked blocks in the snow to buy something to calm my stomach…have I told you this?

A helpless accounting of the facts:

_No, but I remember coming back that holiday break and he wouldn’t shut up about you. I told him at the time he better be behaving around my baby brother. He just laughed and I laughed, too, because it was obvious he was completely innocent and then I cracked about how I should tell you to behave around him, and do you know what he said? Thom said I’d better, because you were a future heartbreaker and if he went that way you’d be trouble. It was just a joke, mind, but still…

Fact the first: Jonny is really fucking bloody hot. Physically he embodies a lot of androgynously feminine features Thom already knows he’s drawn to, and then there’s the all of the masculine ones Thom is _learning_ he adores.

_Here’s a good one! So our first tour, halfway through when Ed’s sleep-talking drove me out and I bunked with Thom? Any time we’d be stuck sharing a bed I’d wake up and find Thom had snuggled right up to me. Awake he might have no clue, but when he’s asleep his body definitely knows what it wants. He’d be pressed right up against me. He’d wake up and see what he’d done and roll away so fast I nearly gave myself away by laughing so many times. It was hilarious! But I didn’t want to humiliate him—no, I’m serious, Colin! That’d be cruel—so I just pretended to be asleep. It was kinder that way. Maybe someday he’ll gain a modicum of self-awareness, but until then It’s not my bloody job to be his homosexual fairy godmother, you arse.

Fact the second: So what? Ed is ridiculously attractive and Thom feels zero attraction to him. In fact, if he can rip his eyes away from Jonny’s neck for five seconds he’ll take a good long look at Ed and see. Yup, nothing. Look at that stupidly handsome man that Thom is not remotely attracted to. So this is not about half the human race suddenly opening itself up to Thom as a possibility, and Thom reacting like he’s a child in a sweet shop. This is categorically about _Jonny_.

But, one might still wonder, just for fun…how well hung is Ed, d’you suppose?

_Jonny, it’s not just about you being a man and his body responding to that, you know. I mean, I made out with him that one time and I think he’s starting to reach a point of awareness. Trust me when I say he seemed to enjoy it a bit more than necessary…but he was cavalier about it, all the same. So I think you underestimate him. He’s attracted to you, yourself. God knows why, you utter prat, but he spends more time with you than anyone else. He finds your appalling personality charming._

Fact the third: For some reason, Jonny seems to annoy everyone except Thom. All the vicious posturing doesn’t bother him. Except recently, when Jonny had become personal with it. But he’s dropped that, hasn’t he? He’s been so…nice…lately. And everyone seems really pleased about that, but Thom isn’t. He wants that snark, because he’s not _Jonny_ without all that clever bite, and Thom always saw right through it anyway.
Remember the time Thom stole Tim’s glasses and hid with them in my bus bunk? He crawled in right behind me and got me to lie and say I had no idea where he was hiding.

Fact the fourth: Jonny is always the one he wants to share a laugh with, more than anyone else.

Oh, how about when Thom calls you up in the middle of the night and talks to you for hours? Does he know you more often than not fall right back asleep and he’s talking to your pillow?

Fact the fifth: of course he knows that. He can’t help it. He just gets these thoughts and ideas, usually in the middle of the night, and he has to tell Jonny right then.

He likes to hug you more than the rest of us, you know. Is that why you almost never are the one to instigate it?

Fact the sixth: He’s drawn to Jonny. Hopelessly so.

Just this summer we were working out “No Surprises” and I’m pretty sure he thought I was about to kiss him, and I’m also pretty sure that on some level he wanted me to. He was literally on the verge of realisation, I think, but I made a quick joke of it. Thank god I caught it in time, you know? That would have been impossibly awkward, having to let him down like that.

Fact the seventh: Jonny understands their music—and as such, Thom’s mind—in a way no one else ever will.

Do you think you need to have a talk with him, Jonny?

Fact the eighth: Jonny has been aware of Thom’s unrealised interest, because how could he bloody well not be, and he has dodged any number of bullets that would have led to a confrontation. That doesn’t happen by accident, not that many times. Jonny has made his stance quite clear, kept his distance in a way that brooks no arguments.

No, I think not. Unless he presses the matter. He’s got Michael now, besides. It’s such a relief, really.

Fact the ninth: Thom is with Michael and this train of thought is not fucking okay. If Michael knew that Thom was having these thoughts about Jonny, what would he think? So Thom needs to get a fucking grip. It’s fine that he’s shifting through all these feelings and working through them, but he needs to shred them to pieces once he’s done.

I used to pity him, Colin. But I think Thom will be okay now. I wasn’t sure of Michael at first, and I even told Thom so. But you know what? I was just being protective. I care deeply for Thom, but anything deeper than friendship was never a possibility for us. Thom is not…well, he’s just not what I want, okay? But I still want to see him happy.

Fact the tenth: Jonny Greenwood does not want Thom Yorke.

Michael Stipe does, and Thom should just let himself be deliriously happy with this remarkable fact.

He needs to keep a hold on reality, and those thoughts he had in the rainstorm, informed by the thrill of discovery? Maybe in another world, another life, we would have been together.
Those thoughts need to die before they can take root.

He needs to remind himself that any woulda coulda shoulda is just regret talking. Would he change anything of his experiences with Jonny even if he could? No, of course not. He’d not change a moment of their history. But still…he’s feeling an odd sense of loss, all the same.

“What are you staring at?”

Thom blinks his eyes rapidly, just now realising he’s been zoned out with his eyes still on Jonny, who is now looking at him grumpily (he always looks grumpy when he first wakes up, though, Thom reminds himself) as he rubs away the sleep from his eyes.

“Nothing,” Thom finally stutters. And then, because he can’t help himself, “How can you regret something if you’d do it again even if you had a second chance?”

Jonny blinks back at him, his face working as he tries to make sense of the existential demands being placed on him immediately upon waking. *Sorry, Jon-Jon.*

“Well,” Jonny finally says, slowly. “You’re not really regretting what you’ve done, then, are you? You’re wishing that life gave you other opportunities, maybe. Maybe. Sometimes life gives you circumstances that simply have to be grieved.”

“I guess.”

“Why are you asking? Is there something you want?”

Thom can feel the universe laughing at him, he swears he can.

“I don’t think you could even begin to imagine the things I want, Jonny.” Thom chuckles wryly.

Jonny stretches and leaves Thom, heading towards the back of the bus. As he moves away, he smiles back at Thom and says over his shoulder:

“It is, at best, risky to underestimate what somebody can imagine about you.”

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“Quick and dirty rule of thumb? Okay…all you need to know is that Creole cuisine uses tomatoes, and proper Cajun food does not. And Louisiana is the only place you should ever eat either.”
Colin is interested in Michael’s answer to Tim’s question despite himself. He stares down at his boudin. He wants to know if it’s Creole or Cajun but isn’t going to ask Michael. Well, fuck that. Knowledge isn’t beholden to his dislike of the man. Knowledge is too pure. It’s the one true boon to be pulled out of the snarled, peripatetic nature of touring life, and Colin will be damned if Michael Stipe will get in the way of his pleasure.

“So this sausage then, it’s…Cajun?”

“Boudin rouge. Yep. The rouge means it’s made with pig blood.” Michael’s french accent is appalling.

Next to Michael, Thom pulls a face but doesn’t say anything. His vegetarian jambalaya has been pushed to the side to make space for Thom’s bowed head and a grubby notebook. It’s a huge portion, the kind where you can dig in and eat until stuffed and still find a baffling amount of food left in your bowl. So maybe Thom ate quite a lot; Colin rather suspects he hasn’t though.

Thom’s sharpening cheekbones have not gone unnoticed; this is one of those tours, where a complicated routine of snacking and lack of appetite has lent Thom the awful delicacy of a porcelain ornament that invites you to smash it, because it appears to be so fragile.

Their party is large and loud, with all of R.E.M. and Radiohead and their motley inner crew circles present. A few guests, friends of R.E.M., inflate their number further. No one wanted to miss out on this meal, and with the day off and friends visiting it was good timing for R.E.M. to throw an impromptu party.

Thom, silent and preoccupied at a dinner table, is expected. Colin, on the other hand, should by all rights be in the midst of it. This is generally the type of public performance he loves; fine food and flowing wine and nearly (but not quite) too many people, enough distraction to either side that he never bores anyone or is bored in return.

He’s not completely unaware that he can talk too much, can destroy people’s vague curiosity in nearly any topic by shaking it into tedious pieces with the teeth of his obsessive interest.

Colin stares unabashedly at the top of Thom’s bent head. No, he has nothing much to say tonight. Thom is pouting over his notebook, but not with the typical surliness that encloses him in a nifty little cloud of solitary gloomy-doomy. This is something else, something new.

The evening hadn’t started that way. They had arrived and been led to a private room with a ridiculously long table filling the narrow confines of the space. The kind of long table that one imagined fairytale kings and queens would fill after the successful completion of a campaign, albeit with fine glassware instead of horn cups, and bright abstracts along one wall instead of stately tapestries. The other walls were nearly all glass, looking out onto a lush private garden.

Thom had said something about strings of lights, and gardens, and Spanish moss…and then Michael was there, his hands on Thom’s shoulders, steering him playfully towards the centre of the table.

Apparently Michael—shy, introverted, old-soul-poet Michael—was going to preside over dinner with Thom at his side. Colin plunked himself down directly across from Thom and smiled with all of his many teeth at Michael.
At first Thom had been the cheery and goofy version of himself, making jokes and wriggling in his seat. Michael slouched in his, though in these hardback, wooden chairs that shouldn’t have been possible. At least not with such unpracticed ease. In Colin’s experience, wooden chairs meant you must sit properly. The fine white linen napkins backed up the chairs in their insistence of decorum, but apparently Michael had taken them as a challenge and was responding with insolence.

Michael spoke softly to those sat around him near the centre of the table and should have been overlooked in the overall cacophony, but he was the center of attention nonetheless and his visiting friends hung on to his every word. Thom piped up a few times early on, but started to grow more quiet as they ordered and the meal progressed.

Was it the topics of conversation? American politics at one point, but anyone could find a way to jump into a conversation like that and commiserate using the leadership of their own country. Crooked politicians aren’t exactly a rare local flora; they’re dead common weeds. People spoke of books and films and music, since nearly everyone present made a livelihood from the arts, and even if they hadn’t, everyone has an opinion on books and films and music.

Colin found himself mirroring Thom. Speaking less, listening less. Withdrawing into thoughts. Colin’s thoughts on Thom, and Thom’s thoughts…well, there’s the crux of the question, yes?

“Oh my god, Geek Love was transformative. Not only for its time and its subject matter, but for Katherine Dunn’s attack on the material. She had such a stout voice and a clear insight,” the woman next to Colin enthuses.

“Oh, I haven’t read that one yet.” Michael takes a healthy swig from his glass. The plates are being cleared away, making room for more bottles of wine.

Thom pipes up. It’s the first he’s spoken since nearly the start of the meal. “I really liked it. It, um, inverted things? That, well, that what makes you different curses you…”

The woman who had brought the book up cuts her eyes at Thom and smiles politely. But her eyes are drawn back towards Michael like shaved metal filings to a magnet. “You need to read it, Michael, see?”

Thom’s mouth is parted; he had been going to say something else. But now he presses his lips together and reaches for his wine glass. Colin starts to open his own mouth, to ask Thom what he’d meant, but Michael lazily reaches an arm out and rests his forearm on Thom’s shoulder, a lit cigarette dangling from his fingers. Thom freezes and skitters his eyes around the table, but no one is paying attention to Michael’s claim. He then eyes the encroaching cigarette as it sends a thin drift of smoke up over his shoulder, drawn towards the nearest window.

“Well, since apparently I’m the last one in the world to read it, I guess I’d better? So people don’t think I’m being contrary.” Michael laughs and everyone who’s turned their chairs towards Michael’s nucleus voices their mirth, as well. Michael glances in Thom’s direction, at his cigarette, and taps his ash so that it tumbles into Thom’s abandoned bowl, which has yet to be cleared away. A few errant ashes drift down onto the pages of his open notebook.

Sycophants? Or just old friends, hard-worked crew, and tired musicians glad to share in on a pleasant evening, open to laugh at anything that makes them feel warmth and connection? Which is it?
Colin places his finger on the pulse of it, as Michael pushes his chair back from the table slightly and closer to Thom’s. He shifts into a different slouch and Thom is pulled even closer to Michael’s side by the unconcerned arm slung around his shoulders. Safe in the circle of Michael’s esteem, that arm is a signal to anyone who might care that Thom is Michael’s. He’s every right to be here in this place, with these smart cultured people, and no one is going to notice him and wonder why. That’s nice, isn’t it? Thom tires of eyes on him. It must be nice to let down your guard.

No. That’s wrong. Thom does want to be noticed. Always. But he wants people to notice him not caring if they weren’t noticing him. Make sense? No? Colin never really understood it either, beyond that it was a form of protective armour. Look at how you don’t hurt me.

But no one is looking at Thom.

Or, they are, but without any real curiosity. In their eyes, he’s…what? The quiet new boyfriend, who just happens to make music as well, and isn’t that nice. Is that the shift that Colin is only now seeing but Thom somehow grasped immediately? He’s been noticed, but for all the wrong reasons. He’s Michael’s charming little British accessory to these people.

Not an equal.

And now the strange look on Thom’s face makes perfect sense, now that Colin is reading the situation with clear eyes. Thom is pleased by Michael’s attention and touch but, at the same time, livid that he’s been dismissed by these people because of that very attention.

If Michael Stipe was to do the unthinkable and let it slip to a journalist that he’s seeing Thom, the headline will read “Michael Stipe reveals he’s gay!”

The subhead will read, in smaller type, “Stipe gushes about his new British lover: see page 17 for details.”

Look at how you don’t hurt me.

Colin glances down the table at Jonny; he’s deep in conversation with Peter Buck’s wife. How desperate, though, is his focus? Is he that involved with whatever they are discussing, or is it a ploy; is he trying to respect Thom by not stealing covetous glances that Thom will never see?

But shouldn’t Michael see? It’s his right to see, as he has made his public claim at this table tonight. A small step, a negligible claim, but it’s enough that Michael now has a responsibility. Is he not aware of the shoulders under his arm tightening, the growling silence tucked against his ribs?

How much effort is Michael putting into learning about the man he seemingly wants publicly at his side, yet isn’t even looking at?

Too many questions, like a puzzle box that you’re not clever enough to suss open…or maybe it’s just jammed. There’s no way to know the difference. Either way, Colin’s concern is a redundancy, and won’t be finding its way to the heart of this onion-skinned mystery.

Michael laughs at something said further along the table and slides his dangling hand from Thom’s shoulder to cup the back of Thom’s neck; he finally looks Thom in the eyes, and smiles at him warmly.
Colin thinks people are sculptors, constantly carving out of others the image they long for, need, love or desire, often against reality, against their benefit, and sometimes, in the end, they reveal a disappointment, because it does not fit them.

Thom smiles back at Michael, uncertain but brave.

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Thom sighs. He can’t sleep. He’s just lying awake listening to hum of people’s dreams circulating through the hotel’s air system. Stray teeth in the vents. Someone’s worried about money. Dirty sex with someone who isn’t a wife. All the people twitching their legs under their bedsheets, running through the fields of their unconscious fears and desires and needs.

He shifts and feels the arm wrapped around his waist tighten, the hand against his stomach splaying out. It’s cozy and comforting and suddenly too much and Thom climbs out of Michael’s embrace, hoping but ultimately not caring if he wakes him up. He needs out.

Michael rolls over onto his back and for a moment Thom thinks he has woken him; some lame excuse about needing to take a piss is already working its way up his throat. But no, Michael just sighs and starts to lightly snore.

Thom pads over to a small couch and curls up against one armrest. He’s naked, but after the heat of having Michael wrapped around him, the cool air feels good against his skin.

Dinner was a disaster.

After was better, just the two of them. But the sex was a distraction, not a conjoining. It makes Thom feel cheap and guilty using Michael like that. Michael deserves better. Why can’t Thom just be fucking happy for once in his stupid life without trying to sabotage it?

He curls up tighter on the couch cushion and settles in, pulling the night around his shoulders. He shoves his fingernails in his mouth. The darkness lets him enjoy his comforting habit, instead of feeling furtive and guilty over it like he does in the daylight hours.

Always with the guilt.

Thom wishes he could ask Michael for advice.

You can’t ask for advice from a person when the problem concerns them, though, can you?
Hey Michael. I don’t mean this to hurt you, but I have to ask, do you want me or do you want your idea of me? And hey, Michael? I was worried this was a game to you, and I’m not now, so that’s good, but now I wonder if I’m a project instead. Am I a puzzle piece you’re whittling into shape, and when I finally fit right will you just snap me into place to form the bigger picture of you? Why do you think you’re asking me to let you in when it’s really bloody obvious you’re not doing the same for me? What do you think? What would you do if you were me?

Hey Michael. I’ve been looking at my best friend a lot lately and reevaluating the entire last decade of our time together, and for a moment tonight I imagined it was his mouth around my cock and not yours. Just for a moment though. I know, I’m disgusted with myself, too. I don’t mean this to hurt you, but what advice do you have? What do you think I should do?

Yeah, he should ask Michael. It’d only feel a little bit like rising from your grave and asking the person burying you alive if he needs a plaster for the cut on his hand. No one is strong enough for that.

Thom doesn’t want to be the supporting character in someone else’s narrative though. Tonight at the restaurant felt like…like maybe if he’d wanted, he could have slipped into a drawer neatly labeled by Michael’s hand.

Thom thinks back on a fanciful thought he’d had a few days ago, that this new relationship with Michael was feeling like he was building a dresser from badly-translated directions that would crash apart at the first touch of weight. At the time he concluded that he was just assuming the worst, guessing he’d fuck this all up.

Now he can’t help but wonder if maybe Michael is helping, if maybe he’s painting the dresser up all nice, assisting in hiding the shoddy craftsmanship. Labeling the drawers all clean and neat.

But Michael wouldn’t do that, right? Michael is smart, smarter than Thom, at least. There’s no possible way Thom has more insight than Michael into what’s happening here.

Thom’s mood shifts and he wishes he could ask Jonny what he thinks. But no, that’s not an avenue he can bloody well explore either, is it? You can’t look someone in the eyes and ask them for advice on your relationship while also wondering how their lips would feel against yours.

Fuck. Fuck fuckfuck. Thom tosses himself sideways on the couch and starts in on his other hand. The freed fingertips he’s just finished with are gently throbbing where he’s chewed the nails down past the quick. He vaguely hopes that he’s not bleeding snail-trails all over this nice little couch.

Still, he can at least try to imagine what Jonny might say.

Fine. I’ll play your game. How are you?

I am, as the poets say, a mess.

So the normal state of the universe prevails. What do you want me to do about it, though?

I just want to know what you’d say about the mess. If you were here. And real.

I’d say you’re just looking for another self-made drama. I mean really, Thom, there’s no such thing as a perfect relationship. You’re still getting to know each other—and on tour, besides. Give this a chance, at least, before you declare it a disaster! You think everything is doomed.
Well, a lot of things are.

Then why not just let them run their course and enjoy things while you can, if you insist upon rolling around in your misery?

I don’t want to hurt Michael.

That’s just the infatuation talking. You think everyone is so bloody perfect at first, and you think Michael is the most perfect of all. Why do you insist upon this hero worship? He’s just a man. Just a man, Thom. How many times do I need to say that?

Yeah, well, maybe being infatuated with someone who likes you back is a better deal than loving someone who isn’t remotely interested in return. Someone who can barely even stand you half the time, Jonny.

Do you even know the difference between infatuation and love?

Infatuation is when you find someone who is absolutely perfect. I think that maybe love is when you realise they aren’t and it doesn’t matter.

And finally some sense! And what, do you think, should you take away from that?

I don’t know. Kiss me.

What?! God, no. Don’t be pathetic, Thom.

But…

Go away. Lie down until this ridiculousness passes. I’m not cross with you, but we’re definitely done here. God, you’re so hilariously daft sometimes.

So much for that attempted segue into fantasy. Even his imaginary-Jonny laughs at the very idea.

Well. He can at least attempt to follow the one bit of concrete advice imaginary-Jonny gave.

Thom softly rises from the couch and goes to lie down next to Michael. He’s taken a chill that he is just now noticing, and the warmth of Michael’s skin feels good, lulling him to sleep before he realises it’s happening.

Michael, tell me what to think here, because every fall hurts and falling in love is no different, and I’m really hurting and you’re not the cause of this specific pain.
Thom wakes up the next morning to Michael playfully kissing along his shoulders.

“Mmmmm,” he hums. “I was trying to see how many of your freckles I could get to before you woke up and caught me.”

Thom snorts, charmed and pleased. In the early morning light, the misgivings of last night feel thin and nonsensical; just another short chapter in one of his endless series of freak-outs. Even his new awareness of Jonny feels contained and manageable once more, especially when placed in contrast to the solidness of Michael against his back.

Thom needs to remind himself that being afraid of things isn’t the way to make them go right. Trust this, he firmly tells himself. He has a little frisson of guilt, over what precisely he doesn’t know, but he pushes it down.

He rolls over in Michael’s arms and nuzzles against his chest. “Do we have to get up?”

“You don’t, but I’m going to get some grub downstairs. Should I bring you back up some coffee?”

“Nah. I’ll get up, too. I’m going to take a shower back in my room, though. My suitcase is there, possibly even some clean clothes. I’ll see you at the venue later though?”

“Sounds like a plan, Thom.”

He likes the sound of his name mixed with Michael's voice. Michael starts to climb out of bed, but Thom pulls him back and plants a soft kiss on his mouth. Michael kisses him back firmly like all things that are good and familiar and friendly. The kiss goes on until it can’t any longer, until they finally pull back for lack of breath, exhaling their own weather patterns, the collisions resulting not in lightning or hurricanes but something rich and humid.

“I’ll be back in a bit, kitten.” He places one last lingering kiss on Thom’s forehead. “Do you have any idea what you do to me? You’re amazing, Thom Yorke.”

Thom lays back and stretches out as the door to Michael’s room snicks shut. He takes long, measured breaths and lets himself simply exist in his skin.

Wait.
He sits up and scampers over the edge of the bed to his backpack. He digs through the pockets until he finds what he wants. The little toy bird from the airport. Where’s the dog? There was a black dog, too. Doesn’t matter; it’s the green bird he wants.

He starts to get dressed in yesterday’s rumpled clothing. He wants to get back to his room. He has some writing to do.

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“We’ve two hours until we need to be on the buses. The buses are going to stay parked at the venue until tomorrow night when we have to load out. The hotel doesn’t want them in the lot taking up space, so tonight and tomorrow morning we’ll do transport in vans. Got it?”

“Sure, Tim.”

“So don’t leave anything on the bus that you’ll want to bring back here to the hotel tonight, okay?”

“Sure, Tim.”

Tim wanders away and Colin returns to picking through the hotel’s breakfast buffet. If he never sees a baking pan full of watery scrambled eggs again in his life, it’ll still be too soon. Bagels? Maybe he can make a sandwich with the eggs, hide their disgusting texture between carbs. Is there cheese here? Ah, there’s a tray. The cheese looks as sad as the eggs, unfortunately.

“Morning.”

Colin glances up at Michael. He’s holding an empty plate and dolefully looking at the questionable breakfast options on display.

“Michael! Good morning!”

Ed is in the background near the coffee machine, groggily picking through the little tubs of flavoured creamers. Ed pauses his digging, something in Colin’s voice catching his attention.

“It’s so weird! I was standing here, looking at these dreadful eggs,” Colin emphasises his words by hoisting a sloppy scoop of the offending dish. He tilts his hand, letting the chunks drip back down into the tray with audible, soupy splats. “And you just plonked into my thoughts for some odd reason. And suddenly here you are!”

Michael’s mouth is hanging ajar. Behind him, Ed’s is doing the same thing. It’d be funny—it is funny—but Colin needs to focus.

“I…um. Okayyyyy.” Colin can see Michael actively decide to step onto Colin’s crumb-trail of provocation. “Hey, is there something going on? Have I pissed you off, I don’t know, you just seem like…well, if I’ve done anything to upset you, I’d like to apologize…”

Colin slowly tilts his head quizzically, his brow folded into an origami of confusion. “What? Michael, I’m sorry, but I haven’t a clue as to what you might mean? We’re utterly copacetic.”
Ed’s eyes are shining avidly, and without looking away from the scene unfolding behind him, he fumbles for one of the beige mugs from the stacked pile next to the coffee machine. He shifts his attention to Michael, to catch his response.

“Oh.” Michael thins his mouth.

Colin waits for it…

“My bad, then. Everything is okay, though?”

Bless, but Michael’s trying.

“Oh!” Colin shrugs and takes a step further along the table. He forks a slab of ham onto his plate with a loud smack and then pauses, staring dreamily up at a spot high on the wall. “No, no, everything is impeccably fine! Well, not fine. The world is a mess when taken as a whole, isn’t it? Strife, war. All of that. War especially is the worst. Don’t you agree?”

“Um, yes. Yes, it is.”


C’mon, Michael.

“Wonder what?”

There we go.

“Wonder if these people are trying to compensate for something, of course. It reminds me of what Oscar Wilde had to say on the matter.”

Ed has flicked the lever to fill his mug, but his focus is still on them. What the fuck he mouths at Colin over Michael’s shoulder.

Michael’s mouth has pressed into an even thinner line, if possible.

Colin elaborately shrugs as he adds a mealy-looking melon slice to his dish. “Everything in the world is about sex except sex. Sex is about power. It gives me shivers. Does it give you shivers?”

Michael shifts, understanding slipping over his features.

“Oh dear, I’ve put my foot in it, haven’t I?” Colin schools his face into lines of compassion and lowers his voice. “Is everything okay with you, Michael? Here I am, nattering on when it seems I may have hit a sore spot? I’m so thoughtless. And after all you’ve done to be so accommodating.”

There’s a sudden loud squawk and both Colin and Michael turn to look at Ed. Coffee has overspilled his cup, scorching his fingers. He eyes the quickly spreading pool and mumbles, “Whoops, made a bit of a mess. The, ah, spigot got…stuck.”

“Oh, Michael. Don’t fret.” Colin chides brightly, pulling the other man’s attention back to him. “This tour has been a delight in every sense. Not just the company…we’ve been exposed to so many things! Especially Thom, he most of all.”
Colin winks; they're confidants. Michael opens his mouth to speak, but then pauses, trying to find words. He finally closes his mouth, settling on a nonplussed, suspicious nod as his response.

“That was an allusion to your cock. Didn’t that come through? I didn’t want to labour the point.” Colin bares his teeth at Michael in a vague approximation of a smile. Interesting, but none of that now.

Michael’s starting to let himself get angry. It’s obvious he’s had enough; his nostrils are flaring with the effort to remain outwardly calm. Interesting, but none of that now.

Colin throws his head back and forces out a full-throated laugh. He steps forward to clap Michael solidly on the back, still giggling. “You’re so much fun to talk to, we really should do so more often, don’t you think? You’re a very funny guy, and here everyone was like, ‘Oh Michael Stipe, he’s so sensitive and serious, he’s no fun at all, he’s a dreary bore.’ And look at you! I could scream.”

“I…” Michael licks his lips and carefully sets his still-empty plate on the nearest surface. “You’re very strange and…I am leaving now. I don’t know what this is…but I’m not playing this game.”

“Oh, thank you! You too! It was lovely chatting!” Colin raises a hand in parting and for good measure, winks again. He’s going to sprain an eye muscle at this rate.

Michael stalks away from the dining room. Ed wastes no time in accosting Colin.

“Okay, what the hell was that. It was magnificent, you bastard, but seriously. What’s going on?”

Colin sighs.

“Has something ever happened to you and you’re like, ‘This is it. This is how I become a super villain?’”

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Thom bounces up the steps of R.E.M.’s tour bus and pauses. Pretty nice; nicer than theirs, certainly, but any tour bus is still just a bus and inherently still sucks. No amount of inlaid wood and posh seating changes that.

He looks about, trying to decide where he’ll leave his offering. He wants to put the little plastic bird and his letter where only Michael will find them. But it won’t do to hide them too well, either. What would happen if his gifts were never found and months from now, when some other band has rented this bus, they stumble across his…well, love letter, for lack of a better term? Filthy, explicit (but thoughtfully so, he amends) love letter. He doesn’t want, like, Billy Corgan to get the
impression he gives Thom the horn. Gross.

Maybe he shouldn’t have signed it *Thmx* at the bottom.

Thom pads down the aisle, a little nosy despite himself. Bloody hell, this thing has *four* thermostats. Maybe he is a wee touch jealous now.

He reaches the part of the bus with the beds, glancing back and forth at the narrow berths, each with a privacy curtain neatly pulled closed. There are twelve in total, just like on their own bus. For the first time he feels like a sneak, like he’s doing something he shouldn’t be. Coming on R.E.M.’s empty bus to leave a surprise is one thing, but poking his face into each of their beds to try and discern which one might be Michael’s is blatantly intrusive.

Fuck, maybe he needs to rethink his plan. Maybe he should leave it in the venue’s dressing room? Or maybe there’s an assistant he could ask to give his little bundle to Michael. No, what if they open his hotel-stationary envelope and read what he’s written…

“Hey, what the hell do you think you’re doing?”

Thom *squeaks* and startles so forcefully he drops the plastic bird as he spins around, his heart trying to push his lungs out of the way. The toy bounces on the carpeting and Thom loses sight of it.

“You can’t be in here.” Bertis Downs, fourth of his name, is coming down the aisle toward him very quickly, so Thom aborts leaning over to retrieve the bird and faces him instead.

“I’m…I’m sorry. I wanted to leave something here for Michael. I’m sorry.”

“Jesus Christ.” Bertis stops in front of him, his bulk too close for comfort. “I don’t give a shit why you’re here. You’re *here*, and that’s not fucking cool, you got it?”

“Y-yeah, I got it. I’m sorry.”

God, this is humiliating. Bertis is going to tell Michael, of course. This didn’t seem like such a transgression when he first had the idea. He just wanted to leave Michael something to read in his bunk tonight. But now the certainty that he’s messed up proper—done something unacceptable—is filling his stomach as solidly as cement. He feels stupid and small.

“Yeah, yeah, whatever,” Bertis says dismissively. He still looks angry, but he looks a *bored* angry. Suddenly he rolls his eyes and asks, “What were you going to leave? This isn’t your fucking love nest, kid.”

Oh. Thom cringes. “I…had a l-letter for him, and, um…”

He looks frantically around for the bird. Where’d the bird go? He’s too upset to focus. This is surreal; he’s twenty-six, for fuck’s sake, but he feels like he’s regressing in the face of Bertis’ dressing-down.

“Hey, look at me when I’m talking to you, what, do you think this is a joke? If I ever see you on this bus again, we’re going to have a major fucking problem, you got it? The only time you are *ever* allowed on here is if your Daddy brings you, you fucking understand me? And even then, you *better* find a way to tell him no. Have him bend you over somewhere else. I don’t want that shit
around me. You got it?”

Thom freezes.

“What did you say?”

“What what did I say?”

Thom grits his teeth so that the word can barely squeeze through. “Daddy?!”

Bertis looks at him in disbelief and barks out something ugly-sounding that barely passes for amusement. “Jesus, are you joking? You’re not that stupid, kid, are you?”

Thom’s voice sounds deceptively calm, suddenly. No, not calm. Iced over and stiff. “Apparently I must be. What are you talking about?”

“It’s not my job to explain the birds and the fucking bees to you, you know.” Bertis is grinning, however, as he advances on Thom. Thom has no choice but to retreat until his back presses up against the wall in front of the bunk section. Thom recognises when a bully has scented weakness; some skill-sets are never lost.

Bertie is not a trim man. He has the look of an American footballer that’s spent much of the past couple decades enjoying too much wine and steak. There’s plenty of coddled flab, but beneath that there’s still plenty of muscle. Even if it’s mostly neglected muscle, it’d not be smart of Thom to dismiss it.

“Okay, Yorke. Here’s the deal. Since he didn’t take the time to explain the way things are to you…”

Thom’s organs are screaming at him to get out, to push past Bertis and escape this nightmare he’s found himself in, but he can’t feel his legs let alone move them.

“…Michael’s your Daddy. Some older guy who likes ‘em young, sweet, and inexperienced. Likes to take twinks like you and parade ‘em around, teach ‘em how they like things. Gets off on making brats behave, you get it? Don’t look at me like that, who do you think told me what that word meant for people like you in the first place?”

Thom doesn’t know “how” he’s looking at Bertis, but he feels like he’s going to be sick all over the posh carpet.

“What, did you think you were the only one?”

“Fuck you,” Thom hisses, knowing how weak he must sound.

“Nah, I’m not interested in that gay shit and that’s not your job,” Bertis leers. “Your job is to keep Michael happy, just like all his other boys did. Got it?”

The words pouring out of the repugnant mouth in front of him are poisoned water and Thom can feel every memory of Michael tarnishing under the weight of their acidic truth.

“So,” Bertis barks, apparently bored of playing with such lame prey. “Here’s the deal, since I feel sorry for you. Not even gonna make you thank me. Guess what? I won’t tell Michael you snuck on
his bus and you won’t get a spanking from Daddy. See? Aren’t I a nice guy? So be a good boy and get the fuck outta here. NOW.”

Afterwards, Thom will never have a clear memory of how he managed to stumble his way off the bus. He’ll only remember the sound of Bertis snickering behind him, and his parting words:

“Don’t be such a fucking pussy, kid. A million people would kill for the chance to be Michael Stipe’s plaything.”

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Thom’s brain has helpfully zeroed in on one fact to the exclusion of all other thoughts: Michael won’t be at the venue for a few hours yet. Unlike Thom, who likes to show up hours early at the venue, Michael seems to wait until the last minute. The last minute for soundcheck, the last possible second to take the stage. Like it’s a game.

“Hey, it’s going to be okay. Plenty of shows get delayed. The audience can handle waiting a little longer.”

“Maybe if I just get out and run for it? It’s what, three kilometers?”

…And then a hand on his thigh and soothing words. Fuck. FUCK. The memory is taking on a new meaning as it surfaces. Doesn’t matter. It doesn’t matter, and there’s only one fact that does.

Michael will still be at the hotel.

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“We need to talk. Let me in.”

Michael looks at him silently for a moment, and whatever he sees in Thom’s mismatched eyes causes him to just nod and open the door all the way to allow Thom to stomp past. Thom immediately starts pacing, suddenly feeling caged by the reality of what he’s about to confront.

“What’s going on? What’s wrong?”

Thom laughs; he brings his hands to his face and presses fingers into his overheated flesh. He starts another circle of the room.
Michael stands there, watching.

“So I went to your bus today. Snuck right on. Was going to leave you a present, see? I wrote you something.”

“That’s nice…” Michael crosses his arms and waits for Thom to continue, looking confused but concerned. For some reason that makes Thom more upset. At the very least, couldn’t Michael have the decency to already have an idea of what this is about?

“Yeah, well, I ran into Bertie.”

“Ah. Shit, what’d he do?” Michael sighs and brings a hand to his forehead. Thom’s rage is building, compressing in on itself, but he catches that there’s a marked lack of surprise in Michael’s reaction.

Resignation, however? Yes.

“Oh, he just let me know the way things are. He really opened my eyes, he did. Opened them so wide my brains got a good airing out.”

“Thom…you need to calm down and tell me what happened. I’m really lost here.”

Thom has no patience for this delicate posturing.

“Daddy.”

Thom hisses the word at Michael, the syllables leaving a film on his teeth as they slip past, making him want to wash out his mouth.

“I…okay. I’m still not really following. I’m going to need you to try again, kitten.”

“DON’T CALL ME THAT. I HATE IT, DON’T EVER CALL ME THAT AGAIN, GOT IT? I AM NOT YOUR FUCKING PET!”

“Thom. Hold on. I don’t think you’re anything like that.” Michael steps forward and tries to place his hands on Thom’s shoulders in an attempt to distract him from his pacing. Thom quickly knocks his hands away and steps back.

“Don’t touch me. So all this time, I really was just a game, huh?”

“Thom…no….not at all.”

“Oh, so Bertie was lying? There’s not been others?”

Michael looks at him, at a loss for words. Finally he says, exasperation colouring his voice, “Thom, how am I supposed to answer that? I’m thirty-five years old, of course there have been others. Lots of others…I mean…what did you think…?”

“I didn’t think I was just a…a plaything.” Thom spits out the word Bertis had used. “I don’t mean sex, I mean, am I just another in a long line that you’ve seduced and…and used until, I assume, you became bored?”
“God, I could kill Bertie. I will kill Bertie.”

“Why, for letting me in on your dirty secret?”

“No, for winding you up like this. There is no dirty secret. Look, you’re going to hyperventilate. Bertie’s crass. The only reason we employ him is that he’s a hell of a lawyer. But whatever bullshit he told you, I promise you it was just him running his mouth about things he can’t even begin to understand. He’s an idiot.”

Thom forces himself to stop pacing. Michael takes this as an invitation and approaches him again, rubbing his hands soothingly along Thom’s tightly crossed arms. Thom lets him.

Michael says, his voice reasonable, “C’mon, how about you sit down with me and tell me what that jackass said?”

Thom nods and allows Michael to lead him to the bed. He desperately wants to find out this was all just a cruel joke, that he can trust Michael’s gentle voice and calm, earnest eyes.

So he takes a deep breath and starts to lay out what happened on the tour bus. He doesn’t try to explain how it made him feel, how it all appeared so obvious as soon as Bertis said it.

“Holy shit, no wonder you were so pissed off,” Michael says once Thom is done. “He actually said it was your job to make me happy? Look, I am going to have a talk with Bertis. He will apologize to you.”

“No, no. I’d prefer if you didn’t. I mean, I just don’t want to have to look at his face again if I can help it, okay?” Thom’s beginning to feel embarrassed at the way he came exploding into Michael’s room, full of accusations. What a cock-up this is turning out to be.

“Are you sure? Look, I’m offended, too. He made me out to be such an asshole. I’m kinda upset you believed him, if I can be a little honest?” Michael laughs like he’s the one embarrassed.

“Ah, shit, no, I’m sorry.”

Great. This is just great. “Guys like that just seem to know exactly how to get under my skin, you know? I let him. I never learn.”

“That asshole doesn’t deserve another second of your attention.” Michael leans forward and wraps his arms around Thom.

He clings back and feels the tightness in his chest start to drain away. Michael turns his mouth to Thom’s ear and starts to whisper.

“Don’t take Bertie so seriously. Lighten up. But hey, can I make an admission? You know, it’s kinda hot, right? When you think about it. You can call me Daddy if you want.”

“What?” Thom whispers back. This is really happening.

“I’ll be your Daddy and take care of you. Take real good care of you,” Michael purrs playfully. His hands start to roam over Thom’s back. “Is this where we get to have make-up sex? I like that part.”

Thom very carefully leans back and looks Michael in the eyes. And all he sees staring back is a lack of understanding.
“No,” says Thom, very calmly. “What the hell, Michael? Haven’t you heard a thing I’ve said?”

Michael sighs, “Okay. So that was a miscalculation on my part. I’m sorry.”

“You think?”

Michael unexpectedly flops backwards onto the bed and huffs in exasperation.

“I’m sorry. I…I don’t know what the fuck you want from me sometimes, Thom.”

“I want to be treated like…like a bloody equal and not like some—”

“You are my equal.”

“Don’t patronise me!”

“—Really?” Michael interrupts him and sits back up. “You can’t treat me like I’m your life raft in one breath and then, in the next, get mad because you think I’m patronizing you. I really like being with you, but you can’t have it both ways, Thom!”

“W-what…That’s not…but…” Michael’s sudden anger has pulled the rug out from under Thom.

“That’s not true!”

“It is though. I never know where the fuck I stand with you. I thought I did, but it’s obvious I don’t. It’s exhausting.”

“Oh, I’m exhausting? It’s exhausting letting someone in, letting me in? Exhausting acting like I’m not just your accessory? Like my feelings don’t matter?”

“It’s exhausting living up to your hero worship.”

“I don’t. I don’t worship you. And I never asked you to live up to anything. Don’t be daft.”

Jonny’s words from that drunken night at the pub, coming back to haunt him.

Sure, Thom, sure. You want advice? Here’s some advice: I think you’ve got your hands up and you’re praying to him like he’s a god, but he’s no god. He’s just a man.

“You sure acted like you wanted me take the lead, for someone who now claims otherwise. An Oscar-worthy performance, darling. Do I enjoy playing dominant in the bedroom? Yeah, I do. But only when my partner does as well, and don’t for a moment pretend like I hid what I enjoy from you. I gave you every chance to let me know if you weren’t comfortable with it. You loved being seduced. You get off on acting a little submissive. And so what if you do…but this isn’t about the fucking, is it, Thom?”

“I…” Thom isn’t given a chance to actually formulate an answer as Michael lunges from his seat on the bed to stand in front of Thom. He gestures with his finger like he’s wielding a judge’s gavel.

“In fact, how fucking dare you talk to me about how you feel like you’re not being treated as an equal. How self-centered can one person be?”

Thom lashes out defensively. “Of course I’m self-centred. What am I supposed to be, you-centred?
Oh right, that’s your whole kink, I forgot.”

Michael grins and tips him a sarcastic salute. He backs away and their positions of earlier have flipped; he is now the one stalking around the room, gesticulating wildly as he talks to himself as much as to Thom.

“No, this isn’t about some barely kinky sex games. This is about the rest of it. Which is it? Am I your Daddy, as much as you hate that word? Or…or do you want a so-called boyfriend, but one that cleans up after you without calling attention to what he’s doing, because god forbid your pride be forced to endure a little scrutiny when you want to be taken care of? Yeah, I get to pretend like you see me as an equal, and I dominate you in the bedroom where your secrets are safe, and then I get the privilege of being your famous friend in public. Don’t think I didn’t see how embarrassed you were by me at that restaurant in Louisiana. How you cringed at my touch like it disgusted you. Your dismissal came through loud and clear.”

Thom’s breath catches. That’s not why he had withdrawn. Is that really what Michael thought? Michael isn’t done speaking though, and the words continue to pour out of him in an unstoppered stream.

“And it fucking hurt, okay? And in exchange? I get put away on a shelf when my services aren’t required, because having to treat me like an actual flawed person with my own needs and insecurities doesn’t fit neatly with your fantasy of me, does it? You want me to be wiser and stronger and less affected than you. You don’t want a partner, you want a mentor that can fuck you when you desire it and then graciously grant you autonomy from any emotional reciprocity when you don’t.”

“That’s not what I want, Michael!”

“Good to hear you say that, because that really sounds like a shit deal, to be honest.”

Thom’s shaking, the twin rushes of fear and anger indistinguishable to his body.

“Or maybe it’s not me who you want to be your boyfriend? Am I just practice? I’m not blind, Thom.”

Oh fuck. He knows. He has somehow seen through Thom, perceived the farrago of feelings he has for Jonny…

Michael doesn’t push Thom for a confirmation or denial, however. He moves on. “This pedestal is exhausting. It’s even more exhausting pretending I’m not on it, to protect your sensibilities.”

Michael is slinging ideas that might form something in Thom’s head when he thinks back to this moment but right now he has no defense against the metal-laced syllables.

“What do you want me to say?” Thom asks. “I don’t know what you want from me, either.”

“Either acknowledge it, and I'll stay up here if that’s what you need, gladly…or let me down and let's try this a different way.”

Thom swallows.

“We can’t have a relationship if it’s all about your needs alone, Thom.” Michael’s anger has
drained away; he moves slowly to stand in front of Thom and then kneels down in front of where he’s sitting. “I like you. Yeah, I’ve fucked around plenty, of course I have…but I’d like to give this thing a real go with you. Can you give me a chance to be just as messed up as you, sometimes?”

Thom feels his head nod at Michael’s words.

Michael’s right. Oh bloody hell, but he’s right.

There’s a crumpled letter in Thom’s pocket that was meant to be read by Michael in his bunk tonight. The very first line—the very first thought Thom had when he put pen to paper to express his feelings to Michael—was meant as an offering.

*Kiss me until I forget how terrified I am of everything wrong with my life.*

His opening words to Michael were a just an idealised demand to be saved by him.

No fucking pressure, Michael. *Just be my salvation, that’s all.*

Michael is still kneeling at Thom’s feet, searching his face for something. They’ve been trying to fill up each other’s cracks with their own clay, but there’s a severe shortage…so they’ve been scooping it out of the critical aspects of themselves, hoping it’d be enough.

“This isn’t going to work out, is it?”

“It can, Thom. It can. It can be good."

Just waiting for something good to happen. Just tensed and waiting. Anything good. And you know: a lack of bad things happening does not count as a good thing. *It could be much worse* is not a good thing. Someone meeting your dashed expectations is not a *good* thing. Getting by is not a good thing.

“No.” Thom shakes his head sadly. “I exhaust you, and you’re starting to resent me for it. You overwhelm me, and I’m starting to resent you back.”

“You’re overthinking this…”

No, for once he’s *not*. There’s nothing more that either of them can say right now that won’t sound like a broken promise in a pawn shop.

“I can’t do this. You’re right. I’ve used you. And you’ve been using me right the fuck back, haven’t you?”

“Thom, wait—“

“No.”

He brushes past Michael’s crouched form and leaves the room.
As far as Thom is aware, Michael doesn’t follow after him. He doesn’t show up to pound on the door of Radiohead’s tour bus where Thom ultimately goes to hide, curling up in his berth as he tries to not replay every single thing he said to Michael and every single thing Michael said back. He fails miserably, of course.

Thom doesn’t see Michael when he finally drags himself from the bus and takes the stage that night, nor does he the next night, either. Michael isn’t watching from the wings, not that Thom is looking to see if he’s there.

He next sees Michael in Austin, his ropy figure silhouetted by a stage door, and Thom immediately turns and more or less runs away before Michael has any opportunity to move towards him or say something…or act like everything is normal. Like maybe none of it happened. Like they’re just professionals sharing the same polite space.

The day after the Austin show they’ve the day free. Thom lies in bed listening to Ed snore, the early morning sun aggressively pushing past the drapes. It’s only shining because it doesn’t have a choice in the matter, which pretty much sums up Thom’s state of affairs as well.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

Thom doesn’t startle or even turn towards Ed’s voice. “Not really.”

“Okay.”

“Yeah. Okay.”

Ed is silent for a few moments before heaving himself out of bed. Thom continues to stare at the ceiling as he listens to the sounds of Ed moving around the room and then using the toilet. The faint scratch of teeth-brushing spills from the bathroom.

“Why is the word ‘no’ so brief? It should be longer, harder to say.”
Thom sits up. There’s a dresser with a mirror facing the foot of his bed and he’s faced with having to take stock of himself: his hair is snarled into wobbly exclamation points and the bony angles of one shoulder poke through the wildly misshapen neck of a ratty old t-shirt. There are dark smears under his eyes like he was touched in his sleep by the charcoal fingers of a night creature, marking Thom as its own. Thom doesn’t particularly want to be confronted with this reflection right now, but he continues to stare into the mirror. The sound of Ed’s toothbrush comes closer and slows in pace, but doesn’t stop.

“Like, there should be time to abort the word in the middle. Time to change your mind. Once the word is out, it’s too late, no matter what you say after.”

The toothbrush stops completely. “What did you say ‘no’ to?”

Thom shrugs. On his reflection’s body it looks like a spastic twitch.

The toothbrush doesn’t start back up, so Thom finally says, “Sometimes I wish I was a machine. Androids have a complete lack of hesitation. No wavering confidence, y’know? If they say ‘no’, they mean it. There isn’t any…regret.”

“So go talk to him.”

“I’m too angry.”

“Every time you take a deep breath and maintain your temper, your power is increased.”

“Oh thanks, Ed. You’re a right fountain of wisdom,” Thom retorts. “I think I’ll keep my anger and skip the zen, all the same. Don’t think the world could handle a single person with that much increased power anyway.”

He’s angry, yes, but he’s more cross at himself than at Michael. Frankly, he’s trying not to consider why he went full-tilt after Michael when given an opportunity. Why it almost seems in retrospect he was looking for an excuse to blow their fledgling relationship, however misguided it may have been, out of existence.

Not that he’s letting Michael off the hook, though.

But the self-directed anger? He knows how he’d handle it if faced with Michael right now. The way he generally deals: by taking it out on other people. He decides not to voice another facet of his thoughts to Ed…that he’s worried Michael might be angry, too. But unlike Thom, actually angry, and with proper reason. He had plenty to say when caught unexpectedly by Thom’s wrath; what would he say now he’s had more time to consider all the ways in which Thom is a fuck-up?

“Do you want to patch things over? I mean, I don’t know what happened—“

“—It all went pear-shaped, Ed. Full stop.”

How can he explain to Ed that what has him avoiding Michael isn’t just a reluctance to grapple with their combined anger again? Thom’s anger, if he’s being honest, isn’t really anger of course. It’s just pain. The pain of feeling used, or at the very least manipulated? To some extent, sure. Of Michael treating him a bit like a pet? That, too. But beyond that surface-level scenery there’s a sublevel. And down there, down under the dirt and muck, exists the newfound understanding that he was using Michael as well, and Michael knew and let him because…because Michael apparently
thought that’s what had to be allowed for Thom to want to be with him.

Whatever Michael wanted from Thom—a distraction, a conquest, some slightly kinky sex—he had never asked him to be anything other than who he is.

He might have been playing with Thom, but he never asked Thom to pretend along with him. Thom chose to play make-believe on his own.

Thom’s ashamed. Anger and pain he can overcome on long enough of a timeline, but how can he face Michael when he’s so fucking ashamed?

“Do I use people?”

“Wow. Erm, hold on.” Ed re-enters the bathroom and rinses his mouth clean of toothpaste before returning to sit on the edge of his own bed. Thom can see his reflection in the mirror carefully looking Thom over.

“You don’t use people, Thom. Sometimes you overwhelm them with your needs though. People just want to… I don’t know. You’re charismatic. You have the ability to make people follow you, usually for the better. That’s not a character flaw, necessarily. You just need to be careful with how you use it, you know?”

“So,” Thom says bitterly, “I’m manipulative.”

“No, I didn’t say that. Now you’re putting words in my mouth. I said you’re needy.”

Thom considers whether he wants to make a fight of this. Usually he’s spitting words at people before he realises it. But his brain is molasses-slow and dreary this morning; he can sense his neurons firing as they actively look for an outlet for his pain, reaching out towards the easy target Ed is providing.

Thom takes a deep breath. He wishes he knew how to meditate.

“So what now?” Ed asks quietly.

“Now? I get up and avoid running into Michael for the day. I plan on getting wasted tonight, if you want to join me. Tomorrow, second verse same at the first. Keep doing that until this bloody tour is over and then I just pretend none of it ever happened.”

“Is pretending it never happened really the best solution here?”

“No, it seems I’ve done more than enough pretending,” Thom mutters. “But Ed, I fucked up. I mean, he fucked up too, but why press the issue? It is what it is. I think I maybe just need to accept there’s no happy resolution to be had.”

“What about the friendship?”

Thom makes his voice breezy. “I got laid, why make more out of it than that, right? I’m sure he’d agree.”

“If you say so, Thom.”
“I hate it when you do that.”

“Do what?”


“I don’t have a voice like that.”


“Now you’re just being absurd.”


“You don’t have a haunted soul,” Ed sighs.

“A little bit, maybe I do.”

“Stop being…romantic.”

“—What!? I’m not…romanticising. What-the-fuck-ever. I’m not…Jonny.”

Ed snorts.

Thom gives Ed a middle finger. Also, he doesn’t really want to think about Jonny because tangled in with the uncomfortable thoughts concerning the reasons he’s avoiding Michael, cowardice and Jonathan Greenwood might feature into a half-formed theory he’s terrified to explore too closely. His subconscious motivations behind the wholesale destruction of what he and Michael were maybe starting to build are better left alone.

Self-knowledge is overrated at a certain point, surely.

Ed rolls his eyes. “No wonder you two get along so bloody well. You’re two peas in a pod. Shitty, melodramatic peas.”

“No one likes you, Ed. We just pretend because you can reach things on shelves that we can’t.” Thom’s smiling, though.

“The tears I’ve shed knowing that could fill a pool.” Ed stands up, smiling as well. “Look, I’m taking a shower. One last question, maybe? To ask yourself? If you’re honest with what you really want from Michael, does that preclude you from dating him? If the answer is yes, is that so bad when you think about it? And if the answer is no, is being with him worth fighting for?”

Thom shrugs noncommittally.

“Just think about it, Thom. Maybe go find a Greenwood and get this moodiness out of your system or something. And give it a few days and talk to Michael, be an adult about the whole thing.”
“Oh I see, passing me off to the Greenwood sisters in my time of need, cheers mate.”

“Yup. And c’mon…I know shit was really intense…but really, you’ve only known Michael a few months. It’s not like you have years of history between you.”

“No,” Thom says quietly. “No. I guess I don’t.”

But he’d hung that poster of Michael in his teenage bedroom.

Michael hadn’t been aware of Thom till he’d heard “Creep” on the radio.

It hardly seems fair.

Then again, Michael isn’t a photograph. And Thom isn’t a best-selling single.

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Thom does eventually hunt down a Greenwood, though he waits until evening because he wasn’t lying when he said he planned on getting fantastically, irresponsibly wasted.

Colin and Ed join him; Jonny had waved them off saying he was going to take advantage of their absence to get some much needed time alone (Ed asked if he was going to have a wank and Jonny threw a book—Dostoevsky’s The Idiot—with incredibly accurate aim at his head). They thought about Tim for a moment, but Tim would have made them retire back to the hotel at a responsible hour since they needed to be on the bus to Dallas in the morning. They didn’t ask Phil, because the thought didn’t even cross their minds.

So the three of them left the hotel and meandered in the direction they were told would lead them to several satisfactory bars, and on the walk they ran into Plank along with several other of their crew, all having the same idea in mind.

Cool. The more the merrier.

Thom doesn’t talk about Michael and Ed doesn’t bring him up. Tonight is about not thinking about him. Thom assumed Ed had immediately spilled everything to Colin, what with him being such a great big gossip, but Colin can’t keep his thoughts to himself to save his life and doesn’t give any sign he’s aware of what’s happened between Thom and Michael.

Thom kind of wants to thank Ed for being able to keep a secret. But that would involve bringing up Michael, and once again, tonight is all about not being about Michael, so he settles on buying Ed a
shot and hoping he figures out it’s a doubled ounce of burning gratitude.

Thom loses track of how much he’s drinking after the fourth shot and fifth pint. And after that, he loses track of everything else, as well.

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Thom gropes for the key to the room. It’s here somehow…some…where. So much of touring is spent fumbling with unfamiliar keys.

He’s on his own; Cozzie and Ed had somewhat paced themselves and hadn’t been in any mood to call it a night when Thom had decided he’d reached his limit.

He hadn’t planned on leaving earlier than everyone else; the whole evening had been his idea, after all. Ed had at some point decided they all needed to leave and head to a karaoke bar a couple blocks further down the way. He’d circled the bar, repeatedly yelling, “NO MAN LEFT BEHIND!” over everyone’s heads, whether he knew them or not. Somehow this accomplished the impossible, and eventually the sprawling lot of them tumbled out onto the sidewalk like a soused amoeba.

Thom thinks it was probably less to do with Ed’s crowd management skills and more to do with him being an utter embarrassment they ultimately humoured just so he’d shut the fuck up.

A little internal flag inside of Thom had popped up as they’d started towards their destination. It said in no uncertain terms that while he could continue to drink if he so chose, it’d most likely lead to unmentionable actions and their resultant recriminations come morning. And suddenly, just like that, Thom was exhausted. His buoyant, alcohol-bolstered mood started to deflate and there was nothing more he wanted than to crawl into bed and maybe get a full night of sleep for the first time in a week. Well…sleep…passing out drunk…either option sounded blissful.

“Hey, guys! Wait, I think I’m going back. I’m done, I’m knackered.”

Most of the group carried on towards karaoke, Ed leading them like an overgrown pied piper. Colin and a sound tech named Josh wobbled back around to face him. Colin, Josh, and the girl under Colin’s arm, that is. The girl had a straw cowboy hat and a pierced navel and looked flushed by the unexpected rockstar karaoke adventure she found herself enmeshed in.

“You okay, man?” Josh asked…maybe it was Jason? No, Josh, for sure.
“Yeah, yeah. I just wanna go home.”

Colin arched his eyebrow, nearly as drunk as Thom but obviously enjoying himself much more. “Home? You better not, Yorke. Dallas awaits your dulcet tones.”

“The hotel, you wanker, the hotel. Fuck you, I’m drunk. You know what I mean.”

Colin theatrically leaned into the girl at his side and whispered sloppily into her ear—well, hair, as he couldn't seem to be able to stay in place long enough to aim his mouth where he should—“He just wants to go back to his loverrrrr. He has a lover, a right bastard too. I’m not a bastard by the way. I’m British. You’re pretty. Pretty…cowgirl.”

Oh god, Colin was so blasted. As drunk as he himself was, Thom still found the wherewithal to cringe in embarrassment on Colin’s behalf. Even if the girl under his arm hadn't started to turn her head away from him like she was the Leia to his Jabba, Thom wasn’t sure Colin was physically capable of closing this deal. Thom estimated a lot of vomit in Colin Greenwood’s not-too-distant future.

“Yeah, well, my…um, they…they had other plans tonight.” Ah, and fuck, but that hurt to say, but it was a convenient workaround in service of avoiding a conversation he was not about to have with Colin right then. Thom suddenly had an idea.

“Hey, can I get your room key? I’m gonna crash and I don’t want Ed to wake me up singing Journey at three AM, okay?”

“Fuck you, Yorke, where will I sleep? Imma not gonna sleep on…on the bus. Or a bench. Hey, remember the time we fell asleep on a bench? More of a…a pew, really.”

“No no no, I’m giving you my key, and you’ll sleep in my room. You and Ed can walk each other home! No benches needed! Pews neither.” Thom had felt very proud of this sound logic.

“Unfuck you, then,” said Colin, making a grab for the key Thom dangled from his finger only to immediately drop it. The girl under his arm crouched down to retrieve the fob. Thom noticed she’d didn’t deposit herself back under Colin’s arm after that, though.

Thom waved the group off and wove his way back the way they’d come, toward their hotel.

And now Thom is so close to a bed that will in no way run the risk of having a drunken Ed leaning over it singing power ballads at any point tonight. So…close. If he can find the bloody key. Thom feels even more drunk than when he was leaving the pub—that last shot must just now be catching up with him.

Aha. There it is.

Thom lets himself into the room quietly, years of drunken sneaking lending him a practiced grace. The lights are off but the muted telly is on, an old black-and-white film flickering. James Stewart is in an alley talking to a young couple, a wistful look on his face.

Jonny is in the bed closest to the door. Thom can just barely make out his features in the dim light cast by the telly. He’s asleep, his head tilted back on the pillow, baring the long pale column of his neck. His lips are slightly parted, and Thom feels a pang of something unnamable as he stares
down at him.

He sighs. His stupid heart cracks, just a little. One of Jonny’s feet has kicked free from the sheets and Thom carefully covers it back up.

He’s not sure when he sat down on the bed next to Jonny, but it’s okay, right? He’s just looking. Has he ever really looked before? He’s shared a room with Jonny innumerable times over the years; he would recognise it was Jonny in that bed even if he couldn’t see his face; the way one arm was carelessly tossed over his head, by the specific angle of one slightly-bent knee. By the hair splashed across his pillow, a darker shadow amongst all the rest.

Impulsively, Thom does the one thing he’s always wanted to do but has never dared: he reaches out and strokes a couple fingers through a lock of that hair.

“What are you doing?”

Thom straightens. Oh.

“Nothing. I was just touching your hair. You know.”

“I don’t, really. You drunk?”

“Very.”

“You should go to bed.” Jonny’s barely awake; he has years of experience dealing with a drunk Thom. At this point he barely needs to be conscious.

“Jonny?”

He sighs, and mumbles, “What is it, Thom?”

Thom leans over and kisses Jonny.

No, he doesn’t lean—he more or less falls into him—and in the darkness he can’t really be sure where his lips land. They brush against warmth, either a mouth or cheek, and Jonny’s scent is suddenly filling his nose and breaking through his fog despite the alcohol, and then he’s defying gravity as his body rewinds itself back to its previous posture.

Jonny has Thom by the wrists, and has firmly but gently pushed him back up into a sitting position.

Oh.

“Thom, no.”

It takes a few moments for Thom to find his tongue and even longer to shuffle his thoughts into some type of order. “Couldn’t we…just this once? I’m…you’re…maybe we should…please?”

“You need to stop.”

Jonny’s voice is heavy and flat, a paving stone that sits on Thom's chest and will not budge.

“I’m sorry. I just…I just thought…maybe…I’m sorry.”
What has he done? Oh god.

“Thom? You need to go to sleep. And…and you can’t ever do that again, all right?”

Thom can still smell Jonny, and he imagines that’s how the inside of his mouth tastes, too. Earthy and green. He longs for that taste.

“Thom.”

He comes back to himself and blinks down at the shadowed face staring up at him. Thom can’t read the expression there, but he doesn’t know if that’s due to the near-dark, the alcohol, or if Jonny is purposely locking him out. Jonny still has his wrists, though, and his fingers convulse against Thom’s skin.

“I’m…sorry, Jon-Jon. I am so sorry.”

“It’s okay, Thom,” Jonny’s voice is a whisper. “You don’t know what you’re doing.”

“But…”

“Thom…you’ll hate yourself come morning…what about Michael…”

Thom shakes his head. No. He doesn’t want to think about that. And he doesn’t owe anything to Michael. Not anymore.

“Just…just go to bed, okay?” There’s a sharper edge to Jonny’s voice now, one that Thom hasn’t the strength to push against. “I can’t do…I can’t let you do this. Please.”

“Okay, Jonny.”

He releases Thom’s wrists, finally, and the freed skin tingles at the loss. Thom somehow manages to drunkenly stumble the few feet to the empty bed next to Jonny’s. He should…he should take his shoes off. He feebly kicks a foot against the sheets. That won’t do. Oh well.

Thom faintly feels the shoe he was flailing being gently pulled off his foot. The other follows. But he can’t respond, can’t find the strength to roll over and say to Jonny I’m sorry I’m like this and Why do you put up with me.

And it suddenly feels imperative that he explain himself to Jonny, tells him, Sometimes if I’m not sleeping, I can feel it if you’re awake, too. I can feel that gulf between us and I want to jump into it because maybe I’ll meet you there, somewhere in the middle.

And he wants to say, I just realised that recently because I’m stupid and didn’t know any better. I took you for granted.

And, Teach me how to make it up to you. Teach me to adore you.

And, I want to weather every winter with you.

And, It was over between me and him the moment I first imagined kissing you. Even if he had been perfect for me, and me for him, it wouldn’t have mattered. That’s the real truth. Out of all the
But he can’t say any of those things, because he’s sinking fast into oblivion. But still, as the blackness is claiming him, he feels like he hears a voice—like Jonny’s voice maybe—say something he can’t help but feel was plucked free from the cracked terracotta of his own heart.

“If they hooked me up to a polygraph and asked me if I loved you, I would say No but the needle would jump and sputter exactly how you laugh. Do you understand? Do you understand why I can’t kiss you?”

Thom tries; he tries to say No.

But he’s truly beyond consciousness then, and when he wakes in the morning, he’s alone but for the little black plastic dog sitting on the nightstand, the one he thought he’d lost in Italy.
Chicago isn’t New York City so it doesn’t own his heart, but Michael can understand why the people who live here are so fierce and proud of their city. He’ll still never understand Midwesterners—in college his cohort loved to talk about Yankees and all the myriad ways in which they disappoint—but Midwesterners are much more difficult to parse, diametrically opposed to Southerners in a way that’s more purely alien. Northerners are the flip side of the Southern coin, a shiny coin, a coin that reflects back hidden parts of oneself.

Midwesterners are just weird.

Maybe it’s the perfect city for his mood. Weird, and prideful, and experience-roughened.

Michael slouches down in his seat and glowers vaguely at the few other customers in the diner. If any recognize him, they’re keeping their distance. Good. He can’t muster the energy right now to interact with strangers, no matter how Midwestern-friendly these Chicagoans may be.

Thom likes Chicago. He’d been excited to take Michael around to the record shops.

Fuck.

This was not how this was supposed to go. Yet again. Jesus christ, Michael, yet again.

There has got to be a solution; he just needs to find it. Surely he can convince Thom to give him another chance. He runs through scenarios—each one more improbable than the last—until he gives up in annoyance. They’re all stupid and would just bandage the situation. A few days from now, a week from now, a month from now and the same core problems would remain. You can only bandage something so many times before it rots away, if the wound itself isn’t dealt with. Michael rubs a hand over his skull and scowls at his coffee. The damage is pretty fucking terminal. The words they had spat at each other were poison-tipped. And the ones from Thom’s mouth were so completely unfair.

Well. Some of them.

“It can’t be that bad. All coffee is good, even the shitty stuff.”
Michael startles and Patti laughs, gesturing for him to get up and greet her properly. He’s all too happy to comply, hugging her close. He feels safe in a way he rarely does, yet always does, when in her presence. She places her forehead on his chest, pauses thoughtfully, and says, “If I was a unicorn, you’d be dead.”

Despite his mood Michael laughs. They settle down, the morning sun flooding their booth to soften the long, sharp angles of Patti’s face and highlight her cloud of hair with threads of silver. Michael apologizes for not having had much time to see her last night, and again, what an honor it was for her to come and guest with him on ‘Dancing Barefoot.’ She waves away his social niceties and orders tea.

“My plane got in late and as soon as the gig was over I went back to my room and slept. Been keeping weird hours lately. That’s on me, not you. So, what have you done?”

“Done?” Michael looks at Patti blankly, not understanding. “I mean, the tour’s been going well so far…though calling it the Monster Tour has turned out to be a little too on the nose, you know? It’s a beast.”

She stares back at him shrewdly. “No. Not how R.E.M. is doing. I don’t even mean how you’re doing. That’s obvious. You’re a pile of angst. So what’s happened? What have you done?”

“Why do you assume I’ve done anything?” He grins at her, making light. His face feels like an old, dried-out rubber mask. Cracking at the overworked creases.

She says nothing and looks away, busies herself with her teabag.

Goddammit. He hasn’t known Patti Smith all that long but they’ve already slipped into the rare sort of friendship that transcends years. That's a blessing but also a curse. She can read him and can surely see he wants desperately to unload on her; her entire demeanor is saying get on with it, don’t waste our time without her having to utter a word.

So Michael slumps back; capitulation it is, then. “I don’t fucking know. I’ve been sitting here trying to figure it out, but I swear to god, until a couple days ago everything was great. Really fucking great. Then, suddenly, not so much.”

“Oh, Michael. You’ve done it again, haven’t you? It’s that little red-head I saw skulking around, isn’t it?”

“Thom was skulking?” Michael flashes back to that party in Berlin, on Thom at the periphery of the group, stealing small looks of Michael as if he could be made to put them back. And Michael pretending he wasn’t aware. Enjoying the game and considering if he wanted to make something of those mismatched eyes furtively roaming over him. He might’ve wanted to. Or not. He hadn’t quite decided yet. Either way, at the time he had found it to be an unexpected yet delightful development, one he thought he would enjoy unspooling at his leisure.

Goddammit, Thom. Why’d you have to look at me like that? Why couldn’t you have turned out to be a waste of time? You were just supposed to be a diversion.

“Yes. I saw him spying on me before I went on. I beckoned and he ran away. Why do you insist on these babies, Michael?”
“He’s not a baby! He’s twenty-five.” Michael pauses and suddenly smacks his forehead. *No, wait. Wrong! He’s twenty-six! Almost twenty-seven, I’m pretty sure.*

Patti nonetheless shoots a disapproving glance in his direction and chides, “He looks like an especially bratty eighteen-year-old. Jailbait. Come on, what are you doing?”

“Nothing! He’s a cool guy, we started to hang out, and—“

“—Cut the shit, Michael. What are you trying to save him from? What is this one’s angle? Drugs? General malaise? Please don’t tell me you’ve gone and involved yourself with another sweet, needy kid…you can’t save them.” She tightens her lips, concerned. “And they can’t fill whatever that hole within yourself is, that one you’re trying to close up with their admiration.”

“No. He’s not a druggy.” He decides to ignore the latter part of her admonishment.

“Whatever he is, you have a type, and that pretty boy looked like he slots right into that category nicely. I only needed to look at him for a minute to see that. He looked like he needed a blanket and cookies, or maybe a swift kick to the ass. Probably both.”

Michael sighs. “I just…we started to hang out. It was just supposed to be some fun. And then…” He shrugs, at a loss on how to continue. “He was…singular.”

“You started to have actual feelings for him? My god,” Patti feigns shock at whatever she sees on Michael’s face. “How horrible! How dare your little bit of fluff turn out to be an actual person with depth! It’s so rude, when playthings don’t actually play along and they have their own demands.”

“Don’t call him a plaything. He’s…not.” Even though Patti’s teasing him, his heart still lurches at the memory of that word slipping from Thom’s lips as a flash of hurt disgust lit up his eyes. *Don’t take Bertie so seriously. Lighten up. Hey, you know, it’s kinda hot, right? You can call me Daddy if you want. I’ll be your Daddy and take care of you. Take real good care of you.*

Michael feels himself cringe at the memory of his words while Patti busies herself with her tea and pretends to not notice, leaving him momentarily free to wrestle with his mortification.

God, the hubris. The impossible, wretched hubris. What the hell had he been thinking? He’d been pushing his luck from the start, hadn’t he? It’s obvious now, looking back, that Thom had started to bristle pretty early on at some of Michael’s more overt…playfulness? No. Possessiveness.

Goddammit, but it’s not like Thom hadn’t led him on, right? When someone follows you around like a lovelorn teenager, so obviously eager to please, what the hell are you supposed to do? He’d come to assume that Thom *was asking* to be treated like that, based on how he responded to Michael. Thom acted like he wanted to be guided and molded, like he *enjoyed* that sort of power dynamic. Thom admired him, he was hungry for advice and longing for comfort, and Michael assumed…

Well, there’s the problem. *Record scratch.* He’d just assumed.

The thought is like running a thumb along a smooth wooden railing and suddenly encountering a splinter. Michael deflates.

In the here-and-now, Patti snaps her fingers at him. “Earth to Michael! That’s enough navel-
gazing. Now, tell me the whole sordid tale.”

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The day after the record label’s party found Michael in an airport, killing time before their flight out of Berlin. Mike approached him and held a box out to Michael. “Taffy?”

Michael selected one. “Airport stores seem to think saltwater taffy is way harder to get in the regular world than it actually is.”

Mike chuckled and they sat in comfortable silence, Michael reading a Rolling Stone and getting sticky candy caught in his molars until Mike’s sudden laughter distracted him.

“Oh, he’s hurtin’, look at him.”

Michael looked; Thom was more or less staggering across the terminal, the hems of his too-long jeans catching under the heels of his shoes and his hands hidden in the sleeves of his hoodie. He was bent under the weight of his over-stuffed backpack and his untidy hair was smashed flat at the back. The very picture of hungover. Ed was plodding in his wake like he was Thom's long, equally miserable shadow. Behind both trailed Jonathan, looking deeply unimpressed with his bandmates’ suffering.

“I hope they don’t throw up all over our jet,” Michael lightly said. “I’d hate to regret my humanitarianism of last night.”

“Humanitarianism, is that what you’re calling it?” Mike rolled his eyes and chuckled.

“What?” Michael smirked back. “Are you making insinuations?”

“I’m thinking Mister Yorke needs to watch his back before he finds himself on it.” Mike squinted at Thom’s small figure collapsing into a chair next to Phil. “Ah shit, I thought he was about to upchuck all over the baldy one just now. Wanna take bets?”

“Crass,” Michael sniffed, returning to his magazine. He waited several beats before playfully purring, “But since you brought it up, he’d look fantastic on his back. Thank you for the mental picture, I hadn’t even considered such a scenario. And the balding one’s name is Phil. Be nice. Bald is beautiful.”

“I should warn him, give him a fighting chance at least.”
Michael laughed. “A fighting chance against what? A good time? Pretty sure he’s straight, anyway. This is all academic.”

It wasn’t though. He had known exactly what he was dealing with by the end of last night’s party. It was an unfurling possibility the moment Thom Yorke had started to run his eyes over Michael when he thought Michael wasn’t looking. It was a radio broadcast tuning into sharp clarity when Thom had bitten his lip as Michael met his eyes. It was obvious as anything in the farrago of embarrassment and shocked possibility that had crossed Thom’s face when Michael had brought up his rather unusual loss of virginity to those red-headed siblings. Oh, that moment had told Michael plenty. And when he had praised Thom, seen him quiver at the approval as if Michael had shot a hot arrow into the depths of Thom’s soul?

It told him how he should proceed if he wanted to pursue this. It told him that he was about to have a fucking great summer, that’s what it told him.

But to Mike, he’d only said, “He’s an odd little guy, isn’t he? I’m just curious, that’s all.”

“No, you’re not,” Mike countered. “You think he thinks he’s straight, and you’ve already decided to prove to him how wrong he is. I know you. This is how it always goes. You already know you can make it happen. You only like games you know you’re going to win.”

Fair enough. He’d lost enough through the years to know it fucking sucked, and why set yourself up for more of that if you could possibly bypass it? He enjoyed singing about heartache, not experiencing it firsthand. Their band life was too frenetic these days to allow himself the space to care, anyway.

Sex is one of the few arenas in which Michael didn’t feel awkward. Flirting is easier than conversation. Seduction is simple; it’s a challenge of skill, not his own worthiness.

“Hey, it’s a long summer. We all need our distractions. Have you seen his skin? It’s like a fucking English rose. I didn’t realize that was an actual thing, thought it was just a saying, but look at it.”

“Just don’t bring your spoils back to the bus. You know the rules.” Mike grimaced, some memory surfacing.

“Jesus, I did that one time, like ten fucking years ago. Let it go, already. Or I will bring him back to the tour bus the moment we’re back in the US and then I’ll fuck him in your bunk.”

At that moment Thom glanced up and sighted them across the terminal. His eyes snagged on Michael momentarily, and then he quickly looked away.
“His skin is beautiful, you’re right,” Patti muses. “Won’t last though. Skin like that never does.”

“Well, then you understand why I needed to act fast. Another few years and he’d be useless to me.”

“Michael.”

“What?” Michael knows how this all sounds. He’s not unaware of what he’s doing—jokes and deflection, trying to distract Patti by being outrageous. Stop it, he tells himself. Tell the truth, yes, but don’t degrade Thom in the telling because you’re humiliated and hurt.

Still, he can’t help but grouse, “Give me some credit, you wanted the truth and I’m telling you the truth. Would you prefer just a dry accounting of the facts?”

This also counts as his confession, doesn’t it? Michael has an uncomfortable thought that if he isn’t completely honest with one of the very few people he can, when it really matters—and he knows this matters—he may lose something. Something integral about himself that he’ll dearly miss. It’s too easy to keep lying once you’ve realized you can, and well. Too easy to try it out on yourself, before much longer.

Michael is so tired of sidestepping himself. It’s not helping. This was not how this was supposed to go, he thinks for the hundredth time. He’s running in ever-decreasing circles. Had he once said that to Thom, or had Thom said that to him? He can’t remember.

“Then give me some credit that I’m not kicking your ass. When did you turn your heart off? Who is this person in front of me? A changeling? Because the Michael I know isn’t this callous man.”

When had Michael become this person?

He has no answer to that. Instead he lights a cigarette and returns to staring at his now-cold coffee.

“Some people put walls up, not to keep people out, but to see who cares enough to knock them down,” Patti says softly.

Yes, isn’t that the fucking truth. Speaking of those who put up walls…

“It turned out that the Thom Situation was more complicated than I had originally thought.”
The girls really loved watching Jonny Greenwood perform. He, however, wasn’t remotely interested back. When they screamed for him, Michael got the sense he was occupying a reality separate from theirs, one where they were barely-sensed hauntings on the other side of a thick curtain. He might at times glance up at his bandmates in a cursory, clinical check of his surroundings, but there was really only one person he truly noticed when on stage. And Jonny watched that person like they were the only living, vibrant creature that occupied the same dimension he did.

Thom Yorke. *Horses for courses.*

And it was very obvious after Berlin that Jonny Greenwood did not like Michael Stipe.

At first Michael had wondered if it was a cultural misunderstanding, if Michael had accidentally offended him over some weird uptight British thing. He knew the dislike didn’t stem from what Michael was, because Jonny was very obviously—to Michael, at least, and Michael was never wrong about these things—gay.

And then, the first time Michael watched Jonny on stage instead of greedily staring down Thom the whole time…well. It clicked into place immediately.

It was easy enough to unearth whether Jonny’s feelings were a secret with some light probing at Thom, who was none the wiser afterwards. Frankly, Thom was so oblivious to his friend’s attraction that it was shockingly hilarious. And precious. And, Michael concluded with mixed feelings, a mystifying simulacrum of authenticity. Thom was a little bit too enthusiastically unobservant concerning Jonny.

The thing was, Michael liked Jonny. Quite a bit, actually, even though he was positive Jonny thought otherwise. He was a vicious little shit at times, sure, but damn if he wasn’t hilarious in how he went about it. It was all for show, anyway, though he could see it was wearing thin on several of Jonny’s bandmates. But Michael discerned the gooey center shining through that kid like it was a neon core. Jonny was shy, and wickedly smart, and he had zero fucking clue who he was or who he wanted to be.

You could nearly see the growing pains if you squinted just right. Like an unsure aura, sputtering and jagged along the edges. Michael assumed it’d zap you if you dared try touching it, let alone push through to the mistrustful vulnerability it was surely masking. Michael’s own aura wasn’t all that different, after all. A different color, maybe.

Dislike? That was a mild way to put it. If anything, Jonny loathed Michael. It had very little to do with Micheal’s actions and, he suspected, an awful lot to do with their not inconsiderable similarities. What was it people said? That you hate most in others what you yourself are guilty of? He realized quickly that Jonny was going to assume the very worst of Michael’s every word and action. Sure, his interest in Thom didn’t help the situation, but Michael was pretty damn certain Jonny would have manufactured reasons to dislike him no matter what scenario had placed them face-to-face.

When Michael had gone to introduce himself to Radiohead that first time he hadn’t only noticed how Thom had been vibrating with shy energy; he’d also noted how Jonny Greenwood had looked him up and down and had instantaneously decided he knew what lived under Michael’s skin, and
wasn’t impressed with his findings.

So maybe Michael flaunted his intimacy with Thom in Jonny’s face a little. So maybe he felt that if the man was going to hate him, he might as well help him out by offering up an actual reason to do so. So maybe he was a bit too aggressive, a bit too self-satisfied, a bit too…everything.

Michael has over a decade on Jonny, though. He should have acted like it. He can admit that now, okay? It’s not like he wasn’t aware of Jonny’s backstory.

Michael had gone so far as to fish for it, early on when he was still trying to decide what to do with Thom. Maybe if he understood the guy…

Thom, chattering away, had mentioned Jonny was only about fourteen or fifteen when he joined the band. Michael felt his soul clench at bit at that. Poor fucking bastard.

No wonder he walked around like he was perpetually heading off to a war he didn’t even know the name of, let alone the point. How hard was it, Michael wondered, being smart enough to know that you didn’t know anything about the real world and had missed out on the opportunity? It must be infuriating, being surrounded by people who all had the chance to grow up and find themselves somewhat before being thrust under the weird glass cloche of the music industry and put on display.

Michael thought he’d be pretty cranky as well.

But even if he had all the empathy in the world for the younger Greenwood, he wasn’t going to underestimate him. He wasn’t sure what, exactly, his deal with Thom was—was it a vague attraction, a general possessiveness, or was it more?

Michael had made his decision; he wanted Thom. Once settled, his desires weren’t easily set aside.

Yeah, he was going to need to keep an eye on Greenwood, keep an eye on the eye that, in turn, had been starting to notice Michael's own machinations toward Thom. The eye that, he now suspects, had started to guess at Michael’s intentions even before Michael himself had.

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“I talked to Jonny last night; he was the sweetest, shyest thing.”

Michael snorts. “To you maybe.”
“I was expecting you to say it was the other one mooning over Thom. The big brother, he’s got daggers for you. He told me you’ve started referring to yourself in the third person and they’re all very concerned for you. I knew he was playing at something, but I couldn’t figure out what. It’s what initially made me suspicious of what you’ve been up to this summer.”

“Colin? Oh my god, he’s fucking crazy. Don’t ever do anything to piss him off, okay? I’m serious. He’s Machiavellian.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Patti says, her voice riding the edge of sardonic. “So no third person narration?”

Michael shoots her a look.

She chuckles and sips her tea. “Okay, so when did you stop thinking of Thom as just a diversion? When did shit get real?”

“Shit got real really fast.”

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For someone with their feelings so clearly on their sleeve, it was startling how well Thom could tamp down his emotions when he had a mind to.

Michael had already noticed he was a creature of duality, but kept being surprised as to what extent. He had seen immediately that Thom was suspicious by nature and quick to correctly read when he was being fed a line of bullshit. But conversely, he was completely blinkered to what Michael felt was the outrageously obvious devotion of Jonny. Thom bristled over anything he read in the music mags that disparaged him, but often seemed to indulge Jonny’s much more cruel (in Michael’s mind) sarcasm. He sneered at materialism and capitalism, but seemed to collect shopping bags at an alarming rate. He shamelessly ruled over his band, calling any shots that mattered…yet Michael could nearly smell his desperation for guidance. He was a shy introvert yet transformed into a supernova on stage.

That last, at least, was something Michael understood.

Michael had already decided he loathed the creepy music journalist assigned to write a piece on R.E.M. It was like the guy couldn’t decide if he wanted to act ingratiatingly smarmy or coolly dismissive, so he had just split the difference and settled on toady and abrasive. He had an especially stupid goatee, too.
When they had wandered into the greenroom of the venue looking for a quiet place to conduct the interview, Michael hadn’t even noticed Thom at first. The journalist had, however, and when he’d attempted to belittle him by insulting his appearance (apparently he couldn’t dismiss Radiohead itself with a straight face, some rusted sense of journalistic ethics must have been at work there), it was all Michael could do to not grip him by the back of his jacket and toss him out of the room. Well, okay—since physical altercations weren’t his style—chew him out and then call security.

But Michael was—most likely for the best, really—left immobile by an immediate crush of protectiveness; a snake slithering up his back, clamping its jaws shut where Michael’s shoulders met his neck. The protectiveness itself wasn’t what made him freeze—that was an ingrained trait he was well aware of and even took pride in—but that it had already attached itself so strongly to this odd young man that Michael barely knew anything about. That was fucking unexpected and added another layer to the enigmatic patina surrounding Thom.

Thom had just blinked lazily up at the toad, and with the smallest of Cheshire grins playing at the corner of his lips, had returned to his book with a soft huff of amused dismissal.

Michael had felt his cock twitch. Goddamn. Now all he wanted to do was crawl onto that couch with Thom and cover his body with his own. He wanted to clench a hand in that red snarl of hair and distract Thom from his book in a way the boy couldn’t ignore.

Michael could never resist impudence.

Especially not from a pretty brat by turns so unruly and then unexpectedly self-contained.

*What’s going on in that head of yours, Thom.*

He couldn’t help it. He invited—well, insisted—that Thom come find him after the show.

Michael loved a locked box but he was growing impatient waiting to see if Thom would ever grow a pair and approach Michael on his own. It was time to stop looking for a key and pick Thom like a stubborn lock.

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“And you realized then? When he didn’t take that reporter’s bait? I can’t believe he said that to Thom, by the way. That’s horrible.”

“No. I realized that night. Thom came to the dressing room—and oh, I had given him a pair of my sunglasses earlier, really it was just an excuse to touch him—and he showed up still wearing my
sunglasses even though it was night. Is it weird I liked that? I really, really liked that, seeing him wearing something of mine. Yeah, that’s pretty weird.”

“I’m sure psychologists would have a field day,” Patti says, drily. “So it was after sartorially pissing all over him to mark your territory, then. That’s when you started to care?”

“God, you make me sound like such a dick, woman. It wasn’t like that.”

“Then what was it like?”

It was later. It was walking around the city, sharing experiences, sharing opinions, tripping over each other’s words in a way that only happens when you’ve met a kindred spirit. When you’re in a rush to get everything out in case they just vanish, because you’re so delighted and awed by the simple fact a person like this even exists that you care barely trust your luck. Yes, yes! whispers the undercurrent of your conversation, I’ve been waiting for someone just like you! Where have you been? We have so much to catch up on.

“It seemed like he could understand anything I told him. Not could, did. And the more we spoke, I knew why. The same things excite us. The same things concern us. Not just being in a band, or life on the road. What it’s like being me. Being us. It’s like he can crawl right into my head; it was spooky. We clicked the way you and me clicked, do you see? It was…”

Intimacy.

Intimacy is not who you let touch you, Michael knows. Intimacy is giving someone your attention when ten other people are asking for it. Intimacy is building a bridge across the moat protecting someone’s heart, and then crossing over unarmed. Intimacy is phone calls that you promise yourself will last no longer than an hour, but then stretch to five. It’s when you daydream about having a new secret about yourself to share with the other person, like a gift, one that’s had no previous owners.

Intimacy is the person who starts to make space in the back on your mind, no matter how distracted you are.

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“Hitting thirty? I dunno what I see for myself. Mellowing out, beards, big cars, baking your own bread. Definitely. Just growing up, really. Growing up is something to be proud of.” Thom looked slyly at Michael and swigged from his beer. “Unless you’re The Rolling Stones, of course.”
Michael laughed, “Hey, why do I feel like that was directed at me? What are you trying to say?”

Shrugging innocently, Thom leaned back on his elbows and appeared to be studying the night sky clouds. “I don’t know, guess it’s something to ponder. Maybe when you’re on the Stones’ private jet.”

Cheeky. Michael mirrored Thom and stretched out on the grass. “You’re just jealous.”

“Totally!” Thom cackled, more than warranted. Must be a private joke there. “Nah, it’s wicked, you getting to borrow their jet.”

“I jumped at the chance. Anything to make it feel less inhuman. Flying, that is. I hate it.”

“Me too.”

They both fell silent. Michael looked over at Thom, cast in shades of blue and yellow by this city’s version of darkness, and idly thought about how much he’d like to leave a bite mark on the pale delicate skin of Thom’s neck. Something to remember Michael by. A mark like a soft evening cloud.

“I can never sleep well on planes,” Thom said eventually. “I get insomnia, anyway. Sometimes it makes me feel like the ghost light in a theatre, the only thing left on in the dark.”

*Life is not going to take it easy on you, Thom, is it?*

Michael wanted to tell him it was going to be okay. He wanted to tuck him into bed. Perversely, he would settle for keeping Thom there with him, under a light-polluted, foreign city’s sky, selfishly stealing away as many hours of maybe-sleep as he could.

And when he did, finally, lead a drunk and sleepy Thom back to his room, there was a moment at the door. It was the cliché of every movie where a goodnight kiss was meant to happen.

But Michael just shut the door softly behind Thom and walked on silent feet back to his own room.

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“Didn’t you want to kiss him?”

“God, I nearly rolled him over in the grass so many times that night, you have no idea.”
“What stopped you?”

“I…well. You only get one chance for the first kiss, the first time you fuck, hell, even just the first time you make your intentions known. And I just, I dunno. I realized all that wasn’t something I wanted to rush through this time. Those things, suddenly they weren’t just hurdles to getting him into bed. I wanted to take my time and savor it. I…I wanted to court him.”

Michael pauses and bites his lip.

“I guess I also just wanted him to like me. Like me.”

“I thought you already knew he was a sure deal?” Patti has lowered her voice, like maybe she worries she might spook Michael away from this train of thought.

“There’s a difference between seducing someone who is bi-curious into your bed, and having them just…just want you. Want you because they actually like you and not…not because of whatever role you’re playing for their benefit, for their curiosity, just so you can get laid. I very well know the difference, Patti. I know I took advantage of his hero worship, okay? I’m not proud of it, but it is what it is. I went into this thinking it was going to be just a quid pro quo thing, and then it was too late to start over.”

“I’m sorry. I’ve offended you.”

“A little, yes. But that’s just my hubris acting up and trying to convince me away from the truth.”

“Which is?”

Michael chuckles wanly and answers her question with one of his own. “Isn't it kind of silly to think that tearing someone else down builds you up?”

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If there’s one thing Michael regrets, it’s what happened as a direct result of the morning in that hotel café in Stockholm, after that first night when he realized that maybe Thom wasn’t just another conquest to be had.

He’d not slept. He knew he should go back to his hotel room and not wait until he crashed, which would effectively waste the day. He definitely shouldn’t be nursing this coffee, strong and dark-chocolate-bitter with flecks of grounds floating near the bottom. But he couldn’t sleep as long as the memories of last night’s conversations continued to roll around his brain; double-helixes,
toppling, evaporating as soon as they hit the pavement only to be replaced with some other recalled moment of Thom being wonderful or clever or sexy.

Thom and Jonny had wandered into the room, deep in conversation. Jonny’s head was bent down to better hear Thom, who was chattering away at a mile a minute. Michael had a moment to wonder (to hope) if Thom was talking about him.

And then Jonny was suddenly swooping down to hug Thom, and the immediate, ugly flair of jealousy flash-burned away Michael’s complacency. Suddenly his sleeplessness had little to do with daydreaming over his night with Thom, and everything to do with sizing up a challenger easing into his territory.

Yeah. If there’s one thing he regrets when it comes to his dealings with Jonny, it’s throwing that moment in his face later on.

Did it ache?

Hell, he regrets that entire encounter. He had forced Jonny’s hand, hadn’t he? He could have just let Jonny remain behind those folding chairs. But no. He had to start shit. And when Jonny had accused him of using Thom, of chasing after talent and vitality…

Yeah, definitely not Michael’s best moment.

It’s a hard thing to face, to look back at your actions and realize you were the villain of the piece.

And it was all because Michael was feeling low and defensive, because when Thom had pulled back from Jonny’s arms, the look on his face was very different than any look he had given Michael up to that point.

Different from the way anyone had ever looked at Michael.

Thom had looked up at Jonny like maybe he’d just walked through the door after a long, terrible journey.

Like maybe through the door of his home.

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“I think now that I knew in that moment that I was fucked. I mean, it’s like I became more consumed with the idea of Thom, of wanting to be the one he chose…and don’t look at me like
that, I know it’s fucked up. I think maybe I wanted to so fully...inhabit...Thom’s life on this tour, push things along so fast, just to compete with that goddamned hug. Even if there was nothing between them, even if Thom never felt like that towards Jonny...how could I compete? With their weird, chaste, fucked-up relationship? Hell if I know.”

“Love isn’t a competition. Being an asshole to Jonny, trying to possess Thom...neither is a good recipe for lasting love.”

“Patti...I know how I sound, but,” and Michael is going to be very honest now so that there’s no confusion. He speaks plainly. “I’m not in love with Thom.”

“No?”

“No.” And now he smiles, and he can feel the sadness held in its curve, weighing it down. “But we’ll never know if I could’ve been, now, will we?”

---

He’s not going to tell Patti about the sex.

He definitely is the kiss-and-tell sort, but he has zero interest in engaging in any true salaciousness beyond his normal dirty song-and-dance right now. He knows Patti would listen, and is probably even curious on some level. But she won’t ask.

Thom isn’t the first boy Michael has debauched.

Thom is the first that made him care about making it matter, though.

That first night was when Michael learned that Thom was made to be touched by hands attached to a body that found itself at rest when it was with him. Those hands needed to come with gentle words and an honest mouth. A mouth that said Thom’s name in a way that sounded like the very definition of “falling.”

Michael wondered if Thom could settle for a lot less than that. Even though he shouldn’t.

Michael worried he wasn’t up to the task. Because he sensed that Thom desired him to be the strong one, the wise one, the experienced one. Michael couldn’t do that and at the same time continue to let down his walls for Thom. How much base humanity could Michael afford to show before Thom stopped looking at Michael with so much admiration and deferential longing?
Michael found himself wishing he could go back to that night where they had wandered the city, back before he’d made the decision to take Thom to his bed. Because that night had been real; Michael had let himself open up and had found himself being accepted.

But do-overs don’t exist.

There was a choice to be made, obviously.

It was easier to play the older, dominant role. As easy as telling himself it was for Thom’s sake, because that’s what Thom wanted from him. So Michael made his choice. And maybe it hurt a little to pack his insides back away, and maybe he knew on some level it was the wrong choice, even as he used Thom’s very obvious hero-worship to his advantage. But if it was the only way he could be with Thom…what other choice was there, really?

*When they begin to ask for you to shape yourself around them, leave.*

That’s the advice he would have given someone else. Damn good advice, but what use is good advice when the bad advice is exactly what you’re comfortable with already, a typecast role you naturally gravitate towards?

What use is that advice when Thom blushes so prettily beneath him, when he begs so nicely, when he is so good for Michael?

Thom turned out to not need saving at all, really.

Michael surely fucking misread the writing on *that* wall, probably when he was pushing Thom up against it.

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"Get nervous when you realize you can do it. When you can go through a whole evening having talked to fifty people and not remember a fucking word of any of it. Then you really are in trouble."

Thom’s eyes were on him, his body paler even than the sheets he was tangled in. His eyes, innocent, uncomprehending yet sweetly cynical, if only for the moment at least, because Michael could see Radiohead’s future, it’s neon-sharp and Thom’s destined, oh yes, that boy’s life is going to flare brighter and brighter and Michel’s heart had clenched at the idea of what is incontestably in Thom’s future, when he’s up against the wall shoved alongside *expectations* and *fame* and *money*
and pretensions and esteem and he realizes it’s his own goddamn self-respect and sanity making up the firing squad and they’re telling him either he gets the bullet or everything else he’s lined up with does. Which should be an easy choice—walk away from that wall and don’t look back—but it’s fucking impossible, because juggernauts are called so for a reason, and Thom’s already been swallowed down by one almighty whale of one.

He couldn’t save Thom from any of it, but he could tell him everything he knew, everything he’d suspected. He could try and draw wards around him with his advice.

But Thom’s eyes were on him and it was obvious he was unmoved by Michael’s words and headstrong in a way Michael couldn’t really understand. Yet. He wanted to unravel the young man who was now shifting, pushing aside the sheets to slide down Michael’s body and take him into his mouth.

Thom drew back for a moment and looked up at Michael. “You’re only ever really in trouble if you’re satisfied, I think. Might as well go home then, yeah? Go home, get fat, watch some telly.”

He’d chuckled at some private joke even as he slid his lips back down Michael’s length, and anything Michael may have responded with was lost in the warm vibration.

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“So. You find yourself pursuing a cute British boy with a major case of hero worship and discover you actually really like him. But then, you discover his bandmate is literally in love with him, and what’s more, sees right through your bullshit. You get a bit jealous and possessive and manipulative. But you are victorious—cue the power chords—and introduce your young man to your bed and a whole new world opens up for him. You then decide you really, really like him, and instead of pursuing a relationship in any sort of adult, responsible way, you actually put up more walls. You read things into his personality you want to see, by mistaking his inexperience and hero worship for something it’s not. He isn’t happy with that but instead of listening to him, you dismiss his feelings on the matter. You pretend to be something you’re not because you’re chickenshit, scared he wouldn’t want the real you. THEN, your asshole lawyer basically scars the kid, and instead of kicking Mister Lawyer’s ass, you kinda sorta take his side and pick the absolute worst moment to call your British boy out on his own terrible dating skills. So he says ‘fuck you, wanker’ and walks out. Probably into the arms of his bandmate. And now here you are, alone and wondering how you found yourself in this position even though you knew the score. Is that more or less the truth of it?”

“Um. Yes?”
“Jesus, Michael.” She sits back and looks at him with something that almost could be admiration. “For someone who claims to not like drama, you’re the only person I know who ever finds themselves in ridiculous soap-opera worthy situations like this. I mean, seriously, Michael. What the fuck.”

“I never should have been so cavalier with him,” says Michael, morosely. “I treated it like a game.”

“You shouldn’t have done a lot of things, honey.”

Wait.

“You really think I’ve sent Thom right into Jonny’s arms?”

“How would I know? Thom knows now he’s not straight, or at least isn’t pretending otherwise to himself anymore. Does he see Jonny as just a friend, or do you think he could see Jonny as more? And do you think after all these years Jonny would swoop in and take advantage of the situation? Answer the truth, and not what you’d do.”

Ouch. That hurts.

That hurts a lot.

“I respect him, you know. Maybe I’m not good at opening up, and maybe I’m a slut, and maybe I’m even careless with people’s hearts sometimes. But I respect him and never wanted to hurt him.”

Michael feels like maybe if he doesn’t shut up now, he’s going to puke all over the easy-wipe brown vinyl of their booth. “I… I really did want to help him.”

“Oh, shit. I know. I’m sorry. That sounded horrible, didn’t it? I didn’t mean it like that. Look,” Patti catches his eyes with her own. “You are one of the best people in the world to have as a friend, once you drop those walls of yours. You’re loyal, and giving, and honest to a fucking fault. Except to maybe yourself, but the whole human race is guilty of that one, so you get a pass. Your heart is so big. It’s too big, and you get scared. It’s just… get you into any sort of romantic situation and you turn into a fucking dick, okay?”

Michael realizes he’s leaking around the eyes a little, but chuckles, thick and snottily. “Fuck. You mean I went through all of this, and it could turn out that all I did was give that fucking Greenwood a leg up?”

“Would that be so bad?”

“Yes!”

“Why?”

“*Because it’s NOT FUCKING FAIR. BECAUSE WHY NOT ME. BECAUSE—*”

Michael cuts himself off from yelling further by slamming a hand on the formica of their table. He spreads his sweat-slick hand wide and presses down against the scarred surface. Trying to calm down. Trying to center himself. No one in the diner appears to be paying attention to his outburst.

“I’m sorry, Patti. That was uncalled for,” he whispers when he feels that his voice won’t get away from him again.
Because if this is a world where the impossible could happen for Jonny Greenwood…well, then Michael would have to ask why didn’t the world think to do the same for him? Why didn’t the world give him a shot back when he was young and unscathed and still mostly sure that his love could be enough? Would things have turned out okay in the end for him when he was Thom’s age? Maybe he’d have…still be with…well…in that direction exists too many unhappy memories to bear.

*It’s not about fairness. You said that to Jonny yourself. No schemes of the universe or a higher force in charge. Just dumb luck and your own bravery. If only he had known how to fight…if only he’d been brave enough to speak up…*

Each time he’s not said what he needed to say he thinks maybe part of him has died, just a little bit. *Make a list of how many times you died just this week,* he thinks. *Now make a list of how many times you’ve died over your lifetime.*

He could choose to shrug it all off, accept that this is who he is now; cold, composed, sensitive as long as it’s not too risky. Accept he never got his chance, never spoke up, and it’s too late for him to change.

What a shitty life, though. What a shitty life for him…and for Jonny Greenwood, if he doesn’t watch out. The kid’s on the same path.

Patti is still waiting for him to answer, so he says, “He’s on the same path. Jonny. He’s gonna end up lost and bitter, if he isn’t too far gone already. It’s like looking into a mirror at my younger self, and it’s painful, okay? Maybe he’d have hurt Thom as much as I have.”

“*You’re not lost, Michael.*”

“I’m not?” It’s meant to come out sarcastic, but damn if he can’t hear the pleading edge to it.

“Babe, you’re going to meet someone of these days and you’re going to fall head over heels for each other and that will be that. You’re not even in the same hemisphere as lost. You’re just very melodramatic.”

“How can you know that?”

“I just do. And Michael…it’s not Thom. He’s not the one.”

“I know. I just wanted to pretend he was, for a bit.”
For a moment Michael felt uneasy, in the same way he did when fans would look at him sometimes, because he knew how bottomless their need could be. How could he help them when he was just like them? How could he help Thom when he was just like him?

But the way Thom was staring up at him, his mouth clamped downwards into a painful-looking arch, his questions obvious, unspoken by his mouth but screamed by every other part of his being—how do I handle this? Is there a way out? Is this how it’s always going to be now?—made Michael feel stronger, suddenly. Needed.

Maybe he was afraid he might not live up to Thom’s ideals or be able to lesson his pain. He’d be revealed as a fraud, unworthy and insubstantial. The disconnect between who he was in Thom’s eyes and who he was in reality was jarring to think about. So he wouldn’t.

He liked pretending to be the person Thom seemed to think he was. There was that, too.

So he had just smirked at the girl harassing Thom. Apparently she’d been at that show in Vancouver, the one where Thom had announced, “We’ve been all over the world and you’re the rudest fucking audience we’ve ever met.”

Tonight was supposed to be about the two of them, hanging out at a bar and unwinding after a show. It wasn’t supposed to get heavy.

But it had when this drunk woman had approached them, approached Thom really, and started to give him shit. Thom had held his own at first, just shrugging when she taunted him. Michael noticed when his shoulders had started to pull in on themselves, though. He hunched a bit further into his seat. But thankfully she had then turned on Michael and given his shoulder a little shove. “R.E.M. guy. Hey, R.E.M. guy, what do you have to say?”

“I like your t-shirt, and you need to go find your friends and tell them to take you home.”

She had gaped but left them alone, perhaps conflicted by the combination of compliment and chastisement. Michael had made his face malleable, a practiced expression so neutral that it simply reflected the onlooker’s intentions. But he had used his no-nonsense voice. The one that made Thom shiver in anticipation, not that he was shivering now. He was clenching, and he looked at Michael for some sort of answer, an answer that would encompass more than what had just happened.

“What the fuck was that?” Thom finally said as he peered back over his shoulder, and Michael wondered if he was thinking about following her, causing a scene.

“Well, you gotta sort of cultivate a healthy sense of the absurd,” Michael said. “Fuck that chick, sometimes people like to start shit with you just because they saw you on stage a couple hours earlier. It has nothing to do with you, or me; it’s just a fame thing. It’s a stupid byproduct.”

“Yeah, and it’s all gonna mean shit-diddly when you’re dead,” Thom muttered. But his shoulders were loosening, his brow smoothing out.

“No, no, it will mean nothing well before that.”

Thom blinked up at him. Michael raised his glass and, with more blinking, Thom raised his to clink
them together.

Suddenly Thom was laughing, shaking his head at the whole of existence. When he looked up at Michael again, he was flushed and admiring.

He wanted to be the person that Thom thought he was so much in that moment. Sometimes you want things to change so badly, you can’t even stand to be in the same room with the way things actually are and so you act accordingly.

So he leaned forward and kissed Thom, in front of everyone in that dingy little Texas punk rock bar. He kissed him desperately, chasing some sort of annihilation. Thom tasted like every brave thought Michael had ever had, and with that he pulled Thom to his feet and steered them towards the door. He suddenly wanted to be spilled across soft surfaces in a dark room.

In the darkness, he wouldn’t have to examine that better version of himself reflected in Thom’s eyes.

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Michael clunks his head back against the pleather of the booth. “My future self is watching me right now through memories and thinks I’m an idiot, doesn’t he? He’s saying, man, if only you had done this and that, and if only I could go back and advise you.”

“That’s generally how it goes. Do you think you can patch things up with Thom? As a friend, I mean.”

"I genuinely don’t know, Patti.” Michael lights his final breakfast cigarette and exhales his exhaustion on the back of a white plume of smoke. “I’ve really fucked things up. I really hurt him. I don’t think he’s the type to forgive that. In fact, I know he’s not.”

“You won’t actually know unless you try…”

“Yeah. But, I just have a gut feeling. Some miracle, some crazy sign from the universe; that’s what it’d take to get him to talk to me, let alone forgive me enough to consider friendship. The most unexpected of events. We’re talking reality-bending, here. The universe is in short supply of those sorts of miracles these days.”

“Well. You never know, darling. You just never know.”
- Michael Stipe introduced Patti Smith to Radiohead's music. "What the fuck are they talking about? Should I like it?" She asked the first time she listened to Thom Yorke.
Chapter 20 - Measuring Cups and Trash Bins and What They Contain

“Goddammit.”

He is going to kill someone. He isn’t sure who yet, but someone definitely needs their ass kicked. Between this and Bertie, he is done with today. Just done. He is too old for this shit, and too young for that shit, and generally is just tired of shit.

Fucking Bertie. Fucking paparazzi.

He has no idea how the latter had found him; a tip-off of some sort, obviously, because every place he had gone today there they were, popping out of their vans and SUVs as he exited his own vehicle. Michael would say it was a venue staffer, except how could they have possibly known—time after time—where he was going to be on his day off? Bill had joked maybe they were following him instead, but it did little to lighten the mood.

As for Bertie, well, he knows exactly how Bertis Downs the what-fucking-ever-th found him, because they had hired the man, hadn’t they? Yeah, yeah, a great lawyer is the line they give people, and Michael hates that there’s so much baggage to being the biggest (so he’s constantly being told) rock band in the world that they need a lawyer as part of their fucking entourage.

Michael does not like Bertie. It’s as simple as that. At what point does the end justify the means? At what point does it stop? There’s other lawyers out there, sure, but Jefferson had suggested him, them being great buddies from way back and all, and on top of everything else—the stress of touring and the ridiculous amount of health issues they’ve had this year—they don’t need to stir up the silt of their manager’s nepotism.

The paps showing up is bad enough, following him across the parking lot as they made their way into the radio station, and then later at the art gallery. He had thought they’d lost ‘em at lunch, but Michael’s almost preternatural ability to sense cameras (and what a sad learned skill that is to have needed to develop) prickled about thirty minutes later, right as their entrees were arriving and it was too late to relocate back indoors without it feeling like he was running away. So Michael had no choice but to sit there and eat his fucking caesar salad with them watching through their long-distance lenses, smiling and smiling and smiling at Bertie like everything was just hunky-dory.
He can’t help but think it would have been a hell of a lot less stressful—maybe a little fun, even—if it’d been Thom sitting across from him instead of Bertie.

Unlike with the paps, there aren’t any tricks that can help hide him from Bertie. He’s kept a distant but pleasant business relationship with the man as best he can since Bertie was brought on board, bearing his loud personality and questionable opinions with every once of Southern tactfulness he can muster.

But some things can’t be normalized, and he’d told Bertie in no uncertain terms that if he ever pulled bullshit like that again, like he had with Thom, he was out. Michael’s personal life was off-limits, his friends even more so.

“Well, the kid wasn’t really a friend, was he? It was just joking around, I don’t know what he told you but he takes shit way too seriously. No sense of humor. He’s making something out of nothing, and I think he was trying to get a rise out of you. He’ll come crawling back in a few days. You know how it is.”

You know how it is. He knows that if it wasn’t for the man in front of him, perhaps he’d have woken that morning with Thom in his bed. But he tamped the urge to say something that smacked of such vulnerability, and instead ground out:

“This isn’t up for discussion. You heard me. You are never to talk to a guest of mine like that again. Whether that guest is a personal friend or the talent we’ve invited to open for us. It doesn’t matter. Tell me you understand.”

“Oh, for cryin’ out loud, Michael, don’t you fall for Yorke’s act, I mean—”

“Not. Up. For. Discussion. Do you understand, Bertis, or do we need to reconsider if our relationship is still beneficial for all parties involved?”

Even knowing the headache it will probably cause with Jefferson, the thwarted, pigish look on Bertie’s face as he nodded curtly was worth it. It didn’t make Michael feel any better, no it definitely did not…but it was a necessity. Fuck Jefferson if he doesn’t understand that.

But since then things have been a real pain in the ass where Bertis is involved. There’s been low-grade aggression in every one of their interactions, a push and pull over the most mundane business matters. Michael had embarrassed Bertie by pulling rank, and that apparently is festering under the man’s skin, oozing out at every opportunity.

Michael can imagine the man’s voice, saying to whomever has had the misfortune of being sat next to him, “I mean, just who the fuck does that asshole think he is? Telling me I need to be nice to his little boyfriend, not to hurt his delicate feelings or some such shit. What do you expect though, I mean, come on, you know. You know how people like Michael are. He’s a queer and a freak, sure, but whatever, I’m a professional so I’m not judging, right?”

Maybe it’s time for R.E.M. to find a new manager, too, if Michael is going down this path. He’s been hearing some things about Jefferson Holt and while he doesn’t want to believe them, the utter lack of surprise he felt when told how Jefferson may be carrying himself around their female employees is something else that needs to be dealt with, and soon.

Sometimes he swears he can hear his bones straining under the weight of everything that always
needs to be dealt with.

“Goddammit.”

That seems to be the only word he’s capable of uttering today.

He yanks open the hotel lobby doors with a little more force than needed, exhausted by the pleasant attitude he’s been forced to plaster over himself all day for the benefit of the pap’s cameras. He can feel himself practically shedding it like wet clothing as the door swings shut behind him. He just wants to hide in his room, order room service, maybe listen to some music or call up a friend and bitch to them for a bit about his life, his utter fucking shitpile of a life right now…

“Oi! Michael!”

A voice calls out to Michael as he is striding across the lobby. He considers ignoring it for a moment, or maybe just flat-out running to the elevator, but…no. He huffs but stops, turning to see who wants something from him now, and wondering what method they’ll use to get on his last nerve.

Colin Greenwood and Ed O’ Brien are sat at a small table near the hotel’s bar, magazines strewn about them along with a couple pints and what appears to be a box of donuts.

Goddammit.

Why’d it have to be a Greenwood.

Colin grins at him, so maybe Michael’s feelings are broadcasting across his face. But who really knows, because all Colin does is grin like everything is a great, feverish joke, and then he strikes like a gleeful viper. Michael has still yet to figure out what he ever did to Colin Fucking Greenwood to deserve this particularly unpleasant level of interest the man has taken in him.

“Is everything alright, then? You look like you’ve seen the wars, mate.” Those disturbingly large eyes of his go round with concern.

Ed is flicking his attention back and forth between the two of them. Michael has yet to discern where Ed fits into all of this.

“Yes. I’m fine. Just…paparazzi. I didn’t even know Indiana had paparazzi.”

“Oh. Oh dear.”

Goddammit.

Colin smiles apologetically up at Michael. “I think…I think that may have been all my doing, I am so sorry. I was talking to Bill, see, and he mentioned what you lads were up to today, what with the radio and the art centre and such, and then later another fellow came along and asked after you and he looked like your sort of person—all arty with his camera and such—so I thought I’d be helpful and let him know where he could find you today. Did I cause any difficulties for you? I do hope not!”

Michael chews the inside of his mouth and says nothing. There are so many things he could say.
So many. But *don’t do it man, if you ever hope to get Thom to speak to you again just don’t do it…*

“You’re a goddamn psychopath, Greenwood.”

He turns and barrels off. That wasn’t too bad, was it? Pretty restrained, considering. *Why*, why is Colin so hellbent on whatever the fuck he’s playing at? Michael’s a good guy right? He tries, at least. He’s been nothing but nice to Greenwood on a personal level and they’ve given every courtesy to the band on the professional. Is it *really* just because Michael was fucking his brother’s heart’s desire? Because if that’s the whole reason for this, it’s *really fucking unfair*, okay?

Michael jabs the elevator button and if he’s feeling really sorry for himself right now, so what? It’s not fair. It’s not fair that Jonny Greenwood has no balls and was letting Thom just rot away on the vine, and tried to throw around his weight when Michael came along and decided to pluck him free for himself.

“I’m sorry, kid. It’s a bum deal, I know it is. Whether you believe me or not, I completely understand and you have my sympathies. But sometimes the world’s not fair. Sometimes you don’t get what you want. Being deserving has nothing to do with it.”

Michael remembers the look on Jonny’s face as he spoke those words to him as kindly as he knew how, even though that kindness was probably lost on Jonny in the moment. Especially when one considered the words they’d just finished exchanging, hostilely circling each other like a couple of territorial, starving dogs tussling around a meal. Kindness after that, no matter how genuine, probably just felt like an extra dollop of shit on the pile.

Jonny had looked like someone whose every midnight fear had come to pass, and like Michael was the harbinger. He had looked *hopeless*.

Goddammit.

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“You called the bloody *paps* on him?”

“I have no idea what you're suggesting. Stop looking at me like that.” Colin digs a sprinkle-dotted donut out of the box sitting between them.

“Coz…”

“Oh, please. Why is it acceptable for him to be an idiot but not for me to point it out?”
“Is that what you’re doing? Seems to me like you’re terrorising a guy who’s been nothing but brilliant to us since the moment we came on board his tour.”

Colin frowns and glowers down past his donut at the pile of September music mags littering the table. It’s become a bit of tradition for him and Ed to comb through them each month for mentions of Radiohead. On the cover of the one Colin’s eyes land on, Alicia Silverstone is crouched on a field of pink wearing a scandalous pair of ruffled underwear and a cowboy hat. Colin is of course reminded of that girl in Texas. She’d eventually told him he wasn’t her type, after all. Maybe he shouldn’t have gotten so completely wasted off his arse…but, face it, she probably would have ended the night saying what she had regardless of Colin’s level of inebriation. He flips the Rolling Stone over so he doesn’t have to see Miss Silverstone’s wide eyes staring up at him with something akin to amused skepticism.

“Fine,” Ed says with an edge to his voice, and Colin is dragged away from his romantic bouleversements, like a leaf on a rainy day toward the black mouth of a manhole.

“Go ahead. Judge me. Just remember to be perfect for the rest of your life, Edward,” Colin counters peevishly.

“Fine, I won’t tell you what a complete raging nutter you’re being.”

Ed is giving him that look, the one that lets Colin know he’s fucked things up right proper and that Ed’s feeling a bit disappointed with all life choices that have led Colin to this moment and place in time. “I won’t tell you to get your nose out of Jonny’s business, I won’t tell you that you’re going to tarnish Radiohead’s reputation if you keep on, and I won’t tell you that I’ve been kind of secretly enjoying watching this whole shit-show unfold despite knowing said enjoyment probably makes me a very bad person, okay?”

“Okay…”

“What I will tell you, before you launch your next penny-ante campaign against Michael, is that Thom has been making use of his own bed for a week now.” Ed raises his pint glass and drains about half of the contents while Colin processes what he’s just heard.

“I…oh.”

“Not that you’d notice, I suppose, since all this,” Ed waves vaguely at the air like it’s annoying him, “isn’t really about Thom or even about Jonny, is it?”

“It very much is. Michael rubbed it in Jonny’s face, you know, bite marks all up Thom’s neck…it was unnecessary, it was cruel…”

“Oh, so fucking what.”

“But…”

“Who gives a shit? I don’t. You shouldn’t either.” Ed is actually upset, he’s angry, he's looking everywhere but at Colin right now.

Colin doesn’t know what to say. He feels a little frantic. “I…I’m sorry. I guess I see things differently.”
Ed doesn’t say anything at first, just stares down at his tightly clasped hands. Colin lowers his eyes to his donut and waits. He pushes at a candy sprinkle and works it loose, fidgeting, and flicks it. It lands on the NME magazine in front of Ed.

Ed presses a finger over the sprinkle, and brings it to his mouth. He finally looks at Colin and gives him a wry little grimace before starting to speak.

“You know what I see? I see you being over-protective as a distraction. I see you studiously go about your day avoiding your own problems and concerns. I see how bloody obsessive you are in your concern for others, however. You start weighing everything in your little measuring cups, trying to neatly contain everyone’s problems. One cup for each of us, right? Where’s your own measuring cup, though, that’s what I want to know.”


“Colin, are you okay?” Ed leans forward.

Colin sets his donut down and rubs his sticky hand over his thigh, uncomfortable. “Of course I’m fine. I’m always fine. I rather have to be, right?”

“No, Cozzie. Look at me. Are you okay?”

Colin does look at Ed, and the concern he sees in Ed’s eyes—not for Jonny or for Thom, not for Radiohead as a whole, but for Colin—just for Colin and no one else—snaps open something in his chest, something rusted and squalling.

“I’m…fine.”

“But are you okay? Are you fucking okay?”

He thinks back to the early spring. His hand on Thom’s hunched back, before being told off for hovering. Holding a glass of water out to Jonny, who looked down on his offer of both medicine and concern with badly disguised scorn.

“Are you okay, Colin Greenwood?”

He finds himself answering Ed with absolutely no premeditation, and with something like dazed wonder in his voice.

“No. No, Ed. I…I’m not okay.”

“T”

“I know.”

“I’m exhausted, always. I can’t sleep.”

“I know.”

“I feel like I’m just an afterthought and have less say than anyone about anything.”

“I know.”
“And I feel wrecked but I can’t complain because I still have it way easier than Thom, you know? I am so sick of interviews,” Colin sweeps the Rolling Stone off the table in front of him, and Alicia goes flying, “but it’s the only way I know to help out Thom when he’s stressed, by taking over press duties. And they never really want to hear what I have to say anyway since I’m not Thom so it’s just the same questions over and over so they can reach their word count. And I hate it.”

“I know.”

“I’ve been smoking too much and I’m pretty sure none of our friends back home are still our friends at this point. And I read book after book for something to do and sometimes I can’t even remember them the moment I’ve finished, and…and sometimes I want to pick the setlist, okay? Why is it always Thom and Jonny?”

“Yeah, I know.”

Colin can’t stop, now that he’s started, and it’s pouring out of him like the contents of a stirred-up anthill.

“And I’m starting to think there’s something wrong with me. And I don’t like how I get, how I look after Jonny and…and everyone, really…but no one ever really stops to think about me. It’s all very well to tell me no one asked you but then they come to me, looking for help…what else can I do? It’s exhausting trying to take care of everyone but if they’d only not make me feel like a mum about it, I could bear it. And no one seems to care about the things I do! Everyone teases me, and it’s stupid but sometimes it really rather hurts my feelings, and I wish they’d stop. I worry I’m not really that great of a bass player and think maybe I should get some advanced lessons, but I don’t want to tell anyone. I think I just lucked out and fear that at any moment people will notice I’m not on the same level as the rest of you. If this ends I’m not talented enough to join another band, one that will make me a living wage, and then what happens? I’m twenty-six, and all I have for job experience is shilling CDs at Our Price. Sometimes I lay awake with the thought of not seeing a sign—of missing something—and Thom having a final breakdown that could have been prevented because the one thing I do know is that Radiohead is all he really has, but honestly, it’s all I have too, so then I worry that I’m a monster who’s trying to keep the band together for my own benefit but at the expense of my friend’s mental health. I’m tired of people handing me their mix tapes when I’m just trying to talk, to have a conversation that doesn’t revolve around the bloody music industry. I’m forgetting what normal is and that terrifies me. And I hate that I know that you can only hold a smile for so long and after that it’s just teeth. And I don’t like our bus driver. I worry I’ve coddled Jonny too much over the years and some of his attitudes are my fault. And I don’t like sharing a bedroom with Jonny, either, it’s like he expects me to entertain him like we’re still kids, and I…and…”

He doesn’t give Ed the chance to interject, and finally blurts out:

“And…and I’m really lonely, Ed.”

“I know, Coz.”

Colin and Ed stare at each other over their magazines while Colin catches his breath. Finally, he swallows, and asks:

“So…so what…what do I do?”

Ed smiles.
“I don’t know.”

Colin gapes at him. “Are you fucking serious?”

“Well, yeah. I haven’t the faintest fucking clue. Why would I? I’m so deep in the weeds I don’t know if I could find my arse with both hands, most days. Are you going to eat that donut, or poke it to death?”

“So…what? We…I…I just…carry on?”

“I reckon so. You know, I ordered one with sprinkles because I wanted a donut with sprinkles.”

Colin, shocked and feeling vulnerable, starts to giggle. Ed’s smile widens. They both break into helpless laughter and Colin understands that no, of course Ed doesn’t know. And neither does Thom or Jonny or Phil or anyone else for that matter. And Colin…he doesn’t know either! He might know least of all! And why is the possibility of genuinely accepting that so…liberating?

But he feels different now…he feels…well…he’s not remotely okay…

“But it’s strawberry,” Colin says. “You know strawberry is my favourite. Perhaps you should have used that great oversized skull of yours to work out that this outcome was inescapable.”

But he’s maybe going to be okay with not being okay.

“Oh bugger off, I don’t want it back now, you’ve put your fingers all over it and knocked off half the sprinkles.”

He’s not an idiot; nothing is solved and everything terrible still remains. And maybe…maybe he needs to take some time for himself and start figuring some of that out. Maybe he needs to start being a little more selfish.

Just for now, though, just for this moment in time, everything might be okay in the universe.

Sometimes a single moment is enough to make all the difference, isn’t it?

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Michael is really glad to be reunited with Patti in Michigan, and to have her guest on “Let Me In” and “Dancing Barefoot” with him again was an indescribable honor of course, but he’d really rather
had hoped—perhaps selfishly—that he would have her all to himself after the show.

But she had plans of her own, and it turned out that they revolved around a newfound interest in Radiohead.

It’s all his own fault, of course—he hasn’t had much to talk about of late except for Radiohead, with a particular focus on Radiohead’s frontman, so of course she’d want to experience Thom for herself. Of course she’d want to get her own read, and not just rely on the muddled impressions she’s culled from Michael’s endless poetics…and angst…and self-doubts…concerning him.

So now Michael is present at what might be the most unwilling and uncomfortable gathering of people in his life.

R.E.M. is all accounted for, and Michael has to give his guys credit where credit is due—they are playing at being unaffected and casual like their lives depend on it. They’ve not pushed Michael for details over the past two weeks even thought it’s obvious Thom is no longer in the picture, but that’s because they accept his methods in coping—withdrawal, mostly, with bouts of dramatic moping for variety. Maybe they’ve just decided over the years that trying to shake him down isn’t worth the trouble. He’ll go to them when—if—he is finally ready to share the story of this disaster to anyone other than Patti.

As for Radiohead, Patti has them trapped neatly by the short hairs. Their urbane, British manners won’t allow them to escape her clutches. But to be fair, Patti has R.E.M. by the short hairs, too.

So here they all are, at Patti’s pleasure.

She had hunted down R.E.M. in their dressing room and swept them towards the lounge where staff had set up a table with a motley collection of liquor, mixers, and sad cheese trays. It was more comfortable to hang out there than in their sweat-rank dressing room, she had said. They were in East Lansing and this was about as good as it was going to get, she had said. They didn’t want to go back to their hotel rooms yet, she had said. We’ll never be as young as we are tonight, she had said.

So they had gamely trudged through the hallways behind her like ducklings to a…a duckling slaughter…innocent of what lay in wait until the moment Michael heard Patti’s voice call out as she entered the lounge ahead of them.

“Oh awesome! You’re all still here. I love it when men can follow directions. Didn’t find any beer, so I guess it’s just whisky and cokes for us, but I did find these guys wandering aimlessly.”

With equal parts numbing horror and fierce admiration, Michael had realized this was a set-up. Patti, you bitch. I’ll get you back someday.

For a moment he’d considered turning tail. But he wasn’t always a coward, so he buttoned a smile tightly into place and filed into the room along with everyone else.

And nearly an hour later, his mouth tacky from too much boozed-up soda, Michael is thinking that this just might be the purgatory he’s heard tell of, and he really hopes Patti is enjoying the hell out of herself because god knows everyone else is trying hard to avoid being trampled by the elephant in the room.

Well, excluding Radiohead’s tour manager. Tim appears to be genuinely blind to that great beast.
He’s happily clutching a red solo cup, chattering up a storm to Patti while completely unaware of how the elephant keeps shifting its bulk around. Must be those coke-bottle glasses of his. He could possibly set his cup on the thing’s ass and not notice it.

Everyone else is gamely accommodating this parody of a good time, chatting and drinking with a certain forced earnestness bordering on the absurd, with a collective tacit goal of not looking in Michael or Thom’s direction.

Michael isn’t even trying to put up an act at this point. He capitulated after the first five minutes, his fake smile slipping off his lips, already forgotten. Despite his half-hearted efforts, his gaze had kept being drawn back to the small British man nervously hovering around Ed and Phil. He finally allowed himself to simply and unabashedly stare at Thom.

Thom isn’t trying to put up a front either. He’s taken to leaning up against a wall, tensely nipping from a plastic tumbler of what appears to be straight vodka, and is also engaged in a staring contest.

With his feet.

You know, you could just walk across the room. What is it? Fifteen feet, maybe? Would take you all of four seconds.

No. He mustn’t. He’s made it this far, two agonizing weeks of endless hours and impossible distance, with Thom skittering away around corners and hiding out in his bus at the merest whiff of Michael’s presence. He isn’t going to force the issue when it’s unequivocally apparent that Thom wants nothing more to do with him. He has to respect that.

Thom thinks Michael doesn’t respect him. This is the only way Michael knows to show him that he does. This acceptance of Thom’s will.

He’d come to that unpleasant understanding while the words they both regretted—Michael assumes both, he hopes both—were still heavy throughout that hotel room in Texas, resting on the windowsills like cold flies.

So he hasn’t pursued after Thom and he won’t.

But Thom hasn’t bolted. He’s stayed. He’s still here, after an hour of this hell. Maybe that means something?

Michael sighs and tosses back the rest of his drink. Maybe he should be the one to leave. Radiohead only have a few days left on this tour, and the kindest thing he could probably do would be to let them enjoy it as much as possible without him hovering over them like some stupid, useless bird of prey.

Michael feels his muscles starting to propel him into motion but at that moment Thom raises his head and looks him directly in the eyes. Michael freezes, pinned by the weight of sharp purpose he sees in them.

Maybe the room actually goes as quiet as Michael perceives it to, or maybe it’s just his pounding heart masking the subdued conversations around him. He cannot make sense of the expression on Thom’s face. He is closed and shuttered to Michael now, a room without doors or windows.
Suddenly that expression dislocates, crumpling in a way that makes Michael want to take back every vow he’s made to leave Thom be. Thom blindly sets his cup down on the nearest table and swiftly ducks towards the door. Michael starts to raise a hand toward his fleeing figure, but aborts the movement.

No, Michael. Let him go.

Thom is on the verge of making a successful escape when Bertis Downs the Fourth comes striding through the doorway, and Thom collides squarely into him.

“Oh!”

Thom ricochets off of Bertie’s chest, the other man’s significantly larger bulk acting much like a pinball bumper. He catches himself quickly, though, and glowers up at Bertie, red-faced and miserable.

When he sees who is standing in front of him, Bertie leans back on his heels with an unattractive smile splitting his lips.

Now there’s no question about it; the room has gone dead silent. Out of the corner of his eye, Michael sees Patti’s narrow face grow serious. Mike and Bill are sharing a forlorn look of realization. Tim is appraising the tableau in front of him like a man working out a difficult math problem, and Ed plucks a bottle of whisky from Jonny’s unresisting hand to pour another weighty dollop into his cola. *This is like the Karate Kid*, Michael more sees than hears him whisper.

Bertie’s grin grows smug and a vicious understanding fills his eyes as he continues to weigh the man in front of him. Thom instinctively takes a step back.

*How*, Michael faintly wonders, *did we manage to hire a man who is so perfectly a comic book villain? Like, does one have to practice at being so flawlessly nasty?* Ed’s right; this is like a moment right out of a movie, with Bertie having been sent straight from central casting. Has he always been an obvious bully but Michael was too self-involved and distracted to notice? Or was Thom correct when he had insisted it was personal—*Guys like that always have it out for me*, he had said—and Bertie is helplessly attracted to some inscrutable facet of Thom, an aggressive aspect of his already-coarse personality amplified when they come into contact?

Like right now.

“Watch where you’re going.” Bertie finally says, drawing Michael’s attention back to him. His skin is livid and oily in the way it always gets when he’s been drinking. “You wouldn’t want to embarrass yourself. Again.”

Michael’s stomach clenches and he’s about to step forward, but Thom shifts gears from unhappy waif and into feral hellion in zero seconds flat and Michael is left swaying.

“Fuck you,” he snarls in response to Bertie’s words, drawing himself up. He stalks, stiff-legged and proud-necked, past Bertie, who just smirks as Thom exits the room.

Bertie shrugs and goes to fix himself a drink, seemingly unaware (or uncaring) of the icy reception his presence is receiving.

“What? No fucking gin? What is this, a sorority party? Christ, you’re all drinking Jack and Coke.”
Or, at least, Michael assumes that would have been the outcome had Thom been allowed to leave.

But as Thom draws even with Bertie, he shoots a hand out and grabs Thom by the arm. “What the fuck did you say to me?”

“I think you heard me just fine.”

“Yeah? Well, I think you’d better hope I didn’t.”

Thom looks down at the fingers gripping his arm and then slowly raises his eyes back to Bertie’s face. He doesn’t look scared, or even especially surprised. If anything, he looks satisfied, like he was anticipating this reaction from Bertie.

“I’d appreciate it if you removed your fucking hand,” he remarks, his voice crisp, calm, and out of place.

*Put a stop to this, NOW.*

Michael clears his throat. “Hey, guys. Let’s not do this. We’ve got a guest tonight. Let’s just cool down, okay?”

God that sounded so lame and ineffectual. But Bertie, still smirking, releases Thom’s arm and says, “I’m as cool as a cucumber. But yeah, you’re right. Not the time or place. Sorry about that, Michael. Sorry about that, Thom. No hard feelings, yeah? Still good buddies, yeah?”

Thom gives him one last appraising look before barking a sarcastic laugh. “Yeah. Cheers, mate.”

He proceeds to walk slowly past Bertie, but doesn’t step around him. He knocks his shoulder into Bertie instead, an aggressive, foolhardy move meant to convey a single, well-defined message.

*Fuck you, mate.*

Thom’s shoulder barely makes Bertie sway, as he has an easy fifty pounds on Thom. Those fifty pounds, however, make a significant impact when Bertie uses them to ram Thom backwards with one hard shove. Thom doesn’t stand a chance; he goes down like wheat before a hailstorm.

And with that, the room erupts into chaos.

Everyone is yelling and gesturing and Michael has time to think that Thom takes a hard fall well; as soon as he hits the ground he curls into the impact like a roly poly bug and lets his momentum tumble him across the floor.

Michael is wondering why his feet aren’t moving even though he’s telling them to. Everyone else seems to be rooted in place as well, despite the raised voices and flailing. Only Thom seems to still exist in a world where time flows forward and bodies follow their brains’ directives, as he’s already found his feet and is shooting back across the room towards Bertie, his teeth bared.

This time Bertie aims one single punch to Thom’s stomach, low and brutal.

The air immediately leaves Thom and he would have crumpled at Bertie’s feet if it weren’t for the man once again giving him a weighty push. This time Thom doesn’t take the fall with anything
approximating grace—he lands hard and he lands ugly, flat on his back, his limbs akimbo. He curls onto his side as his arms wrap themselves around his middle; he gasps, ragged and long, attempting to pull air back into his lungs.

“Leave him the fuck alone,” a stern voice orders, silencing the room with its authority.

Tim Greaves has moved to stand between Bertie and Thom; he is apparently the only person present who has managed to make enough sense of what’s happening to take action.

But he’s stepping right up to Bertie like he hasn’t quite enough sense, or at least none of the right sort. Michael hears Ed pull in a startled breath and quietly groan, “Oh no, Tim, what the fuck, mate, you’re gonna get killed.”

Michael doesn’t know if Tim’s being brave or foolish—he’s certainly resolute, either way—when he gets in Bertie’s face. “Get the hell away from my singer, or I swear to god I will have your ass.”

“Sure thing, buddy.” Bertie chuckles. “I’m done here, anyway. I think your singer’s learned his lesson, learned it real good. He just got what he asked for, nothing more. Don’t you go and make the same mistake.”

Michael makes a note to fire Bertis Downs the Fourth the moment he remembers how to operate his feet and voice again.

“Fuck. You.” Thom’s determinedly trying to get his feet under him, even though he’s shaky and looks like he’s going to be sick all over the floor. Dismayed, Michael realizes Thom will keep getting back up until he is no longer physically capable of doing so. Michael imagines that’s the only way Thom knows to be. He’ll doggedly dash himself to pieces against Bertie before he will accept defeat.

It’s a hell of an inspiring thing to witness, and it’s so, so infuriatingly futile.

Bertie grins over Tim’s shoulder, down at Thom on the floor, and taunts him. “You want more, kid? I’ll give you—”

“—Oh no you don’t, you’re not going anywhere near him ever again,” Tim informs him. Without breaking eye contact with Bertie, he then snaps, “Thom, you’re not helping.”

He plants himself more solidly in front of Bertie. Bill has broken through the spell of collective inertia affecting them all and starts to step forward, and Jonny shifts to stand protectively next to Thom.

“Get the fuck away from me,” Bertie growls.

And with that, he punches Tim.

It’s a bad angle; Tim’s too close and Bertie can’t get any real force behind it. Instead of connecting solidly, his fist skims the side of Tim’s face, catching his glasses. They tumble through the air in multiple, scattering pieces.

Ed gasps again, his chair scraping loudly across the concrete as he takes to his feet. “That’s our Tim you arsefucking cunt!”
Without his glasses Tim looks shockingly vulnerable and bewildered, and Michael thinks they’re going to have to make a run to the emergency room tonight if someone doesn’t get between him and Bertie right this fucking second because Tim has become the easiest prey he’s ever seen, and Michael was in the drama club in high school for christ’s sake. Shouldn’t the venue have security? Why is everyone in this room so fashionably thin and useless?

“Oh, I am just bloody well done with you,” Tim complains to Bertie, blinking and squinting muzzily.

“Last chance, Greaves. Get out of my way. This isn’t any of your business.”

“They’re mine, and their business is always my business.”

And having delivered that pronouncement, spoken with earnest dignity and not a small amount of grit, Tim Greaves—gentle and patient, abused and ignored, befuddled and endlessly nervous Tim Greaves—rears back and delivers the most perfectly executed right hook that Michael has ever witnessed.

Bertis Downs the Fourth spins on his feet with something approaching beauty, and collapses in an unconscious heap.

The room is holding its breath, having transformed into a still life from the moment that impeccably cocked arm hit its mark. The only sound comes when Ed bonelessly falls back into his metal chair with a clatter.

Thom has frozen into an unsteady crouch, in the process of once again launching himself at Bertie. Next to him, Jonny has his own arm cocked, no doubt prepared to go down at Thom’s side once Bertie had dispatched of their tour manager. Colin is standing against the wall next to Patti and holding her hand, both having apparently decided that sometimes the best way to help is to get the hell out of the way. Phil is hoisting a metal folding chair aloft, and frankly, Michael almost wishes that scenario had found an opportunity to play out. Ed is where he fell back into his seat, his drink cradled to his chest with a protective hand over its contents. He’s grinning maniacally.

Michael realizes he never budged a single inch during the entire ordeal. He’s been suspended within his shock. He glances at his watch. Inconceivably, hours have not passed. The whole fight, starting when Thom first bolted and ending with Bertie hitting the floor, seems to have lasted no longer than a few scant minutes.

Everyone in the room still has their eyes glued to Tim as he fussily searches the floor. He finds the body of his glasses, minus an arm. He pokes a finger through the frame where a lens is missing. “Ah shit. Well, these are done for.”

Tim takes his small handful of plastic and glass to a trashcan and, with a little shrug, drops the pieces in.

“You know,” he says, thoughtfully. “I didn’t really like those glasses.”

He then looks up, squinting to take each of them in. “Honestly, I don’t like wearing eyeglasses at all.”

He ambles (and that’s where the giraffe thing came in, the man ambles like he’s tall even if he’s just of middling height) past Bertie’s prone form, which has started to shift around a little. A little
moan dribbles from his mouth. Bill and Peter are standing over him, identical looks of grim disgust on their faces. Dealing with him once he’s fully conscious again is going to be delightful. It’s going to be a long night, with lots of phone calls to be made, but it will end with Bertie no longer in the employ of R.E.M. Of that Michael is sure.

Tim hesitates in the doorway as something seems to occur to him. He turns back to the room and beams happily.

“Maybe I’ll get contacts!”

And with that, Tim vanishes into the night.

Patti leans over and picks up the popped-free lens that Tim had missed. She quietly walks to the trashcan and makes a move to toss it in, but at the last moment she stops and slides the piece of glass into her pocket. She notices everyone silently watching her and shrugs, defiant.

“If that isn’t a talisman now, I don’t know what is,” she explains.

“Oh my god that was BRILLIANT!” Ed leaps to his feet and starts to pace the room, no longer able to contain his glee. “Did that just happen? We all saw that happen right? Holy shit. Holy angels and baby jesus and…holy shit.”

Everyone is shuffling around now, not quite sure what comes next, and blinking at each other like they’ve all woken from a communal dream state.

Except for Phil. He gently sets down his folding chair (once more, Michael regrets what might have been) and announces, “Right, then. I am heading back to the hotel. Maybe I can catch a ride with Tim.”

He, too, pauses at the door. But when he speaks, there’s a certain scolding inflection to his words.

“You know, I bet Hanson’s drummer doesn’t have to deal with this shit.”

He turns neatly on his heels and leaves to catch up with their mild-mannered tour manager.

Chapter End Notes

- More on the firing of Jefferson Holt
- That Alicia Silverstone Rolling Stone cover. Pretty salacious.
- Supposedly Colin took advanced bass lessons between the recording of The Bends and OK Computer.
Something about Michael’s reflection in the mirror catches his eye and he changes direction so that he can peer more closely at himself. That is a zit. God, he’s thirty-five, when will it ever end? He leans in close to the mirror and sets to work trying to dislodge it.

“Well, that’s the most rockstar thing I’ve ever seen. Good show tonight, by the way.”

Michael startles; his nails slip and he pinches his skin. “Ow, fuck!”

He turns around and there’s Thom, leaning up against the doorway of his dressing room.

“Jesus, you and your little cat feet. How has no one put a bell on you yet?”

“Sorry,” replies Thom, not looking sorry at all.

Looking, instead, like this is normal, like him standing there hasn’t made Michael’s adrenaline spike as he tries to remember every single thing he’d told himself he would say were he given this chance.

“Now you know why I called you kitten.”

Thom rolls his eyes and shakes his head, a small smile pushing at the edges of his mouth. “You know that’s not even a little bit true.”

“Well, it is now,” Michael says.

But no, it’s not, and its inception hadn’t to do with any of the (demeaning, patronizing, untrue) reasons that Thom apparently seemed to imagine. But Thom gave up his right to ever know why
Michael gave him that nickname when he left; the rationale behind it belongs solely to Michael now. *Kitten* has been tossed in the box where all the other secrets of his heart’s past clatter around.

Thom snorts at Michael’s rejoinder, looking down at his feet. He runs a hand through his hair. He scratches fingers down his neck, along his jaw. Rubs a finger under his nose. Finally he shoves both hands deep in his pockets and the unavoidable awkwardness starts to occupy the space between them.

Thom makes an attempt to forestall it. “So…Tim, huh?”

“Yes. That was a hell of a thing. Are you okay, then? He’s gone. I mean I’m sure you know that. But…he’s gone.”

“Oh—yeah, yeah, I’m fine,” Thom says, passing over the topic of Bertis easily. Like it means nothing, like it’s already mostly forgotten. Maybe it really is. “Ed’s been following Tim around like he’s infatuated. It’s hilarious. We’re threatening to have him a t-shirt made, *Tim Greaves’ #1 Fan*. With a big sloppy heart around the words.”

“I’m glad to see you, Thom,” says Michael, because it’s something to fill the silence that’s not meaningless small talk, and because it’s true.

“Oh—oh. Yeah, well, I realized I was being an idiot. After Tim, hiding just seemed, well, pointless. It made me think. I mean. Well.” He pushes away from the doorframe and walks further into the room. “What I mean is, there’s only one more show. Tomorrow night, and that’s it.”

“Yes, that’s very true.” Michael is well aware of that fact. From here on out, everything will be *the last time* as far as R.E.M. and Radiohead are concerned.

“I don’t want to leave things…us…as they are now.”

“Neither do I,” agrees Michael, and if he sounds a bit too eager, he doesn’t care. “I’ve wanted to talk to you so badly. I stood outside your bus pacing for god knows how long a couple weeks ago. Probably half an hour, honestly. I saw Colin coming and ran away before he could see me and yell out ‘Seize that man!’”

“He probably would have enjoyed that. Life doesn’t provide many opportunities to yell something of that caliber.” Thom sneaks a look at Michael. “You wanted to talk to me?”

“Well, yeah. Of *course*. You didn’t know that?”

Thom shakes his head. “No, I assumed…well. It doesn’t matter. I was avoiding you anyway.”

“…Because I hurt you.”

“No, because I hurt *you*,” Thom corrects him.

They look at each other.

“I suppose I may as well ask now and get it over with: is there any chance we might give it another go?” Michael asks, a small barbed sliver of hope catching in his throat even though he knows he already knows the answer. Even though he’s already come to his own conclusion about what the outcome needs to be, should the miraculous happen (and it appears it has) and he was given a
chance to talk to Thom. The conclusion doesn’t have a romantic ending.

Thom shakes his head, sadly. “I’m sorry, Michael.”

Michael nods, Thom’s letdown still a padded blow despite the bare-boned relief edging it. He collects his thoughts, and says, “I’ve been thinking about that, see, and the thing is, I’m not sorry. I’m glad your emotions had teeth. I’m glad that they wore claws and a snarl and didn’t let me walk all over them.”

“I kinda walked all over you instead.”

“Look, Thom, I allowed exactly what I was comfortable with. I knew what I was getting into. Don’t, like, try and take away that away from me. Don’t be so,” Michael pauses, not sure if it’s too soon for this much truth, but then he says it anyway, “arrogant.”

However, Thom just nods, accepting Michael’s observation. “Do you know what I miss the most? Our conversations. More than anything, that’s what I really miss.”

“I miss that, too.” Michael can’t help himself, though, and adds, “Though my ego might be a bit bruised now, I won’t lie. I really rather thought I’d pulled out all the stops. Surely my bedroom skills weren’t that forgettable.”

“Don’t be daft,” Thom says impatiently, and with no little amount of annoyance. It’s unexpected. “You know you were good. You know I enjoyed it. And I know that what I’m asking for is impossible. You can’t…you can’t unkiss someone.”

“You can’t unfuck someone, either.”

“No, you bloody well can’t,” Thom says, looking him squarely in the eyes. “I wouldn’t want that, for fuck’s sake. I don’t regret anything we did, and believe me, I’ve been trying. But I don’t. So don’t you dare walk away from this conversation thinking that’s what I’m saying. But, Michael, I reckon the problem is that everyone always says let’s be friends and it’s nearly always a lie.”

“Would it be a lie for you?”

“No. It would have been enough for me. If that’s all you’d ever offered me…it would have been enough.”

Michael nods. He knows that. He thinks he knew that from the start.

“I was greedy,” he admits now. “I wanted everything.”

“I didn’t try and stop you,” Thom points out. “I didn’t know what I wanted and left you the decision.”

“I really liked the way it made me feel,” Michael confesses. “Pretending to be the person I thought you wanted me to be. The way you looked at me.”

“And I really liked feeling wanted by the person we were both pretending you were.”

“That guy was kinda a dick though, wasn’t he?”
The corner of Thom’s mouth pulls up into a slight smirk. “Maybe a little. But I like it when it’s a
little bit mean, if we’re being honest.”

Michael chuckles. Sometimes Thom is acutely self-aware over the oddest things. “Yeah, well. I
wouldn’t mind being genuinely as self-assured as that guy was. I never have had any of the
answers, just lots of opinions. I thought you’d stop looking at me like you did, if you knew what a
mess I am. I’m sorry that I cared more about impressing you than being honest with you. I’m
sorry.”

“I would have taken any opinion you handed me as fact. I was basically begging you to have the
answers. I just went and dumped all my fucked-up issues in your lap and was like, ‘Here, unravel
these, if you don’t mind.’ I have a real problem with that. It’s a big part of why I’ve been avoiding
you. And I’m sorry, too. For that.”

Michael sighs. “But I liked helping. I liked guiding. That part wasn’t an act. I don’t have answers,
but I have experience. I was serious when I said you should use me like a time machine. It
wasn’t…it wasn’t like I was pretending to care. I just wanted to…fuck, I don’t know.”

“Are you cross with me?”

“No. Well. Maybe. There’s one thing,” Michael admits. “You’re going to do something terrible
someday, you’re going to kiss someone else with that mouth.”

Michael smiles at how Thom’s face pulls in on itself, confusion pressing his eyebrows together in
that adorable way that always makes Michael want to tease him just a little bit more, a little
harder, just so he can kiss that small v-shaped crease between them until it smooths back out.

That’s no longer allowed, though, so perhaps teasing Thom to get that result isn’t in anyone’s best
interest anymore.

“No, Thom. I’m not mad. I’m going to be a sad bastard for a bit but I’ll get over it. And hey, new
material to explore, right?”

“Now I do feel used, cheers.”

“Good. Write me a song about it.”

Thom cracks a proper smile, rolling his eyes up toward the ceiling.

And because he’s only human, and maybe a bit of an emotional masochist, Michael asks, “So what
about Jonny?”

He doesn’t know what he expects to get back from Thom in response to that needling question, but
he assumes confusion and misunderstanding will be somewhere at the forefront. Thom, for all his
intelligence and emotional grasp of things is, after all, willfully blind in certain areas. Maybe
Michael is getting one last—and deeply unfair—little jab in but yes, he’s only human, and an
imperfect one at that.

When Thom’s face goes guilty and surprised instead, Michael has just enough time to feel his heart
lurch, and to think I deserve this.

“He told you? That fucking…traitor.”
It takes every scrap of carefully-learned control Michael has to keep his face still and his body language unaffected. He shouldn’t allow himself to play at this deception; it’s none of his fucking business. He should reassure Thom that Jonny Greenwood would never come to him of all people, and that whatever Thom is talking about, it’s still a private matter. But Michael doesn’t do any of that.

“People,” he notes, aiming to avoid directly lying, “like to tell me things. I guess I have one of those faces. Jonny didn’t go into any detail.”

That statement is factually correct.

Thom’s face is trying to decide between being affronted, embarrassed, and livid. He settles on a bewildered mix of the three. “You know…it was after we broke up. If that’s what we did. I guess we never discussed if we were properly dating, even, did we? Anyway. It was after.”

Michael nods, not trusting his voice.

“God. I was such an idiot. I was blind drunk, and I…dunno. There’s no excuse. I basically fell all over him and made an arse of myself. I don’t even know why I did it,” Thom mumbles, trailing off with, "I mean…it’s not like…”

“What did Jonny do?”

“Made me go to bed, obviously.” Thom says, looking at Michael like he’s purposely being obtuse, or maybe just trying to embarrass Thom by making him have to explicitly lay it out. He then goes pensive and after a moment says, “He was actually really kind about the whole thing, to be honest. When I woke up I thought I’d never hear the end of it.”

“I don’t think Jonny is cruel like that.”

“No, no…he’s not. But he was way nicer than he needed to be. I got on the bus, totally expecting everyone to start laying into me, giving me shit. But he hadn’t told anyone.” Thom quirks an eyebrow. “Anyone on the bus, that is.”

Michael waits for Thom to continue, feeling uncomfortable.

Thom shrugs. “Anyway, he didn’t bring it up. Just acted like everything was normal and I hadn’t basically tried to…to molest him in his sleep like a sad pervert. I almost wondered if I’d imagined the whole thing for a minute there. I was so relieved when I realised he was just letting it go—he probably felt sorry for me, now I think about it. How pathetic is that? Ugh, even talking about it now, I kinda want to die.”

Thom has indeed gone red-faced. He risks a look at Michael. “I’m sorry. I…that’s not on, is it, telling you this? Even if he already told you some of it, I’m the last person you want the play-by-play from. Anyway. It’s in the past. I’m just pretending it never even happened, right? And if it did, it’s just some dumb thing that doesn’t even matter. Inconsequential, drunk stupidity.”

“That’s probably for the best.”

“Yeah, it probably is,” Thom says with finality and gestures between Michael and himself, his good eye widening. “So what now? I…really want to keep knowing you. But what now, how do
we get past this…this moment?"

“This moment? It’s already passed. See there?” Michael waves a hand, like he’s searching the air for something. “Yeah. It’s gone.”

“Just like that?” Thom snorts.

Michael smiles, “More or less.”

“Okay. I doubt it’s that easy. But okay.”

“Okay.” Michael pushes away from the ledge of the dressing table he’s been leaning up against. “You caught me on the way to the shower. I’m going to go do that, I think the sweat congealed.”

“Hey,” he says then, because there’s no time like the present to try on their new relationship to see how it fits. “Hey…would you like to get lunch tomorrow?”

Thom smiles one of his rarest little smiles, the sweet one Michael likes the most.

“Yeah,” he says slowly, his tone as measured and delicate as Michael’s had been in the asking. “I’d like that a lot.”

“Good,” breathes Michael. He feels a gentle swell of sadness as the cover to the story of their misguided relationship is quietly shut with finality. But there’s an undercurrent of joy, too, isn’t there? There’s another book underneath, one concerning what comes next.

Thom’s voice stops him one last time. “Michael?”

“Yes, Thom?”

“I always liked it best when I was learning you were just as fucked up as me. It wasn’t the smoothness or the confidence, or any of the other things you were playing at. Once the hero-worship passed…it was the stuff that I think you couldn’t keep from slipping through the cracks. The real stuff, the real you. That’s the person I really want to be my friend.” There’s that crooked smile again. “I look forward to getting to know him better.”

“Thank you, Thom. He looks forward to it, too.”

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So that’s that, Michael thinks as he walks through the hallways toward the showers. You can’t deny it was one hell of a ride.
Staff and crew pass him in the corridor; he nods to them in greeting, though he’s distracted and caught up in his own thoughts.

So tomorrow they’ll get lunch. They’ve planted the seed; now they start to grow a new way to be with each other.

*I think…I really think it’s going to be okay. I think we got this?*

Well, and he has to laugh because *really*, they’ve been carrying on like they’d been in the midst of an epic love affair spanning years. *Let’s be honest,* he chides himself. They had a summer of friendship and flirtation. And really high phone bills. They only ever fucked a handful of times. But Michael has always been the type to throw himself wholly at a person, his passion getting the better of his common sense. The gluttonous thrill of immersing himself in someone new, absorbing as much of their time and energy as he can, is one of the most addictive feelings he knows. It’s just that usually the other person is a bit more…measured. Maybe putting two people with the same romantic tendencies into the unnatural existence of a tour is a sure recipe for what transpired.

A woman nervously stops him and asks for an autograph. He smiles his traditional disarming-yet-shy frontman smile, but even as he’s writing, *to so-and-so, with love, Michael,* he’s already forgotten her name as he ponders the most obvious question.

So what happens next?

*Well, not for you Michael. You know what comes next for you. You’re wondering what’s next for Thom. Thom and Jonny, to be precise.*

Nothing, it would seem. Nothing comes next.

But that’s life. They came as close as either dared to making something more of their friendship, and if nothing came of it that means it just fundamentally wasn’t in the cards for them.

Yes, that very much is life.

*I wonder why Jonny didn’t take his shot when Thom came to him that night. Thom was handing himself to Jonny.*

Well, to give credit where it’s due, Jonny had backed right the fuck off when he saw Thom had made his choice in Michael. Maybe he realized that Thom wasn’t a possession that Michael could steal away from him. Maybe he finally tired of his daydreams and decided he wanted to be free of their hold. Maybe Michael was just the catalyst he needed. It’s pretty clear the kid has made every effort to move on. Still, it must have been a kick to the guts when Thom came on to him. Michael wonders if Jonny appreciated the irony when it happened.

He’s going to be fine, though. Jonny is just a kid—what, all of twenty-three years? Michael hasn’t a clue how long it’s been going on for, but he doesn’t care if Jonny’s been in love with Thom since he was a *literal* kid (and surely it’s not been *that* long, who the hell can keep a flame going for that many years?), because the fact is people can very easily fall out of love if they put their mind to it. People do it every day. It’s harder to keep love *going,* actually; it takes more of a concentrated effort and not a small amount of luck.

*He’s going to find someone. Probably some sort of academic, or perhaps a classical musician.*
They’ll get a nice house in London and a couple little dogs, I bet Jonny likes little dogs, he seems the sort. They’ll become cultured and enjoy reading from the newspaper to each other in the mornings over their croissants. They will go to dinner parties with their equally refined friends and talk about ethics and morality and politics, and be very progressive and thoughtful, if a bit academic in their approach to the reality of the world outside of their blessed little bubble. They’ll make the world kinder where they pass through it. It will be a very graceful life.

That doesn’t sound like a tragedy. It sounds, actually, like a dream.

And Thom? What about Thom Yorke?

Oh, he’ll meet someone as well. Definitely an artist or writer. She’ll—I bet it’ll be a girl, he’s going to write this summer off, which is a shame, but he’ll go back to what he knows best—she will be a delight, and will help in keeping him always reaching for the very best he can be. She’ll learn, quickly, how to do so. What buttons to push. You have to be very clever to be with Thom. Their life will be noisy and peripatetic and colorful. There will be eventually be kids and laughter and weird art projects littering the dining room table. They’ll fight, but the bickering will just be another way of saying I love you.

That seems about right. That seems like a very wonderful future, as well.

And it’s for the best, really. How do relationships between band members generally go? Excepting Sonic Youth, not very fucking well, on average.

It would have been a hell of a risky move for them to take.

Michael pushes open the door to the shower and wrinkles his nose. These things always look straight out of a low-rent prison movie. They give him the creeps. He’ll make this fast, and try not to think about serial killers and what happens to the character who takes a shower all alone, unaware of the danger until it’s too late. Luckily, his mind has other topics to focus on.

Like for one, it really was kind of Jonny to not make a scene over Thom’s misguided actions. Michael hopes Thom never becomes completely aware of how Jonny had once felt towards him, because realizing he was inadvertently toying with Jonny’s feelings—even if they were just the after-the-fact corpses of feelings—is the sort of thing that will send him into a fugue.

“I don’t even know why I did it. I mean…it’s not like…”

Michael drops his hoodie on the floor and then pulls his t-shirt over his head, suddenly angry for some inexplicable reason.

It’s not like what, Thom?

What were you going to say? It’s not like you are attracted to Jonny? Well, that’s not true, Thom.

Michael thinks he might have implied something to that effect to Thom when they were fighting. He hopes not; he hopes he just thought it.

“I don’t even know why I did it. I mean…it’s not like…”

Maybe Thom had been going to say it’s not like he was looking to cause Michael pain, nor had he attempted to kiss Jonny out of a desire for retribution.
Maybe he’d just been wasted and curious what would happen. There’s that old adage about the universe watching out for drunks indulging their curiosity; taking special care of them so that they don’t burn themselves.

_Sometimes, Michael thinks, the universe chooses to consciously put its foot down and stomp out embers before they catch._

And in _this_ universe, Jonny Greenwood and Thom Yorke did _not_ come together, despite every opportunity. Despite how everything at times felt foreshadowed and nearly _legendary_.

A legend, after all, is just the corpse of history, stuffed and mounted. And the history shared by Thom and Jonny, a history of unrealized possibility, is meant to be hung dead and dusty on a wall, until finally shoved in a box in the garage once they’ve no more room in either of their lives to display it.

And you know what? _That’s okay._

They’re lucky, _all_ of them, with how relatively unscathed they made it out of this. Things could have gone worse…so _very_ much worse. In ways none of them could have come back from, certainly not Jonny and Thom and, as an extension, Radiohead. Possibly Michael could have been the only one able to walk away from the destruction. He always does, after all.

It only seems unfair if you don’t know any better. If you think the universe doesn’t have its own agenda, and that it’s all about what you _think_ you need, instead.

It only seems unfair if you think the concept of destiny is romantic and not kind of horrifying.

Only the universe fathoms its own unaccountable self, and all we can do is to take its hand when it reaches out to us. Trust it when it tells us, _that’s okay._

_So that_, thinks Michael again, coming full circle, _is that._

_“I don’t even know why I did it. I mean…it’s not like…”_

_“Oh, GODDAMMIT.”_

Michael snaps the water off and rips his jeans back up his legs, pulls his t-shirt back over his head so hard he hears the creaking of a seam. The fabric clings to his wet back.

He slams out of the bathroom and stalks down the hallway, fighting with the arms of his hoodie, not sure yet where he’s going.

_“…It’s not like he could ever want me back.”_
"Am I the only one who doesn't care about going on MTV?" Jonny asks.

“Yes.” Colin draws deeply on his cigarette. “It is you alone in the great stark wilderness, you brave, rugged Jack London protagonist.”

“Well, I’m just saying. If we’re getting solid rotations of all our singles, why do we even need to go on that vile show? It’s like Thom says…do we really want to be at the sharp end of the MTV eye candy lifestyle? It makes me hate knowing we’re going to be in New York City because we always end up at MTV. I loathe it.”

“Ask management, Jonathan. I just work here,” Colin says, without much interest. Colin has shown a lot less interest in a great many of Jonny’s opinions all of a sudden. He’s not once said Things will be fine or I’ll do all the talking or even his standard Be nice, Jonathan.

It’s disconcerting, yes…but the dark circles under Colin’s eyes also aren’t as dark as they’ve been of late, so Jonny isn’t going to push. Jonny wouldn’t ever say this to Colin, but he doesn’t like to think of his brother as having any real weakness, any wall he can’t push through. And despite efforts to the contrary on his part, he’s found himself…well, worried. If Colin were to reach a point where he had nothing left to give, every one of his vast and admirable human qualities atrophied, what would that signify for the rest of them?

Maybe the rest of them should just fuck right off and give Colin some breathing space.

Once that thought wouldn’t have even occurred to him. Once he wouldn’t have felt all that terrible about it, even if it had.

He doesn’t think he’s the same person he once was.

Well. Whatever. Maybe he should tell Colin to complain more when the mood strikes. It doesn’t help matters, but it feels wonderful and passes any number of hours.

Something behind Jonny catches those big bug eyes of his brother’s, so Jonny twists his head around to see what has made Colin’s eyebrow quirk up.

“Hey.”

Michael Stipe is standing there, looking more unsure of himself than Jonny was aware the man was capable of. Having seen videos of early performances and interviews, Jonny thinks that’s saying a lot.

“Has someone tried to drown you, mate?” Ed asks, amused. “You’re a bit wet.”

“No, I just took a shower. I, ah, forgot my towel,” Michael explains. “Hey, could I talk to Jonny for a minute?”

Ed and Colin both swivel their heads toward Jonny at the same time, matching questions on their
faces, and it’d be funny if Jonny weren’t so taken aback.

“Erm. Yeah. Sure.”

Ed pops up immediately. “We’ll go. Hey, Cozzers…let’s go see what Tim is up to!”

“I assume he’s hiding from you,” replies Colin. “You know, stalking is considered creepy, Edward. This downward slide into depravity…soon you’ll be stealing his dirty pants, leaving him little gifts at the door…is this the sort of man you’re comfortable with becoming?”

“Yes,” insists Ed, bouncing out of the room.

“Everyone is going to assume I’m your creepy wingman,” Colin grumbles. He gets up, though, and follows Ed. He pauses next to Michael, who looks back at him warily.

“We’re cool now. Just so you know.” Colin nods once, decisively.

“Oh. Thank you?”

“You’re very welcome. But…” Colin leans forward and lowers his voice to whisper, “…don’t think for a second that means you can mess with me or mine. I will straight-up yank the drawstring out of your hoodie.”

Jonny rolls his eyes. Why is Colin so obsessed with consequences, with finality? Is it the typical sober-minded bent of the elder sibling? Or just Colin’s DNA? And what a set of DNA that is to share…

Colin leaves and then it’s just the two of them. Michael looks confused by his own presence, like now that he has Jonny here he doesn’t know what to do with him.

“What did you want, Michael?” He might as well be direct about it.

“I’m not sure, to be honest. I came here on a half-baked hunch.”

“A…hunch.”

“Yeah.” Michael comes closer. “You know, I accused you of being a coward once, didn’t I? I should apologize for that.”

“Okay. Apology accepted.”

“Oh, but I’m not. Apologizing, I mean. So don’t thank me. You actually really are a coward.”

“What have I done this time that has barred me from rising in your esteem?”

“Well, it’s more about what you didn’t do,” clarifies Michael, taking Colin’s vacated seat and lighting a cigarette. He pulls the ashtray closer, settling in. He looks a bit more at ease now; Jonny can only assume because he’s on the familiar ground of being a dick.

“You’ll need to narrow my failures down, I’m afraid,” retorts Jonny. He crosses one long leg over the other and slouches in his own chair. He will play at flippancy as well. It’s as comfortable as a well-worn jumper, after all, and provides an all-too-easy way to maneuver through this
conversation. “Or at least down to what aspects of my character you find so disappointing.”

“You didn’t kiss Thom when he came to you.” Michael draws deeply on his cigarette and watches Jonny carefully through the drifting smoke.

Jonny narrows his eyes. That night…it’s a night he prefers to not think about, if it’s all the same. That night was a brutal, final practical joke at Jonny’s expense. But…and this is the odd thing…there’s pride to be found in that memory, isn’t there? Pride in knowing his efforts to push past his feelings for Thom were not proven inadequate. It’s been like working out with weights and not quite knowing if it’s made a difference until faced with something heavy that needs lifting out of the way. And god knows, that night was the heaviest experience of Jonny’s life. But he was able to lift it. He painfully moved it aside, then put a drunk Thom to bed, and at some point realised it had been the last obstacle of this journey. He has moved on.

He doesn’t need stolen black dogs anymore.

But Michael is looking for a response, so he says coolly, not making a question of it, “He told you about that.”

“Well, yes, but he thought you’d told me first.”

“Why would he ever think I’d tell you?”

“I wondered the same thing! It’s like Thom thinks the best of us, or something.”

Michael grins and fuck, Jonny’s own lips want to twitch at the truth of that statement. Thom is convinced of his own fallibility and yet so bloody sure the people he chooses to surround himself with will have faithful souls. Once he has let someone in, his confidence cannot be destroyed no matter how hard one tries. No matter how much one deserves it.

It has always been a particularly annoying trait to witness. Jonny has operated from the other end of the spectrum, flinging people away the moment he sensed they could possibly let him down. He couldn’t have said if he or Thom had the better deal of it, however.

But he has to admit that Thom’s approach hasn’t actually ever failed. Maybe he can sense the right people to let into his inner circle? His risk has been rewarded, time and time again.

_Present company excluded of course_, thinks Jonny as he looks darkly at Michael.

“He was wasted and didn’t know what he was even doing. And even if he had, he was with you. I’m no poacher, Michael. I am not that mercenary,” Jonny grumbles, aiming for dignity.


Jonny huffs, and adds, “Even if I was that unprincipled, I still wouldn’t have allowed him to do something he would have so regretted come morning. I actually am trying to do right by him, you know. But it doesn’t matter. Because—and I suppose I have you to thank for this—I have moved on. I’ll be honest and admit I was gutted when he started seeing you. I’ll also admit, god knows why, that you were right in the things you said. So I chose to move on, for my sake as well as his. And I wasn’t going to let him cock-up all that work because he was on a drunken, horny lark.”

Michael nods. “I believe you. And those are all very logical, responsible reasons.”
"Well, thank you."

"They’re also bullshit reasons, of course. What has been stopping you every moment since he showed any interest from taking your shot? Or, as it seems to be such a sticking point for your delicate conscience, since the moment you discovered he’d left me? That’s why you’re the second biggest damn coward I’ve ever encountered."

Jonny startles at that. He’d not known Thom had left Michael. He’d only found out they had called an end to it when Colin informed him, apparently after every-bloody-one else already knew. He always found out things last. He’d assumed it was Michael’s choice because, after all, he’d already decided that was the only way it could possibly go.

He pulls himself back into the conversation and retorts, “Am I supposed to ask you what lucky sod has the number one spot?”

“Sure. If you like.” He waits.

Oh for bloody…fine.

“So who is the—“

“Myself, darling.” Michael smiles. “Of course.”

“What do you want?” As always, talking with Michael is leaving him exhausted.

“I don’t want anything from you. I think I just came here to give the universe and its plans the middle finger.”

“What does that even mean, must you always talk in stupid riddles…are you saying I have a chance?”

“No.”

“Then…then why…”

“You’re asking me to tell you—promise you—that everything would have been okay if you had gone to him. You’re asking me,” Michael smiles wryly as if at a private joke, “to give you the capital-A Answer. And I’ve decided I’m gonna stop pretending to be that guy, okay? I don’t know what Thom would have done. He might have laughed it off, he might have started avoiding you out of discomfort, or he might have decided he didn’t want you and your icky unprofessional feelings in the band. You’ll never know because you never had the balls to try. And that sucks, because I do know that there is no knowledge that is not power.”

"Ralph Waldo Emerson said that, not you.”

“See? And having that knowledge and being able to use it to point out that I’m sitting here plagiarizing Mister Emerson…don’t you feel powerful now?” Michael grins like a shark but quickly grows serious again, his eyes shrewd. “All I can say is…he’s worth it. He’s worth the risk. You’ll never have a better opportunity than now, if you were to decide that you’re not quite as moved on from him as you have convinced yourself. Life has a knack for forcing you along the current of its whims. It’ll move him along, too, and maybe in a different direction.”
Michael holds his hands up, making them into palm-to-palm mirror images of each other, with only the slightest distance separating them. He suddenly slides them away from each other, at different angles. An illustration to his point.

“Why are you telling me this? Why would you want to help me?” Jonny is turning everything Michael has just said over in his mind, quickly looking for any cracks that will mark it as fake, as a trick meant to harm him in some way. A puzzle box with a snake hidden at its heart.

“Let’s say it’s because changing oneself is not an overnight process, it’s boring and a pain, and I’m still kinda into the whole admired mentor kink.”

“I don’t admire you. I don’t want a mentor. I wouldn’t want to have anyone want that from me, either. I wouldn’t allow it.”

Michael crushes his cigarette into the ashtray with a forceful jab, sending sparks and ashes flying. He sweeps them from his arm in quick, annoyed gestures. Jonny has the impression it’s not the ashes he’s frustrated with. “That’s why maybe you’d be good for each other. Better for each other than he and I could have ever been, at least.”

Jonny has no response to that so just stares at Michael.

Michael stares back, and after a pause, asks, “Who is Thom Yorke?”

“What?”

“It’s not a trick question. Who is Thom Yorke?”

_Thom is a missing piece that I need to get the spark. He’s the copper wiring that brings out things in me that are always there hidden away. The inner child, the descriptive unconscious, the repressed id. Yes, id is the best way to put it…Thom is the unadulterated id of the group in any scenario we are thrown into. But beyond that, he’s…he’s…_

“He’s my best mate.”

Michael smirks, and fidgets with his lighter. Jonny watches as he flicks the metal cap of the Zippo open and closed, open and closed. He appears to be thinking Jonny’s declaration over.

Finally, he says, “A last bit of advice? Not advice, even. I’m not doing that, remember? More of just an observation. Contrary to what they’ll tell you, love does not make the world spin ’round. You can want someone, want them until you’re raw. That kind of longing can turn you into water after a live wire has been thrown into it. I think you know exactly what I mean.”

“No, I bloody well don’t. I don’t know what I’m supposed to take away from that.” Jonny doesn’t even care if he’s failing to hide his frustration at this point. “From any of this!”

“Oh, absolutely _nothing._” Michael dismissively waves away Jonny’s irritation. “You’re not supposed to do a damn thing. The only thing you’re _meant_ to do is get your stuff together and get on the bus and show up in Connecticut. Play the people a good show tomorrow night. The universe will take care of itself; it has so far, right? Whatever will be, will be. _Que será, será._ I bet you don’t know who first said _that_, smarty pants.”
Michael stands up, brushing the last errant ashes from his lap.

“Anyway. I can’t think of anything else I want to say to you,” Michael declares. “You’ve made your stance perfectly clear. The choice to move on...and it's sound. Can't argue that, I suppose. I wish you the very best of luck in all your other future endeavors, however. I genuinely mean that.”

“Michael.”

“Yeah?”

There’s something he wants to say now. He will be clear, even if Michael insists on vague nonsense.

“You didn’t deserve him.”

Michael rewards that statement with a smile Jonny has never received from him before, leaving Jonny uncomfortable with the realisation that there’s a little part of himself that wants to make Michael smile at him like that again.

“No, I didn’t,” Michael finally responds, genuinely pleased. “But I still had him, all the same. I suppose it's for the best that you're over him because if you were lucky enough to find yourself in a similar position, you’d have had to deal with the fact that I still exist there, somewhere in his skin. I always will.”

He raises a hand over his head in farewell and saunters out; Michael Stipe always knows when to make his exit.

“That man,” Jonny says to the empty room, unwilling admiration thick in his voice, “is such an utter cunt.”

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Thom plods across the carpark, feeling like he must be nearly bent double under his backpack. There’s no way all this shit weighing him down is stuff Thom bought.

Tonight they’re leaving Pennsylvania behind, and tomorrow is Connecticut and their last show with R.E.M. How has this summer slipped by so fast? It felt endless in the living of it, but now it’s nearly October. Thom’s due for a birthday. Does it matter that it was the worst summer ever if it contained some of the best moments of his life?

He’s exhausted. He’s ready to climb into his little berth and sleep.
“Thom! Wait up!”

Thom growls but shuffles around, feeling like a turtle. “C’mon, they’re not going to leave us. You’re worse than me about the bus.”

Thom’s usually one of the first on board; his unexpected conversation with Michael had left him running behind. Come to think about it, Jonny’s usually on the bus early as well.

“I need to talk to you,” he huffs, catching up with Thom.

“Then come on, let’s get on board.”

Jonny balks. “No, I need to talk to you now.”

Thom sighs. “No, you really don’t. Come on, this backpack weighs a bloody ton. I know you sneak your stuff in it.”

“No, you’re just a shopaholic, Thom,” Jonny says distractedly, and then, more insistently: “I can’t talk to you on the bus, not with the others there.”

“Then tell me whatever it is in the morning!”

“Please, Thom.”

“Are you dying of some rare disease only Victorians ever got? Did you find an alarming, cataclysmic amount of hair in your brush after your nightly one-hundred strokes? Has Colin finally admitted that you were adopted? Did Tim give you the spanking you so rightfully deserve at long last?”

Jonny just mutely shakes his head.

“Then can we please just get on the fucking bus?!” Thom lowers his voice and forces himself to speak more calmly. His exhaustion isn’t Jonny’s fault. “Look, I am completely knackered. It wasn’t the best audience and after the show I…well, I talked to Michael, okay? It went better than expected but I can’t deal with anyone else right now. I just really, really want to collapse and whatever it is, I’ll give you my full attention tomorrow morning if you can’t bear to tell me tonight, okay? I promise.”

Jonny’s hair is hanging down in front of his face, making only the thinned line of his mouth visible. It opens, and after a deep pause he mutters, “...Okay, Thom. Sorry.”

“Fucking hell.” Thom says under his breath, turning back around. The bus engine roars to life; everyone else must be on board and waiting for them. He breaks into a trot, hoping Tim doesn’t lecture him tonight for holding them up. If he hurries Jonny will be the last on board and will get the dressing-down.

But suddenly there’s a force gripping his backpack, and then it’s pulling him backwards and spinning him around. “What the—”

Jonny grabs him by his upper arms and holds him in place. “I’m not letting you go unless you promise to stay put for…for the time it’ll take me to say my piece, okay?”
“Jonny—“

“**SHUT UP** and listen! You *don’t understand!* If I get on that bus I will *never* tell you. I’ll sit there and think about it and maybe I’ll fall asleep and maybe I won’t, but either way when the morning comes I will have come up with fifty bloody reasons why I can’t tell you and so I won’t. There have always been endless reasons and there always *will* be and I never, *ever* will have the guts to do this again. So will you please, *please* just shut up and *let me say what I need to!*”

Despite his claim he'd do otherwise, Jonny releases Thom and steps back. He shoves both hands into his hair, pushing it back from his face. His arms and elbows jut out, tense and shaking, and his face is pale but for two livid patches raked high across his cheekbones. He looks ill. He looks like Thom’s panic attacks *feel.*

This is ridiculous. Thom does not have the energy right now for whatever existential drama Jonny wants an audience to. He’s getting on the bus and if Jonny tries to stop him again Thom guesses he’ll just have to beat him to death with his great bloody big backpack, won’t he?

But he doesn’t walk away. He, for absolutely no good reason that he can discern, just stands there and looks silently at Jonny.

“I’m really going to do this. Oh god.”

“Do what?”

“I’m going to ruin *everything,*” Jonny shoots back, fear and wonder making his voice sound much younger than it is.

“Might as well get on with it, then. Ed’s getting restless,” Thom jokes weakly, with the uneasy realisation he wants to stall Jonny. He’s abruptly nervous now he’s had a good look at Jonny’s face and has a foreboding that if Jonny would only change his mind and walk away, everything—whatever *everything* means in this case—might remain unchanged and familiar. Thom doesn’t know how he knows that, but he *does.*

Jonny glances in the direction of the bus, where Ed is pressing the circle of his face against a darkened window. It’s hard to tell from this distance but it appears he’s making rude faces at them.

“This is not how I imagined this,” Jonny says quietly, as if to himself. “I’ve played this moment in my head a million times, in an endless parade of scenarios. Not once did I ever see it happening in a hotel carpark next to the rubbish skips…with you looking at me like I’m about to do something terrible, and…and Ed pulling faces.”

“Well, he’s not now,” Thom counters. He watches Ed's shadowy bulk shift in the window, to be replaced by a sudden paleness. “Now he’s rubbing his bare arse against the window,” he says, helpfully, in case Jonny's eyesight is suddenly failing him.

Jonny's responding sigh is a cross between put-upon and sad. “Yes. I…I can see. I didn’t note *that* being part of the scenery when I’ve imagined this, either.”

Thom turns back reluctantly, Ed's arse no longer an excuse to look away from Jonny and make light of whatever is happening here.
He tries to peer at Jonny, but Jonny runs his hands down his face and lets them cover his expression. He presses his long fingers into the corners of his eyes. He is the one stalling now, and if Thom makes another crack or even just takes a step away from him, this moment will shatter and be lost.

Thom shifts foot to foot, unsure. Tempted.

_You are completely ridiculous, Thom, but don’t let it concern you._ The memory of Jonny in Tel Aviv, mild in his distraction as he sipped his tea, surfaces.

Thom has let a lot of things about Jonny Greenwood not concern him over the years, and at Jonny’s own insistence. It’s been easy, hasn’t it? So easy to just step back and knock these little moments away, the two of them working in tandem to keep the playing field clear. But the moments are _never_ actually deflected away to shatter, are they? They’ve clung like burrs, each one adding just enough weight that they’ve been reduced to delicately balancing a creaking tower that’s getting impossible to ignore, and unbearable to carry.

Thom’s exhausted from that weight, he is realising. It’s heavier than his backpack could ever be, and with no clear way to set it down.

Maybe it’s profoundly easier to take a step _forward_ and ask, timid but resolute, “Imagined _what_ , Jonny?”

Jonny finally drops his hands and looks at him. He _looks_ at him. In a way he never has before. Or, at least not in a way Thom has ever been allowed to notice, he realises. Because Thom suddenly _knows_ , he knows what Jonny is going to say and Thom's entire understanding of his world, of his _reality_ , is suddenly and simply...shattered.

“Imagined the moment when I told you I loved you.” Jonny’s voice is small, robbed of inflection.

They stare at each other, neither saying a word. The sound of crickets in the fields beyond the parking lot—or cicadas, maybe, he doesn’t know the difference—is suddenly loud in Thom’s ears. The smell of the pavement, a combination of dirt and old fuel, fills his nose. The sight of the sodium lights washing over Jonny’s hair and reflecting eerily from his eyes feels crisp in a way reality almost _never_ is.

This might be another one of those moments that Thom’s Mum had told him about. The magical and rare moments the universe only grudgingly parcels out. That’s why everything has slowed down so helpfully; it’s so he can imprint each detail in his mind. _Two_ of these moments in one year: Imagine that.

_You’re going to want to remember this one_ , his brain verifies. _This one the whole of the universe has been trying to keep from you, maybe. Record every detail down like you can’t afford to miss a scrap of it. His shoulders might be cracking under the weight of his admission, but he’s still standing in front of you. Look at how he’s planted his feet. See the way he’s moving his hands over his thighs, that nervous habit of his? Watch him weave the shattered pieces of your world back together with those hands. Could you watch those hands help you build a future? Yes. Those hands helped you build a band, after all._

The bus honks at them, impatient.

Jonny startles back to reality, the spell broken. He smiles at Thom sadly. “Well, then. Well. Now
you know, I guess. I’ve loved you…oh, for years and years now, on and off, but always coming back ’round to on. And I still do, but it's different now. You need to understand that, before anything else, okay? So there's no misunderstandings.”

Thom is too busy standing there like a gormless wonder to respond. But that’s fine, because Jonny is still talking, now looking down at his feet.

“I didn’t think I could handle having you know. It would have changed things…maybe not now, but when we were younger? You can’t tell me it wouldn’t have.” Jonny sighs. “I learned to hide it, and then it just became old hat. And it was pointless to tell you as nothing could come from it. It had always been…the most impractical of daydreams.”

_I thought you didn’t even like me, a lot of the time_, Thom marvels. _I thought you found me barely tolerable._

“Not that I expect anything to come of it now that I’ve finally told you. This changes nothing, so don't freak out. But I had a little chat with Michael tonight, too, and...well…” Jonny trails off.

“What did he say?” Thom manages to prompt, his mouth dry and unwilling.

“That I was a coward. It’s true. He taunted me. I got angry once he’d left, so angry, all that self-satisfied swagger of his got to me and,” Jonny holds his hands out wide, indicating his own presence, “here I am. What did he say to you?”

Thom barks out a rough approximation of laughter and doesn’t answer.

_What about Jonny?_

That bastard knew, didn’t he? He had figured out Jonny’s secret. And he’d seen—or at least had correctly divined—Thom’s feelings for Jonny as well. All that history clouding the truth, until Michael came along and with his fresh eyes knew exactly what he was looking at. That clever, sneaky bastard.

But then, Thom had realised that Jonny hadn’t told Michael shit about the night of their ill-fated kiss. He’d played along with Michael’s ruse, even though he’d seen through it for what it was, because…well….

He can’t say why. He honestly doesn’t know. It felt right, at the time.

The bus sounds its horn again, in three quick taps.

“We should go. We should get on the bus. Before much longer Tim will be out here, I reckon.” Jonny can’t seem to still his mouth and he continues on, mumbling. “You know now. That’s…that’s why I couldn’t let you kiss me. I’ve moved on, I truly have, but I can't live with the secret of it anymore. The weight of it. And it's such an absurd secret to keep at this point, isn't it? So I decided I needed to finally tell you. I realised I was more mad at myself than at Michael...”

Why does Jonny sound so sad? So sad, but also settled, like discussing the end of a tragic movie they’ve just left the cinema from. A melancholy story where the lovers didn't find each other and, instead, found only a pale shade of peace. What's the word Thom wants, what is it? Catharsis? Is that what this is for Jonny, is this...
Jonny turns toward the bus.

...Oh. *Oh.*

Thom is a frozen effigy, staring blankly. And he realises Jonny is done here. *Fuck.*

Jonny starts to walk away.

“Michael said I was going to kiss someone else someday,” Thom blurts out, “and he didn’t say it, but he meant you.”

Jonny stops, his back to Thom.

“And…and he’s right.” Thom continues, suddenly nervous that he’s misconstrued Jonny’s words, or rather the meaning behind them. Didn’t he just say he’s moved on from Thom, after all? *Catharsis.*

Jonny’s body is as tense as a deer’s, and as ready to bolt. Thom wants to lay a hand on the centre of that back in comfort. With Jonny, he wants to give as well as take.

But Jonny’s admission isn’t an attempt to make something more of their friendship. It's not a grand gesture at all, just an admission. He's *said* he's trying to unsnarl himself from something he has no desire to pursue for any number of practical reasons and is simply telling the truth to shame the devil. To free himself finally and completely from Thom. *Catharsis, catharsis, catharsis.* Now that he has found the word, it's an intrusive loop in his brain.

Thom stutters, “I mean, if that’s what you wanted, if you had any, um, interest still? You don't though, do you. You just said that. Shit. I mean…shit, I’m sorry Jonny. I…I…”

“Thom…what are you saying?” Jonny finally turns around and when his eyes—wary and glittering—find Thom’s, Thom immediately finds his voice again.

But then, he always finds his confidence when Jonny is watching him put his soul on display, doesn’t he?

“Jonny, I’m saying I’m an idiot and it might take me a while to get there but I got there in the end, okay? I *didn’t* think about you when we were kids. You were just Colin’s little brother. I *didn’t* think about you when we were teenagers because you became Colin's *annoying* little brother. And I *didn’t* think about you after I left for university because I barely even saw you on holidays home, let alone thought about you. I *didn’t* think about you when you dropped out of uni and we moved into that horrid house, because I was too busy DJing clubs and getting our band going and trying to talk girls into bed. And I haven’t thought about you in the past few years, either. I *didn't think about you.* The possibility didn’t even begin to cross my mind.”

“Oh.”

“Until it *did*…because somehow you crawled under my skin and you’ve a home here now. And it took me forever but I finally understood, and since that moment I’ve been thinking about you, okay? You’re the only thing I *can* think about. It's not that I can't live without you; it's that I don't *want* to. You’re my best mate. You’re my best…everything. So unless you’re being a complete toser and this is all a bloody joke—"
“—it’s not—”

“—you need to understand that you have me, if you want me. I’m here. Even if you’ve moved on…just say the word, just say that there's the smallest chance and I’ll stay here, waiting, as long as you need me to.”

Thom runs out of things to say as he realises from Jonny's dumbstruck expression that he has definitely miscalculated the implications of Jonny's admission. So he braces himself for Jonny's words. They'll be gentle and measured. And they'll firmly push Thom down and away. Because this isn't about Thom, is it? It's about Jonny, and what he needs to do to reach catharsis. Thom can do this. He can accept this let down. He can do this because it's for Jonny, he must, keep it together Yorke—

“Oh, FUCK what I said about moving on, I’m completely full of shit, you know that!” Jonny exclaims, his voice destroyed. “I want you! I want you.”

"Wait...what? You do?!”

"Yes!” Jonny still insists.

“Thank god…” Thom exhaled the breath he didn’t realise he was holding.

Jonny licks his lips and after a couple false starts says, laughing shakily, “I have no idea what I’m supposed to do now.”

“Well, in all those great imaginings, what happened next? After you,” Thom can’t keep the giddy grin off his face as he teases, “went and got all soppy on me.”

“I’d really rather not say,” Jonny retorts with a grin to equal Thom’s. “But…but I didn’t plan this far! I was going to tell you and you were supposed to laugh at me and walk away and we’d never talk of it again!”

“As usual, I’ve gone and cocked up everything. Cheers.”

“That you have.” Jonny’s face does a thing, jerks with an uncontrolled little twitch, and if he starts to tear up Thom will be a goner, too.

Thom thinks carefully about it, and says, “You need to ask me on a date, I reckon.”

“A…date.”

“Well, yeah. I’m not a cheap tart.” Thom crosses his arms.

If his crossed arms are hiding how his hands are starting to shake, all the better. He wants to reach out for Jonny’s hand but he’s scared that when their fingers touch the hotel behind them will collapse into nothing. A tree will burst into flame in some black forest in Germany. A bird in Peru will discover a new note to sing in, one that didn’t exist before that moment. Because in what universe does he get to have Jonny Greenwood standing in front of him with that look on his face? There’s surely been a glitch.

“Okay,” Jonny says slowly. “Can I take you on a date? I suppose we could go to breakfast tomorrow. A breakfast date? Is that a thing?”
“No, no, that’s not what I want.”

“Oh. Well, tomorrow night there’s going to be a big party though, since it’s our last night and all…” Jonny says, unsure.

Thom snorts. “We’re not missing that. What would we do in Connecticut, anyway?”

“Well, I don’t know!” Jonny wrinkles his nose, annoyance flashing across his face. “Go…go bowling, or whatever it is Americans do in places like that.”

“Ask me out on a date in a couple of days, when we’re in New York City.”

“Oh my god, why don’t you just ask me out, if you’re going to be so specific and demanding about it, then.”

“That’s not how this works. Jesus, Jon-Jon, you have to ask me out and then take me to New York City. And make it good.”

“No, the plan was to take you on a bad date.”

“You didn’t even have a bloody plan! Take me to Central Park.”

“You’re impossible. I’ve changed my mind. I don’t want to go out with you.”

“And I want dinner.”

“No. You’ve taken all the passion out of it.”

“They have those horse carriages…”

“You’re going to climb a tree if I take you to Central Park. You’ll climb a tree and most likely get stuck, and I’ll have to ring up the fire department to get you back down. Tim will beat me up if I lose you up a tree. And you’re scared of horses, you git.”

“So it’s a date?”

“Yeah. It’s a date.”

“Okay, then.”

“Okay.”

They are both breathing hard, like they’ve run endless miles to meet face-to-face at this spot in the middle of an interminable hotel carpark.

In a way, maybe they have.

Ed’s window on the bus slides down and he leans out to yell, “GET YOUR ARSES ON THE BUS ALREADY, STOP DISRESPECTING TIM!”

The bus chooses that moment to jolt into motion, making Ed lose his balance and slide from view.
It slowly starts to roll across the pavement.

Thom and Jonny shoot a final look at each other and are suddenly laughing, running as fast as they can, side by side.

They catch up to the bus and Jonny pounds on the glass of the door. The bus stops with a mechanical grunt and the thing pops open. The driver stares down at them, bushy and grumpy.

“Did you get enough cookies for all of us?”

They’re laughing even harder now, as they tumble up the steps. The door wheezes shut behind them, and the bus pulls out onto the freeway.

Chapter End Notes

"It's a very good idea," nods Thom. "It's not the idea I'm arguing with. The idea, in itself, is fine."

After a couple weeks of unseasonably warm weather, the temperature had dropped overnight as they made their way towards Hartford, forcing Thom into his new furry black coat (a purchase not at all influenced by the similar one Michael had been sporting in Europe, shut your gob, Ed) as soon as they had disembarked. He’d returned from his lunch with Michael—the air reassuringly pleasant if a little formal between them, all in good time being Michael’s response when Thom had commented on it—to find Colin waiting for him, bursting with the news that R.E.M. had issued a warning to expect some sort of practical joke tonight during the show.

So Thom is sitting on the luggage trolley outside of their hotel and pondering with Colin, who is crouched in front of him, what is to be done about the situation. A bow-tied porter hovers in the background, as if unsure whether to move Thom along or just ask him which room he’d like to be wheeled to.

A journalist from Melody Maker has attached himself to Radiohead for the day, and is standing at the ready, watching them debate a plan of retributive action.

"My question," continues Thom, at pains to sound reasonable with the eyes of the journalist on him, "is where the fucking hell we're going to find five hundred ping-pong balls in this fucking place on a Sunday afternoon."

Colin nods in concession to his point. "Mike told us not to wear anything we might want to wear again."

"Paint," speculates Thom, gloomily. "It'll be paint. Or custard pies. Oh, god."

“Do make sure to wear that coat, then,” Colin advises.

"We'll just have to think of something else," says Thom pensively, and chews on a thumbnail. Colin’s dodgy idea was to get the crew in the lighting gantries to drop ping-pong balls on R.E.M. during their last song. It smacks of last minute desperation, but Thom’s not come up with anything
better.

Tim lopes out of the lobby doors, the rest of the band in tow.

“You guys ready?”

Jonny is standing behind him, and smiles at Thom over his shoulder.

Thom smiles back, snuggling deeper into his coat.

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In Radiohead’s dressing room, Thom is bent over a piece of paper to be secreted among the sheets on Stipe’s lyric stand. He draws a smiley face, and the caption, "Thanks for having us, you’ve been brilliant."

He pauses, considering. He leans back down and adds, “Love, Radiohead.”

He wanders back to the group clustered together on the couches and learns a Plan B has been hatched. The idea now is that, as R.E.M. close their show, Radiohead will take flight across their backdrop, suspended from harnesses.

Thom is skeptical. He could pull it off, he took gymnastics as a kid after all, but Colin would immediately flip himself upside down, get stuck, and then throw up.

Perhaps imagining that very same nightmare scenario, Jonny informs them that he won’t be part of anything that sounds like it’s more of a joke on them than on R.E.M. He takes to trying to talk the reporter into pretending to be him on the phone with a local radio station.

"Go on," he goads. "It's easy. How are you finding touring with R.E.M.? Do you feel under pressure to follow the success of 'Creep'?"

Thom snorts, and is rewarded with a smirk that, even though Jonny’s looking at the reporter, is meant for him.

Tim pops in and when he’s told of their plan at playing acrobats, he looks Ed in the eyes and tightly states, “No, definitely not.”

“Why do you assume it was my idea?”

Tim just shoots him a beleaguered look as he leaves.
“You know,” Ed remarks to Colin, “I think Tim’s new status as tour manager has gone to his head.”

The reporter pipes up, extricating himself from Jonny’s clutches, to say that he had thought Tim had been with them for years at this point, since before they were even officially Radiohead?

“Well, yes,” admits Ed. “But we just felt bad for the bloke and let him have his fancies. It all started when he showed up insisting on driving us around in a van to our gigs so we just went with it. We’ve recently decided we might as well recognise the damage is done and just accept the situation for what it is.”

Writing furiously on his notepad, the journalist doesn’t see Ed’s enormous grin and Colin rolling his eyes at the man’s gullibility.

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In the end, they opt to not play any prank on R.E.M., and instead just take to the stage and perform a solid set. Thom attempts to find ways to make this show different, tries looking for something he can latch onto. He doesn’t want to lose it in the snarled passages of his memory where most gigs blur together. The venue’s as generic as they come, however, so he’s going to just take it on faith that the inherent importance of it being their last shared show will be enough to pin it down in his mind.

When the last notes of the last song finish drifting across the crowd, there’s some commotion at the side of the stage. R.E.M. are coming out to join them; they really are going to mash them with custard. Thom has a split second to decide if he’ll be a good sport about it before he realises they’re not carrying pie tins.

They’re carrying bottles of champagne.

Bill Berry approaches, double-fisting multiple empty flutes. He’s wearing a purple Radiohead tour t-shirt. Thom takes the proffered glass, grinning like a madman, and he doesn’t stop when Michael comes at him with an opened bottle. With one of those immutable smiles of his, he splashes a goodly amount into Thom’s glass.

Thom bursts out laughing and launches himself at Michael, who does his best to wrap his free arm around Thom.

They remain like that, ignoring the crowd in front of them that cheers at having R.E.M. make an early appearance on the stage. Michael doesn’t force an end to the hug, letting Thom draw it out.
He just holds him close with one firm hand.

His other hand is clutching a bottle of the same overpriced swill Thom had gifted him in Berlin, on a night that feels now like a lucid dream.

“It tastes like piss,” Michael whispers into his ear. “But hopefully sweet piss, since it’s from me.”

Thom huffs wet laughter against his neck. And if he’s crying just the littlest bit, he can’t be bothered to care.

“Thank you,” he says to Michael, and then repeats himself, unable to stop, because sometimes when there’s too much to say, more than you can ever express, you keep it simple.

“Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.”

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“I’m in New York City, Mum. Well, we’re on the bus driving in. We’ve just come through the tunnel.”

Thom can just barely catch the teeny squeak of a muffled response from the phone cradled up to Tim’s ear.

“Everything is fine. It’s been a pretty standard trip thus far; nothing out of the ordinary.”

Thom shakes his head, delighted, and mouths at his own faint reflection in the bus window: Fucking liar.

“Yes, yes, Thom’s been fine, too. He’s not scheduled to throw a wobbly for at least another week, I’d say.”

Thom twists around backwards in his seat and kneels up so that he can lean over the back of it, and indignantly signs at Tim:

I can hear you, you know. I’m sitting right here.

Why is it just assumed he’s going to throw a fit? And...on schedule? Does Tim keep a calendar with dates marked? Have arcane maths been used to divine when a breaking point might be expected? Is the moon involved in some way? Was Ed consulted for the more occult bits?
I’m offended, he signs. He thumps back down in his seat. Jonny is eyeing him with cool amusement so Thom flips him off.

He isn’t going to refrain from flipping Jonny off just because they’ve a date planned, after all.

This is how it is now, he thinks happily.

Behind him, Tim pushes on.

“No…no, Mum. Look, you need to drop it. I’m…I’m not going to take those business courses. I’m thirty-three; this is it, Mum.”

The bus creaks on, every one of them now silently listening in on Tim’s side of the conversation.

“I know that…yeah, but you see…that’s not how it is. Yes, I’m aware of that.”

Blimey, but Tim’s mum has opinions.

“I’m listening…but…no, it’s not…I didn’t settle! It’s not like that.”

Thom thinks about popping back around and signing something supportive at Tim but decides that’d be inappropriate. This is a private conversation…well, a bus-private conversation, at least.

Tim listens silently to the other end of the line and sighs, low and long.

“Because it’s my life. It’s the life I’ve chosen…and it’s where I’m meant to be. Here with Radiohead. Mum, you’re just going to have to accept that, because I can’t think of a single bloody thing I’d rather be doing.”

There’s a steadiness that’s come into Tim’s voice, a thin edge of that spectacular steel they so rarely get to see. Thom can’t help it; when Tim says his goodbyes—which happen quickly after that—Thom clambers back up over the seat and makes his hands say:

That’s a good man, Tim. We love you, too.

“Oh, do shut up,” Tim mutters, but he looks sheepishly pleased, all the same.

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“The thing they don’t tell you about touring is the number of tragic obscenities you’ll see visited
upon perfectly good cheese,” Colin sighs, leaning back from the sad cheese tray in front of him.

He’s not talking to anyone; he doesn’t particularly need an audience to keep up a running commentary. Maybe he’s directing his comments to the cheese…god knows it’s not been given any attention at all, judging by its deplorable state. They’re in Manhattan—you’d think with a party this swanky they’d be a touch more discerning of what they’re putting out for the glittering throng to nibble.

He turns away from the catering table and sees a woman a few steps away, carefully piling little crab puffs onto a uselessly small napkin balanced on her palm.

Colin’s heart gives a sweet little jolt at the sight…she’s wearing a dress in darkest green, her deep auburn hair, done up in two Björk-like buns, a pleasing contrast. The level of concentration she’s giving the canapés in her hand is usually only afforded to questions of a philosophical bent.

He considers approaching her; she’s alone, or at least there’s no one with her at the present. But… no. Colin is getting discouraged of this game, if he’s to be honest. He’s left feeling a touch more disenfranchised with himself after each failed attempt to make a connection with someone, and it hurts. Maybe just this once he’ll let it go, and enjoy this little stolen glimpse. She most likely has a date around here somewhere, being a girl as lovely as she is…or maybe she doesn’t. Either way, tonight it’s not of Colin’s concern.

She’s very beautiful, though.

“He wondered if she wondered if he were watching her.”

Suddenly the woman’s eyes are rising up to meet his, coolly unconcerned. Shit, he’d actually said that out loud! He really needs to stop doing that; maybe nattering on all the time to himself is making him weird, after all.

Humiliated, he tries to shoot her an apologetic smile, but is pretty sure she just gets his bared teeth. He scoots away, seeking out a familiar face in the afterparty crush. As always, it’s Ed’s he sees first, towering above the crowd like a grinning beacon.

The others are surrounding him because Radiohead have pulled in the ranks as the evening marches on around them. They must simply be eternally drawn to each other, pulled into a private orbit no matter the surrounding chaos or people or situation.

“Cozzers!” Ed slaps him on the back and pulls him into their group, where he belongs. It’s safe to natter here. “Did you find a bar? Phil and Donna said they’d figure out where it was, but I think they’ve completely left, the turncoats.”

“Oh, really? That’s unfortunate.” Colin likes Phil the most when his girlfriend comes to visit on tour. She brings out something expansive in him that he usually hides away. “I got distracted, I never saw the bar.”

Ed’s eyebrows raise, but he’s no longer looking at Colin. Thom and Jonny have stepped closer, but they’re not looking at him, either. Colin turns to see what’s caught everyone’s attention.

The woman he had embarrassed himself in front of is standing a few feet away. Her crab puffs are gone, a jacket now dangling from her hand instead. The enigmatic expression, however, remains.
"Could you hold this?" She says to none of them in particular and holds out her jacket at arm's length, until Ed finally steps forward to take it, good-natured but baffled.

She vanishes back into the crowd. Ed looks down at the velvet blazer in his hand. "I don't know what just happened."

"What always happens," says Jonny. "This one has just decided to stake her claim preemptively. She's probably in the toilets, snorting a crushed up birth-control pill and making sure she didn't accidentally put on her ugliest knickers this morning."

"Oh, look, here she comes again," chirps Thom.

She is heading directly towards them, somehow carrying four cocktails, each one the colour and consistency of a sleet-packed cumulus cloud. Colin glances at Ed, who very nearly looks intimidated as she approaches. He can't blame him. This woman is above even Ed's league. Colin can't even imagine who'd be her equal; surely only some fictional character too good for this world. If it has to be a real person, though, Colin is glad it's to be Ed.

"You're going to have to help me get my arms in the holes of that jacket." It sounds practically obscene the way she says it.

Thom is staring at her in awe, and even Jonny looks casually impressed. She is, Colin thinks as he recalibrates his first impression of her, the most beautiful woman he's ever seen.

"Oh." Ed moves forward to assist her right as she sidesteps into Colin's space and destroys reality as he knows it.

"You will help, won't you? That man has my jacket."

Colin's mouth drops open, and for once in his quarter-century of existence, he can't think of a single thing to say. He simply gapes.

He feels something being shoved into his hand, and then someone bending his fingers to grasp it when he seemingly cannot. Oh. It's her jacket. Right.

"I'll..." Colin swallows. "...do my best."

"I was hoping you'd say that."

Getting her coat on while she juggles the cocktails is like a mathematical story problem come to life. The rest of the guys have clumped up, watching the proceedings from a respectful distance. Jonny is muttering in Thom's ear, speculating that Colin will make her drop one of her delicate cloud-filled glasses. He has a hand gently placed against the jut of Thom's hip as he leans into him to whisper something else. Interesting, but Colin doesn't have the time or means to consider what that signifies right now.

Despite his brother's not completely unfounded prediction, Colin impossibly succeeds; the jacket is finally on, the cocktails still intact.

The woman beams at Colin like he's performed a magic trick for her benefit, and then walks over to the little group watching, her heels clicking briskly, to hand each of them a drink. She brings the last one back to Colin. He takes it, blinking stupidly down into the glass. It's as ethereal and
stormy-looking as he currently feels.

She then asks Colin to turn around. He does, still at a loss for words. Really, at this point he has no other choice but to do anything she may ask of him. She lifts up his shirttail and writes something on the small of his back, the wet dashes of what feels like a marker making him shiver. She vanishes before Colin can even turn around again.

Thom has already scurried over to take her place, shoving the back of his shirt up roughly. "Oh my god, Cozzie. Did you see that?"

"I don't know," he says faintly. "What's it say?"

"'I reside in London and am in NYC on business. Please call me at your earliest convenience. I will be shattered if you do not. I like your sad eyes. I like that you quoted Raymond Carver.' She signed it Emma. Her name's Emma. There's a phone number, too. For her mobile, it says."

Colin feels a frantic rush of adrenaline yank his floating brain back down into his body with what feels like must surely be an audible snap. "Well, hurry up! Write it down on something before it rubs away!"

"Hold on, hold on…." Thom shoves a napkin at Colin, a phone number carefully scrawled out in his neatest handwriting. He’s drawn an alien face under the number, lest Colin dare mistake him as taking any of this seriously for even one second.

Oh my god. What does he do with this? Does he call her tomorrow? No, standard operating procedures say three days. You wait three days to call so you don’t seem too needy. Okay. He can wait that long. They’ll be far beyond New York City by then, they leave the day after tomorrow, but Colin thinks tradition is best here. And if they hit it off on the phone, she lives in London. London is just a train ride away, after all.

She was so beautiful. She knows Raymond Carver. Her name is Emma.

Colin waves away his bandmates and goes out on a balcony to smoke; he can’t handle the crowd right now.

He thinks about the word sublime. How it doesn’t really mean elevated and lofty, but rather, an untamable force of nature possessing the power and grandeur to induce awe and veneration in the mind of the beholder. Although less than divine, something sublime contains a wildness and power that transcends human ability to control…or even to comprehend. Something to bring a person to their knees in awe and terror.

Jonny steps through the towering glass doors and joins him at the railing. “Working out your game plan?”

“Me? A game plan? I have no need of such frivolity.”

“Right, right,” agrees Jonny, easily. “Want some advice from your baby brother?”

“Always.”

“Why the fuck are you still here? Go back to the hotel right now and call that girl up and make some plans for tomorrow.”
“That’s a bit desperate.”

Jonny sighs and turns his back to the railing to lean against it, staring blankly back into the raucous party happening on the other side of the glass.

But he’s smiling, and Colin realises his gaze is not so blank after all. He follows Jonny’s eyes and sees Thom gesturing wildly to a couple people. Thom has that frenetic, rare happiness that means he’ll probably come looking to cadge a cigarette from Colin if he drinks enough tonight.


“It’s…well…” Jonny shrugs, shy and blushing. “…we’re in negotiations.”

Colin bursts out laughing.

“Oh, fuck you too, then.” But Jonny is laughing, as well. “I’m going back inside, it’s cold out here. Enjoy your grotty nicotine habit.”

“More stipulations to hammer out, eh?”

“Something like that,” Jonny pauses with a hand on the door handle. He appraises Colin and asks, “D’you reckon that woman was different? Was she special?”

“How could I possibly know that yet? She’s only just accosted me the once.”

“If you say so.” Jonny glances through the glass door again. “Just…don’t wait too long if you think she might be, okay? If you’re scared of taking a chance and then cocking it up…take it anyway. Take the risk or lose the chance.”

“Thank you, Jonathan,” Colin retorts, making it clear with his tone that he has this well in hand, thank you all the same.

Jonny raises an eyebrow and gives him that please don’t waste my time look. “Well, I trust you know best. We Greenwoods generally do, don’t we?”

He slides the glass door shut behind himself and gives Colin one last pointed smirk from the other side before slipping into the crowd.

“But we don’t,” Colin complains to the empty balcony, “do we? We’re really rather shite at it, for all of our pretensions.”

He sees Jonny reach Thom’s little group and watches his brother place a hand on Thom’s shoulder as he leans in to say something to a woman. Colin sees how Thom presses back into that hand and shines.

Colin drops his cigarette and crushes it beneath a heel that’s already moving towards the door. He pushes past people, ignores his name being called, and by the time he reaches the lifts he’s running.

There are cabs helpfully waiting outside and as he sits in the back of one, willing it to deliver him to his hotel—and the telephone within—faster, he reaches into his pocket to clutch the ink-marked
napkin there like it might decide to vanish from between his fingers.

There’s an endless array of girls in the world, and sometimes when he’s feeling jaded Colin thinks he’s probably laid eyes on nearly all of them. Some have had auburn hair, and others were wearing green dresses, and many had clever eyes.

Jonny was right.

She hadn’t been just another girl.

How could she be?

She’d held his future in her smile.

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"I feel so small," Thom murmurs.

"You are," Jonny says, just an edge of teasing to it.

"Prat," he says with exaggerated haughtiness. He squeezes Jonny's fingers. "No. I mean here, in this city."

Jonny hums in acknowledgement as they both look out across Central Park from their perch on the Umpire Rock. Jonny had told him it was four hundred million years old. Thom had replied that they filmed a scene from The Fisher King here, which is more interesting.

Lights are coming on in the many windows of the skyscrapers lining the park; the city is on the knife’s edge of dusk.

Jonny looks down at where his hand is wrapped around Thom’s. They’ve limited themselves to the briefest of touches over the last couple of days out of necessity, their eyes doing most of the work.

But every rare brush of Thom’s hand has felt like he's writing a sonata on Jonny’s skin. And now, with no workaday distractions keeping them at a distance from one another, Jonny has discovered a finished symphony trapped between their palms.

“You look distracted,” Jonny eventually says, observing the thoughtful look on Thom’s face.

“I’m not. I’m just glad. Wondering at how I got here, I guess. How I’d have thought this would
feel weird, you holding my hand, but it doesn’t. Wondering, why me? Why me of all people?”

Jonny peers at him through the rapidly fading light, and says, simply, “It just is.”

“I feel safe with you, as safe as I’ve ever felt, at least.” Thom shyly rubs his thumb over Jonny’s knuckles. “I know that’s a laugh…I never feel safe, really. But you’re the closest I get, is what I’m trying to say. Like you’re a timeout from anything the universe can throw at me.”

*Maybe when we say love, we mean a safe place to fall apart,* Jonny thinks.

All the other tourists that had been clambering over the rocks when they arrived earlier have vanished, off to get dinner most likely. Only a few remain, all ensconced in the middle of their own private worlds.

Thom continues, saying, “Do you believe in signs from the universe? I know it’s daft, but I reckon that maybe I do. Don’t tell Ed, he’ll start lending me those weird books of his. I’m not saying I believe in predestination, just that maybe there’s nudges here and there. *Maybe.* And some are helpful, but some are meant to be fought against.”

Jonny thinks about it, and concludes, “I know there may be universes out there where I made different choices and they led me somewhere else, led me to someone else. And my heart breaks for every single version of me that didn’t get this chance to end up with you.”

And then what feels like every smile Thom has ever smiled is suddenly pressed against his teeth, and Jonny tries to capture all of that happiness with his tongue. He gently traps Thom’s face between his hands, his flushed skin warming Jonny’s chilled fingertips. They kiss, and it’s not elegant, and there’re bashed noses, and Thom’s a little sniffly from the cold.

And it’s better than *any* of the endlessly imagined kisses Jonny has ever shared with Thom.

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“Stanley sent me these books on how to make websites. There’s this whole language, it’s mad, and he somehow thinks I’m going to learn it and we’ll make a website for Radiohead.”

“I thought you liked computers?”

“Oh, I do. I’m not afraid of *computers* taking over the world. They’re just sitting there. I can hit them with a two-by-four. It’s just a lot to take in. But I’ve learned how to make text blink.”
“That’s horrifying.”

“Well, I’m not making you a website, am I? Maybe if I need to find a new career. Talk to me then.”

“I sincerely doubt you’ll be free to help us geezers out, if that’s the criteria. You have a plan for the next album? Promise me you’ll put ‘Lucky’ on it.”

“Ha! Yeah, well, we’re going to take a touring break in January. Get our heads straight, if that’s even possible. Parlophone offered us a one hundred thousand-pound budget for recording equipment, which is doing my head in. We’re thinking of buying our own, actually. It’ll empty us out, but Ed says it’ll pay for itself eventually. He got his degree in business and understands all that shite, which is good, as I bloody well don’t. But we’ve been talking to a guy we know, Nigel Godrich, and he’s been brilliant, advising us on the most important bits to get. It’s all about having control, going forward.”

“It sounds like you’ve got a solid plan.”

“The plan is to never have to go through what we went through with The Bends ever again. The next one can’t possibly be as wretched, right? They say the second album is the hardest, anyway. This year, this fucking year. Utter bollocks. We’ve already got a bunch of songs we think are strong contenders—yes, ‘Lucky’ is one—so maybe we’ll have a smoother time of it from here on out? I think we’re feeling more confident. I think things are going to be easier, going forward.”

“I can’t wait to hear what you come up with.”

“Well, you might be the only one that even cares about a third Radiohead album. Cheers.”

“I doubt that, darling. But hey, I gotta go? I’m meeting friends for a drink.”

“You have friends? Kidding, kidding. How long you in Athens for, even?”

“Like literally three days. Talk to you soon?”

“Yeah. Definitely. Take care, Michael.”

“You too, Thom.”
Michael shakes his head as he drops the phone into its cradle, chuckling at Thom’s mix of cockiness and insecurity. He doubts either will ever change. Just one of his endless hunches.

Michael thinks one specific hunch, the one he’s foreseen in Radiohead’s future, is poised and waiting to step out into their path. It’s waiting impatiently right around the corner and is most likely clutching an album in its hands. Perhaps that third one that Thom thinks no one might even care about.

It’s just a hunch. But Michael is good at raising his little baby hunches up big and strong, primed to succeed, isn’t he?

Only time will tell.

He gathers up his wallet and keys, still chuckling to himself. He’s in a buoyant mood, and wonders at the tenacity of hope. They say a person needs just three things to be truly happy in this world: someone to love, something to do, and something to hope for.

Of course, the universe is under no obligation to give us what we hope for, and it seems to delight in providing us with quite the opposite.

How can Michael not laugh at that?

He shuts the back door to his house and inserts his key into the lock, which sticks and fights him like it’s always prone to do. He gives his hand that little twist he’s learned is required, setting the rest of his keys—along with the green plastic bird also attached to the ring—clattering and bouncing against each other.

There’s a click of the bolt sliding home, and Michael pockets his keychain. He bounces down the back steps, tilting his head back to take in the soft Georgia dusk. Feeling in accord with the universe, he nods at the purpling sky in approval and acknowledgement.

Michael starts to whistle a jaunty little tune as he walks away.
"The world is violent and mercurial--
it will have its way with you.
We are saved only by love--
love for each other
and the love that we pour into the art we feel compelled to share:
being a parent;
being a writer;
being a painter;
being a friend.
We live in a perpetually burning building,
and what we must save from it,
all the time,
is love."
~ Tennessee Williams

Chapter End Notes

- Much of the description of the last Radiohead/R.E.M. show are taken from the October 28, 1995 Melody Maker.

- In 1997, Radiohead became one of the first bands in the world to have a website

- Thom was totally right; no one cared about their third album, OK Computer

- Throughout many of the interviews we read in 1995, Radiohead repeatedly put forth the idea that their 'hard' days were behind them and going forward, recording albums would be much easier. It didn't quite turn out the way.

- Colin did his thesis on the writing of Raymond Carver while at uni.

- Tim Greaves was Radiohead's tour manager from 1992 (when they were newly signed) until 2002. He still works for Radiohead, as their studio manager.

- Michael and Thom became great friends after the Monster Tour.

- Thom and Jonny made this easy to write

- Sad cheese trays, man oh man.

- the name of this story, "Mouse Dog Bird," was the working title for the song "Separator."

It's like I'm fallen out of bed
From a long, weary dream
The sweetest flowers and fruits are hanging from trees
Falling off the giant bird that's been carrying me
It's like I've fallen out of bed
From a long and vivid dream
Just exactly as I remember
Every word
Every gesture
And my heart, in my mouth
Like I'm fallen out of bed
From a long and vivid dream
Finally I'm free of all the weight I've been carrying

- and lastly.....THANK YOU for sticking with this long-ass story. We have appreciated every comment and message, and hope you enjoyed reading this sprawling tale as much as we loved writing it. We'd love to know what you thought of it! <3

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