Get Out of This Place While We Still Have Time

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Summary

She doesn't know what will be worse to her mom – potentially sleeping with your boyfriend at a party or running off with him to New York City in the middle of the night. [originally published 11/29/11]

Notes

**Warnings:** AU/canon divergence, language

**Disclaimer:** Lyrics and title are from "Work" by Jimmy Eat World.

**A/N:** This was originally published on FFN & LJ in 2011 and figured I'd move it to AO3 along with some of my older fics. This has been edited from its original version to fix some grammatical errors and other such distracting things.

"I don't know what I think anymore."

And it's true – it's the most honest thing he's said to her all fucking night and that's not how it's supposed to be. It feels like something is lodged in his chest and throat and he can't get it out; this town is choking him.

"Jess –"

She sounds too logical and reasonable and he's so beyond the point of rationality that he snaps.
"Rory, stop, just stop! I did not invite you up here, you came up here on your own."

Rory blinks at him with those fucking blue eyes, filling with tears and fuckfuckfuck this was the last thing he wanted.

She inhales for a few seconds before saying, "I don't know what I did," in the most broken voice he's heard from her and that kills him the most.

She turns to leave the room and he quickly strides over to grip her arm in a loose hold. "You didn't do anything, Rory –"

She rips her arm out of his grasp with a glare. He wants to look away, but he doesn't, he can't because as soon as he does, she'll walk right out of the room and then that's it. Done.

Eventually, as they continue to stare at each other, the tension in her shoulders finally begins to loosen.

"Can we go, please," he asks in a whisper, pleading, practically begging. Maybe the farther away he is from this room, this house, this town, he'll be able to focus, think, breathe.

She bites her bottom lip, her eyes still wet as she tries to read him beyond the simple but obvious notion that he's not okay.

(He'll never get deeper because he won't talk and that's his fault, but she won't ask, either.)

She nods once, walking out of the room.

He trails behind her closely; he's careful not to touch her because he's pretty sure he royally fucked up and won't be allowed that privilege again.

"Rory, are you okay?"

Jess grits his teeth as he avoids looking Dean directly in the eye.

"Yes, I'm fine," Rory says, keeping her eyes ahead and continuing her pace down the stairs.

Once they make it down the steps, Dean knocks Jess' shoulder with his to get at Rory, gripping her wrist to turn her around. "Rory, are you sure?"

"Don't touch her," Jess threatens, pulling Dean's arm away. "This is none if your business."

"Dean, I'm fine, go back to Lindsay," Rory says more strongly than before, but not strong enough for Jess' liking.

Since Jess can't afford those feelings, he lightly brings his hand on the middle of her back, his fingertips brushing the fabric of her jacket as they walk out the front door, the balmy night enveloping them in the darkness.

He breathes.

"Jess?"

Still too claustrophobic.

He presses his hand into her back, directing her to follow him towards –

"You want to go home?" she asks, a mixture of surprise and exasperation.
"Yeah, exactly."

He pulls out a set of car keys from his jacket, heading not for the entrance to the diner, but to Luke's pick-up truck.

"What are we doing?"

He unlocks the driver's side door and climbs in, reaching over to unlock the passenger door.

Without saying another word, she climbs in the car.

(As he has to know what he means by home, right? Right?)

She figures out what he means. She doesn't say a word as he drives a town over to the train station, buying two tickets for the next train into New York City.

(Nothing is said; nothing is ever said anymore.)

After a transfer in Stamford and twenty minutes of solidarity in the train car, they're two stops away from the city and oh god, her mom is going to kill her. She doesn't know what will be worse to her mom – potentially sleeping with your boyfriend at a party or running off with him to New York City in the middle of the night.

Once the train comes to a stop in Grand Central, he takes her hand and they walk.

They cross from the east side to the west and take a local subway until the streets have names instead of numbers. Eventually at one stop he leads her out.

He hasn't looked at her since they got off the train.

She tries to focus on the dirty ground or the flickering lights of the lampposts, anything but his stoic expression: this is something she's only seen glances of and it's scary – pupils are blown wide and his mouth pursed together as they walk and walk.

Eventually, they stop in front of a worn building. Property of New York City Housing Authority.

He gestures up the building to a random dark window. She doesn't know which one he wants her to look at. "That's where I lived for the first five years. I taught myself how to read here when I was four, maybe a bit younger," he starts, sounding strangely flat. "Liz's – my mom's – second husband helped me a bit before he died. We got kicked out because management caught my mom buying recreational drugs of the hard variety," he explains in a low voice, chanting the last part of the sentence as if reciting from a memorized script.

She stares at the row of windows, trying to picture a little boy with crazy hair staring down at the streets below, like he still does in Luke's apartment. At first she thought it was cute – she'll sometimes catch him in an unguarded moment, sitting near a window and looking down, his eyes unseeing. Now, there seems to be a dark undercurrent to it as he looks up at the dirty windows with a clenched jaw and narrowed eyes.

He then takes her hand and leads her down the street. She's feeling more and more uncomfortable with every step, but she can't bring herself to speak up, demand to go home. Something's happening here and she doesn't want to interrupt it.
"We moved a few blocks over where we didn't have heat except for the dead of winter. Ended up moving again a year later," he says, pointing to another building, but he doesn't stop walking.

Suddenly he stops, nodding to a dark alleyway to their right. "That's where I got my first mugging. They were thirteen, fourteen when I was seven. Bruised jaw and scraped palms. Last time Liz gave me lunch money. Had to steal it from her until I started making my own cash."

She exhales shakily, trying not to imagine Jess with his black eye, but ten years younger and it disturbs her.

"Come on."

He's keeping their hands locked together – her hold is loose and she feels like she's in shock right now. This is the most he's ever spoken about his past to her ever.

He stops again once they reach what looks like a school to her. "My elementary school," he confirms. "The only time I ever tried in school. One fantastic teacher just couldn't grasp the reality of a kindergartener breezing through Dr. Seuss and requesting to read something more difficult. Quickly gave up on expecting anything from teachers and read what I wanted to read."

Rory can definitely understand the effects teachers can have on students, but how can anyone have a bad kindergarten teacher? That's so incredibly depressing.

They walk again, this time Jess turning into a side street, making her feel a bit claustrophobic. The lighting is terrible and just when she's about to say something to him, he stops under a fire escape.

Even in the dark and awful lighting, she can see the tightness around his eyes. "This is where I got my first kiss. I was thirteen and it involved way too much tongue. Her name was Cindy."

For a wild moment, she considers kissing him here, but that's unfair and selfish, so she leaves the memory be and lets herself be led out of the alley.

They don't walk very far to the next stop, at another apartment complex.

"I think I lost my virginity here."

Rory blinks in surprise. Of course she knew that Jess was far from a virgin, but to hear him be so frank about it is a shock to her system.

"You think?" she whispers, confused.

He scrapes his bottom lip with his teeth and nods once. "It was the one time I blacked out at a party. Woke up and did basic CSI work."

"You don't remember anything?"

He shakes his head.

She doesn't know whether to pity him or cry for him. But she's still stuck in that numb phase, so she doesn't do anything.

(This is a bad habit when it comes to Jess.)

**

They're back on the subway again, going uptown.
They're sitting next to each other, glued from hip to knee and their hands are still laced together. Despite how close they look, she doesn't feel her heart skipping like it usually does and she's not losing her breath for those reasons.

This is just so confusing and surreal.

They get off at Grand Central and Rory wasn't able to appreciate it when they first arrive. It's still just as beautiful as she remembers it to be.

She stares at the ceiling with all the constellations as they walk through the main concourse towards the Vanderbilt Avenue exit again. She thinks about making a comment about the station, but it seems insincere and he probably won't even respond to her.

They walk in a straight line, the street staying the same but the avenue changing until they reach –

The New York Public Library.

"This is the first place I ever stole from," he admits quietly.

Her eyes bug out of her head. "What?"

"Well, to be fair, I had help. I was four and Liz's boyfriend at the time helped me."

"What book?" she asks before realizing that this is so incredibly personal for him.

He bites his bottom lip and it takes her a few seconds to realize that his eyes are reflecting the streetlights too well. It brings her to tears, seeing him so raw.

"Corduroy," he tells her so softly so nobody in the world can possibly overhear them.

She squeezes her eyes shut, but it's no use – hot tears roll down her face anyway. She opens them and sniffs, turning away from the beautiful building to take a seat on the step. As she wipes the skin under her eyes, hoping her makeup isn't smudged too badly, Jess plops down next to her.

They sit in silence for a few minutes.

"Why are you doing this?" she finally asks.

"I just…want you to…" he trails off, clenching his jaw, unwilling (unable?) to continue.

"Understand?" she supplies.

He doesn't say anything.

(The silence says it all.)

**

"I can't take you to prom."

Rory stops chewing on her hotdog and drops a hand on the mane of the stone lion so she won't lose balance. "Oh." She forces herself to finish chewing even though it makes her sick. She shudders as she swallows. "Did you get in trouble?"

She glances over to see Jess swinging his legs off the right stone arm, his fingers fiddling with the paper around his half-eaten hotdog. "What do you mean?" he asks, tone sharp as he leans in so he
can properly look at her.

"I mean…" she sighs. "Did you insult a teacher, did you walk out of class, did you pull a prank on the principal…"

"…Did I get into a fight?" he finishes for her, annoyed.

"I mean I have a right to know why you can't take me to prom," she snaps. "It's not like I ask for much anyway," she says somewhat bitterly.

Jess suddenly jumps off the lion and walks over so he's standing alongside it, reaching up to grip Rory's knee. "No Rory, I don't ask for much. You want everything – and that's fine, I get it. You… deserve it. But you don't get that this is brand fucking new for me, even seven months down the line. I'm doing the best I can and you're not… cognizant." He suddenly lets go of her to run his hand through his hair and he exhales harshly through his nose.

She watches his hand travel from his head to his face to rub at his chin. His face must be rough with stubble now, which she always thought felt strange, but in a good way. Dean never had to shave everyday until the last few months of dating, but even then it never felt the way Jess' does against her skin.

She looks away from him to stare across the street, trying to keep her tears at bay. He's so direct and brutally honest to everyone, but when it's directed towards her, it's the worst feeling ever. He doesn't think much of anyone except Luke and her, she's certain, so it hurts to fail him.

"I'm not graduating. That's why I can't take you to prom."

She whips her head back to look at him, but he's staring at his feet, his hands stuffed deep into the pockets of jeans. After a few seconds, she looks away, this time across the steps of the library to where the other lion is. She knows the names of the lions are Fortitude and Patience because of the Great Depression, but she wonders which one she's sitting on.

"Why didn't you ask me for help?" she finds herself asking. "I could've…made schedules for you. Figure out what days you could've skipped."

Well, she never thought she'd put her organizational skill to that kind of use, but there it is, out in the open and honestly, if he did come to her for that, she would've done it.

Suddenly Jess laughs, but it sounds strangled. "Really?" He shakes his head, a wry smile on his face. "You wouldn't have tried to convince me to go?"

She runs her tongue over her bottom lip and he automatically follows the movement with his eyes. It's the most blatantly sexual instance since what happened in the bedroom.

"Probably. But I would've given up because you're impossibly stubborn."

"Some could say that about you."

"It's a Gilmore thing."

"I know."

She smiles faintly before remembering that her boyfriend is going to become a high school dropout. She inhales shakily. "What about summer school? Make it up then."

He shakes his head. "It's 'not enough.' I'd have to re-do senior year," he spits, clenching his jaw.
He shakes his head again. "I can't." He looks at her and wow, she always forgets how expressive his eyes can really be.

The thing is, she doesn't understand how someone can hate school that much. He understands her really well, better than so many people in her life, and she can't even wrap her mind around so many things that make up Jess Mariano.

Although this tour of Manhattan based on his life is helping her make sense, at least a little bit.

"It's not a bad idea. You know, school. Having Socratic seminars, whatever. It's just the grading—the rating and judging from people who most of the time aren't even qualified. And it's all so subjective and it's pointless." He glances up at her. "At least for me," he adds as a half-apology to her.

Sure, in a perfect world, she would love school to not involve tests and grades, but learning and having discussions are what make school for her. "You have discussions in school."

"Yeah, but how much of it is actually run by the people having the conversation? Think about it – the teacher always structures and regulates the conversation to fit whatever he or she deems to be the point of the book or the time in history."

…He has a point. At least, in public school from what she remembers. She thinks at Chilton it's a little better, but in the end, the teacher does conclude with the major themes the students should take away and –

"It would be a lot easier if I just…took it for it what it was. Sucked it up. Wouldn't it?" he says quietly.

The nasty, fed up part of her wants to say yes, because in today's time, most people need get an education in order to do something – need those certificates from high school and now college. But another, growing part of her is seeing a boy, almost a man, who has always been a constant victim of those in authority; of those he was supposed to trust.

Jess is one of the smartest people she knows – she thinks he's smarter than her on a number of levels – but it's not going to get him far without schooling, which is so unfair.

"I'm scared," she admits, not looking at him because then he'll know that she worries about him like a mother, which isn't what he wants at all.

"Fuck it," he mutters, taking a hand out of his pants so he can rummage through the breast pocket of his jean jacket. He pulls out a pack of cigarettes and a light blue lighter. He doesn't look at her as he plucks one out of the box and lights it up, taking the longest drag she's ever seen. She probably shouldn't be so impressed by it, and not so consequently turned on as he exhales the smoke through his nose.

"I know you haven't quit."

He finally stares at her as he flicks the tip of the cigarette to get rid of the ashes.

"I know you try to mask it sometimes after you work at Walmart. But…” she flushes, "I can still taste it. Smell it on you."

He brings the cigarette to his lips and pauses. "Sorry," he says before taking another drag.

She shrugs, not wanting to say it's okay, because it isn't – the health risks have been ingrained in her system – but she understands why people do it, why he does it.
(Besides, it can always be worse, which she really doesn't like thinking about, but it's there.)

"Which lion am I sitting on?" she blurs.

"Patience," he answers, gazing into her eyes and holding her attention.

Patience.

(Maybe all he wants is for her to be patient with him.)

She breathes in the night and realizes that demanding everything at once from someone like Jess is unfair when she can't even give the same in return.

**

There are twenty minutes left until she has to be back at home, and yet she's sitting with a fantastic cup of coffee in a crappy diner in New York City.

"I'll be right back, I just have to call…" she trails off, slipping out of the booth.

He nods, plucking a menu from behind the salt and peppershakers.

She steps outside and dials her house with shaky fingers.

There's disbelief and raging anger on her mom's end and there's only desperation on Rory's.

(Please, please understand this is the first time we've really talked in a while and it was just – you should've seen him, he looked…(like he was going to break))

The only consolation her mom receives is that the home key will safely reside in Rory's belt buckle because the last thing she's thinking about right now is sex (despite the constant admiration of tendons in forearms and the lingering stares at parted mouths).

After telling her where they parked Luke's truck, Rory whispers, "I'm sorry," and hangs up.

She may be sorry for doing this to her mother, but she's not sorry in the least when she catches Jess staring at her through the window with his form of concern.

**

Jess had ordered a large plate of curly fries for them while she was on the phone.

"You okay?" he asks, taking a long fry and breaking it in half as he waits for her to answer.

"Yeah."

It's not the total truth, but he nods in understanding as he eats one half of the fry.

They eat in silence for a few minutes and she's comfortable. Usually a lot of their silences have been comfortable, which she used to find unnerving because she loves to talk and listen, but this can be nice too. There's something to be said about silence being louder than words.

"Can I ask you a question?" she asks tentatively, running a finger around the rim of her coffee cup.

He nods.
"You always call your mom by her name – why?"

He clenches his jaw and looks out the window with dark eyes. She holds back her immediate reaction of frustration and does her best to be patient with him.

*(Come on, Patience, I sat on you for a while, maybe some of your magic rubbed off on me.)*

"Contrary to what a lot of people think, you don't automatically deserve to be called 'Mom' after you give birth," he finally says after another few minutes of silence, shocking her. "She's my mother, not my mom. As far as I'm concerned, I grew up with a woman who cared more about losing sobriety and finding guys. She did not raise me," he begins ticking off with his fingers, "she barely provided for me, and she did not do anything synonymous with the word maternal." He takes a breath, running a hand through his hair. The gel is beginning to lose its hold, so a strand falls in front of his eye.

"I…" she stops herself, bringing her hands to her face and breathes in and out for a few seconds. That was a *lot* more than she was expecting. But then again, Jess takes such care and consideration in when he speaks, so it shouldn't surprise her that he'd do the same when it came to labeling people. "I can't imagine that. I really can't. It's too…" She drops her hands and stares at him. "It's something you see in movies or books – nobody in real life is supposed to have that."

"Yeah, well…"

She knows that's naïve; that this world can be impossibly dark, but she just never thought she'd run into it and experience it for herself in Stars Hollow.

"Can I be honest?"

He gestures to her with his hand. "By all means."

Her throat closes up as she stares at his face. Under the harsh lighting of the diner, she can see the growing stubble and the amber in his brown eyes. He fits in well to their surroundings, but at the same time, he shines too bright in comparison to the cheap, stained linoleum and torn menus.

He reaches over the plate of fries in order to take her coffee and steal a sip and oh my *God*, she's a *little* in love with him for it because no one has ever done that except her mother.

In return for her patience, he's patient with her as she tries to gather her thoughts and clear her throat. She always appreciated how their relationship has always been about being and feeling equal, but they lost that at one point; it's nice to get it back.

"I feel like I should care that you're not graduating and how that looks for me. I don't," she quickly reassures him, "but I still feel like I should, which *scares* me. I'm afraid that I actually think I should be caring about appearances. It's something my grandparents care about, something that my mom has always told me *not* to do, but here I am, sitting here, thinking about how my grandparents would feel if they knew that I was…" she shakes her head, not willing to finish the sentence.

For her entire life she's been groomed by her mom to hate all things that her grandparents represent: façades, Chanel No. 5, pearls, societies, pretention, and money. And it's not Rory at all – she doesn't understand how her grandparents could possibly feel at ease in their large home with the stiff furniture and if Rory never has to wear pantyhose again, it'll be too soon. But she's a *Gilmore*, which has to mean something, especially since she's slowly getting more comfortable in their world.

"When I think about it too much there's a sense of inadequacy that's hard to swallow. It's not just
you."

She lifts her head in surprise. "Inadequate? You feel inadequate?"

He doesn't answer her, confirming it.

They finish the plate of fries without saying anything else before ordering slices of peach pie.

(They're the only people who love Luke's peach pie.)

**

"GED."

"What?"

"You can take the GED exam over the summer. It's the equivalent to the high school diploma. And then you can go to a community college, if you want. If not...well at least you can get a lot of jobs with a GED. Until you figure out what you want."

Seeing Jess really smile is one of the most heart-stopping visuals she's ever seen.

**

He's leading her downtown again and this time the subway is full of tipsy people in chic clothing. He's always been great at weaving through crowds, but there's a certain art of dodging people in the subway that she can't mimic.

"Hey, Jess?"

He tears his gaze from the door to look at her.

"I'm sorry. About what happened last summer."

He blinks in surprise.

"I wish I could say I wrote hundreds of letters and I just threw them all away. But I didn't. I started one and it only had Dear Jess on the top. I couldn't think of what to say," she continues. "I handled that so awfully."

"You did," he agrees. "But I don't blame you, really." He takes her hand and steps back just when two drunk girls stumble past them, giggling.

"You should."

He shrugs. "It worked out okay, in the end."

She can't argue with that.

**

"Where are we going?"

"You'll see." He pulls out his cigarettes again. "Last one," he promises her, even though she didn't say anything.

As they walk and he smokes for a few blocks, she asks, "Can I try?"
Jess stops walking and coughs and Rory's tempted to laugh at him, even though it would definitely blow at his ego, despite the fact that he's been smoking since he was fourteen. "What?"

She shrugs. "You heard me."

He looks down at the half-smoked cigarette for a few seconds before saying, "Your mom already wants me burned alive, what's the difference," and hands it over to her.

She plucks it from his hand and rolls it so it's in between her index and middle fingers. She watches the smoke curl from the tip and disappear into the night sky. The smell is familiar since Jess seems to be brand loyal – she knows what its lingering taste is like; would it be all that different if she were to bring it to her lips and inhale?

She brings the cigarette to her mouth, right where Jess' was a minute ago, and it's probably one of the more intimate moments of her life. But after a few seconds, she can't bring herself to do it; she lowers her hand and watches the paper burn.

She glances over at Jess, who's staring at her with so much heat that it makes her really blush for the first time tonight.

He visibly swallows, eyes never straying from her face.

She stops breathing and oh, right, she was planning on having sex with him any day now (at least before this entire mess).

They don't look away from each other until Jess takes the cigarette from Rory's loose hold before it could burn her.

**

They stop at a random building with a pad-locked gate. He pulls out a set of keys and begins to unlock.

"I always thought those were for Luke's apartment," she says, in awe as he pockets the padlock and pushes the gate to the side. "I've seen them before – you carry them –"

"I don't need keys for Luke's apartment. That and the diner are ridiculously easy to break into."

She can't believe it, though – she's always seen those keys and thought they were for one thing, but they were really for something so, so different. It's weirdly mind-blowing.

(It sort of drives home the fact that he shows her things about himself and yet she misses it or misinterprets it.)

Once Jess unlocks everything and dismantles the alarm, he takes Rory's hand and tugs her inside.

"Why are we breaking into this building?" she asks, hating that she can't really see without a light on. There might be shelves…

"Do you remember in February you asked me about the used bookstore logo that's on the inside of most my books?"

"The Bookie Joint? Yes, how could I forget?"

He flips some switches and oh, he broke into a bookstore for her.
Rory Gilmore has been to many used bookstores in her lifetime, but none of them have been remotely like this. There are so many books spilling out of the shelves, piled on top of one another on the ground that she's automatically overwhelmed.

She hasn't felt overwhelmed like this in so long (maybe for the first time ever).

"It's perfect."

**

Her mom calls again and Rory lies that her battery is beginning to die – she'll call her when she's coming home.

**

Jess is sprawled comfortably on a ratty orange couch, reading Tolstoy, and there it is again, that feeling that she's a little in love with him (except it's not a little and she really should tell him).

He looks up at her and smiles briefly before focusing on his book again.

Her heart aches as she tries to find a book to read.

When she picks Catcher in the Rye, she sneaks a glance at Jess and thinks about losing her virginity right there on that dirty couch. But just as quickly as the thought comes, it leaves. She has a feeling he'd see it as pity sex and they're both not exactly in the most lucid state of minds.

Even so, she sits on a rickety wooden table to read on, at least for a little while.

(She ends up moving over to the couch, sitting primly by his feet, which only lasts a few minutes before Jess grabs her arm to pull her down with him.)

**

She wakes up with her head tucked into the crook of his neck and her hand on his chest, right over his heart. Judging by its constant, slow beating and the way his breaths are long and deep, he must've fallen asleep as well.

She presses a kiss to his neck. "Jess," she whispers. "We should get up."

A groan gets lost in his throat as he tightens his hold on her. "How long have we been out?" he murmurs, his voice throaty.

She stretches out her arm so the sleeve will reveal her watch. "I think two hours. It's a little past four."

Jess lifts the arm that was dangling off the edge of the couch to rub his eyes. Then, his entire body freezes.

"Jess?"

"Want to see something cool?"

She was going to suggest heading to Grand Central because she doesn't want to worry her mom anymore, but when she lifts her head to look at Jess' face, that thought is erased from her mind. "Depends."

"Come on, get up. We need to leave now."
She pushes herself off him, running her fingers through her hair to get rid of the knots.

"Do you want that?" he asks, gesturing towards the copy of *Cather in the Rye* that's stuck between the couch cushions.

"I have my own copy."

"Huh."

"Why would I want a second one?"

Jess shrugs.

"I can't just steal —"

"Wouldn't be stealing if I'm paying for it."

"Jess —"

"Don't you want your own book from the Bookie Joint?"

She laughs, practically giggles and okay, she's clearly overtired. "Fine, fine. Yes. Thank you."

He smiles at her and walks over to the cashier desk, tearing off a piece of notepaper and writing a note. She loves watching him write – he always does it with a look of pure concentration and engrossment.

She gets to her feet and stretches herself out as he reaches into his wallet and leaves a few bills.

"Come on, grab your book and let's close up."

She takes the book and stuffs it into her back pocket like he usually does, although her pockets aren't as deep as his. When she walks over to the door, she hears Jess say, "That's hot."

She whips her head and blushes, but only a little. "What?"

He nods and says, "Perfect product placement."

"Nice alliteration."

"I do try."

He walks over to her and she sort of wishes she could read the note he left for the owner, but maybe it's not important in the grand scheme of things. With way too good of skills, he slips the book out of her back pocket and puts it in one of his. She stares at him with her heart pounding in her chest as he nonchalantly sets the alarm and locks up the store.

"So what are we doing?" she asks a little more breathlessly than she intended as he puts away his keys.

"Going on the Brooklyn Bridge," he answers as he takes her hand, walking quickly.

She gapes at him. "We can do that?"

"How do you think people do the New York Marathon?"
"Yes, because I'm so well-versed in the world of athletics."

"Oh, come on."

She shrugs. "Special occasions?"

He shakes his head and tugs her hand. "Let's go."

**

There are already a dozen or more people on the bridge, leaning on the metal ramp of the pathway through the bridge, staring at the sky. It's the most camaraderie she's seen in this city; she's always felt faint traces of it, but it's never been more obvious.

He finds a spot separated from the group of people, like he always does, and leans against the rail with crossed arms. She copies his actions, making sure their shoulders are touching as they wait.

"I'm glad I – we did this," she admits, looking over to admire his profile.

He glances over. "Yeah?"

She nods.

He sighs. "So…what now?"

She runs her tongue over her bottom lip and turns to face the East River, a steel gray, and lower Manhattan, contrasting the pink horizon. "I think…we'll see what happens before I leave for Europe."

She turns to him again to catch him nodding. "Okay."

And the way his eyes flash from relief to gratitude to understand to…

She straightens herself and wraps a tight arm around him. Getting the hint, he stands up to his full height and hugs her. Even though they're holding each other way too tightly that she can't get enough air into her lungs, she feels so much better.

When they pull away, she brings a hand to his shoulder from behind to pull him down so she can whisper something in his ear.

From the corner of her eyes, she can see the sun finally rising. Maybe it's because she's borderline delirious from lack of sleep and coffee, but she's calm. His eyes are wide and warm and filled with –

He shrugs her hand off his shoulder so he can lace their fingers together as he whispers back, his breath hot and perfect in her ear.

She kisses him because she doesn't think she can handle his expression, whatever it is; she knows how important and huge and life changing it is.

His hair is crunchy in her grasp and he tastes like cigarettes, bad coffee, and peach pie, but his mouth is soft and slow, like when they first kissed by the gas pump and when they made up after fighting about his black eye before it turned into something urgent.

It's rare and it's always so honest that it makes her stomach flip and her fingertips ache.

There's still a lot to consider when they walk off the Brooklyn Bridge and head over to Penn
Station, where they'll take a bus together and fall asleep against one another. There's even more to face when they reach Stars Hollow and exit the bus with wrinkled clothes and joint hands, Luke and her mom almost tripping over themselves to reach them, the entire town watching.

But for now, watching the sun rise above the East River and blindly shine in between skyscrapers and apartment buildings next him is enough.

***

He breathes in the early morning air, his insides shaky and raw, but a little content. He can't bring himself to see how the sunrise looks on her face (he assumes it's beautiful) because he's trying to pull himself in after spilling everything out.

She rests her head against his arm and he breathes again. He can do this.

The best view of a Manhattan sunrise is watching the colors of the sky change as it reflects over her cheekbones and in her eyes.

Everything aches in all possible ways and it's just...good. Nice. And maybe even a little perfect.

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