

# Soundczech's One-Shots

## A Slight Resemblance to Marlon Brando

He gets the egg from a client a month after the campaign goes multinational.

“What happened to fucking lighters, or blowjobs?” Brian asks, watching as Justin spins the egg in slow concentric circles, his pale hands white against the charcoal of the shell. “I’m giving it to Debbie for Christmas.”

“I like it,” Justin says. “It’s weird.” He lifts it up and shakes it, listening for any signs of life. “It would be cool if it hatched.”

“Great, then I’ll have a fucking Emu on my hardwood floors.”

“Maybe it’s an alligator,” Justin says. He rests his chin on his folded arms and watches as the egg slowly rolls to a stop. “That’d be really cool. Like that movie.”

Brian drops into the chair next to Justin’s and picks up the egg. It is smooth and warm, rougher than he’d expected. Heavier. Pedsley’s delivery boy had said it would bring Brian good luck, or some shit like that. Brian isn’t even sure it is real. He’s always thought Pedsley to be remarkably full of shit, even if the man is shelling out millions of dollars a year for Brian’s services. The commission alone was gift enough for Brian. Handing over mysterious trinkets is unnecessary.

Still, looking at it kind of creeps Brian out. A dead thing in his palm.

He puts the egg in a drawer. “I’m giving this to Debbie,” he says. “Don’t give me any shit.”

Justin smiles indulgently and lets Brian fuck his brains out.

--

Two days later it shows up on Justin's desk, a paperweight against the hefty pile of Justin's mysterious bills. That little shit.

--

Brian is at work on Thursday when Justin calls his cell.

"Brian," he says. "You didn't happen to slip something in my juice, did you? To be funny. Because it isn't funny."

When Justin stops speaking, Brian can hear his teeth grinding down the line.

"Like what, my cum?"

"E! Acid! I don't fucking know, Brian!"

"You think I drugged you?" Brian is incredulous, and he imagines himself staring open mouthed at nothing. "What the fuck for?"

"Brian," Justin says. The tension in his voice reminds Brian of those early days after the bashing, when Justin would call him from the loft freaking out at shadows. "I – Never mind. I'll talk to you later."

--

When Brian arrives at the loft forty minutes later, there is a tiny winged reptile staring at him from the back of the sofa.

Justin stares blankly at Brian, who is frozen in the doorway hearing the buzzing of fifteen years' worth of acid trips in his ears.

"Is that a fucking dragon?" Brian asks at length.

“Oh my god, you see it too?!” Justin scrubs his hands over his face. “I thought I was going nuts or something. I was trying to figure out how to break it to you.”

“Did it follow you home from school?” Brian walks slowly into the loft and drops his briefcase and coat by the door. He stands next to Justin and they stare at the dragon.

“It was here when I got home. I think it came from the egg.” It opens its mouth and flames lick the air around its face. “Brian, your client gave you a dragon.”

It is all sharp angles like horns beneath its skin. Blue black flesh like a bruise, mottled over tiny ribs and vertebrae. It sneezes and sparks crackle in the air, fading to the smell of fire and brimstone. At Brian’s side, Justin recoils.

“Should we call animal control?” Justin asks.

“And say what, a dragon followed me home from school today?”

“Maybe if we leave the window open, it’ll fly away.”

They stare at it. It hisses flames and flexes its little wings.

They leave the window open.

--

After two weeks, Brian closes the window. Justin is unimpressed by Brian’s protests about burglars and the shifting weather, and scowls angrily at that little fucking dragon, curled up in Brian’s sheets.

Brian named him Marlon, and he’s now the size of Justin’s fist. He makes weird sounds in the middle of the night and eats all the fucking tuna. Tuesday morning, Justin woke to scorch marks on his sneakers, the soles melted a little into his crumpled jeans.

“Forget it,” Brian had said. “Those jeans were fucking ugly anyway.”

It’s easy for him to say. Marlon doesn’t go near Brian’s Gucci boots, his Prada loafers. Justin loses three pairs of sneakers by Monday.

--

Brian hasn’t ever had a pet, Justin supposes. It’s forgivable that Brian has somehow formed an attachment to the little fucking beast, scratching behind its horns while he watches CNN, feeding it bits and pieces off his plate at the dinner table. And it is kind of cute, when it’s not barbequing Justin’s Chuck Taylor’s. Sort of. He decides to leave it be for a few more weeks. It’s unlikely that Brian’s affection will wane, but if Justin leaves it long enough Brian might freak out and decide Marlon is better off without him.

It seems like a good plan until Justin comes home from Daphne’s just before dawn on Thursday and Marlon is curled up on his pillow.

“Brian,” Justin whispers. Marlon lifts his head and blinks sleepily at Justin, but Brian does not stir.

“Brian,” Justin repeats, more insistently. He lifts his hand to touch Brian’s shoulder, but Marlon hisses, his little flames glowing white hot in the dark.

Justin and Marlon stare at one another for a long moment.

Justin sleeps on the couch.

--

“What the fuck are you doing out here?” Brian asks in the morning, already immaculate in his favourite suit. He’s got some big pitch today, Justin thinks. Some potentially hot new music company. Justin has stitch marks from the sofa on his face and aching muscles from the cold.

“Your dinosaur hates me,” he says. He eyes the little beast, hovering by Brian’s shoulder. Justin’s not sure when he learned to fly. He wonders if he’d have more luck now, opening the window.

“That’s ridiculous,” Brian says. “He’s an animal, he likes everyone.”

When Mikey came over last week, Marlon lay on his back while Mikey scratched his belly, purred and preened like a cat. When Justin got home twenty minutes before that, Marlon set fire to the magazine rack.

“He doesn’t just dislike me, he breathes fire every time he sees my face. If you had a fucking bird like a normal person, I wouldn’t even notice.”

“Maybe if you had a better attitude, Marlon wouldn’t resent you so much.”

Justin glowers.

“Fine,” he says finally. He flops back on the sofa, feeling the slide of silk cushions against his face. “But could you take him with you to work? I’d like to take a nap without fearing for my life.”

Brian scowls as he puts Marlon in his pocket, but kisses Justin goodbye.

--

When the fluid in his Zippo runs out, Brian takes to using Marlon to light his cigarettes, and that’s when Justin knows he’s never getting rid of him. He watches Brian, stretched out on the couch in jeans and no shirt, cigarette clamped between his lips. Brian’s long fingers stroke Marlon’s belly, coaxing flickers of heat from between the dragon’s teeth.

“I don’t know what you’re queening out about,” Brian says. “Marlon is the most useful member of this household.”

Justin thinks of the coffee he made this morning, the sheets he washed because the cleaning ladies keep quitting since Marlon came around. Useful. Fuck you, Brian.

Justin sits on the other end of the sofa, where Marlon's acid breath can't singe the hairs on his arms.

--

"Brian says you're jealous of Marlon," Michael says in that concerned tone he's been adopting since he became a father and, consequently, the wisest man on Earth. "He thinks it might become a problem."

"I'm not jealous of Spyro," Justin replies, stomping over to the donuts Michael hides behind the counter. "And it's already a problem. I feel like we haven't fucked in months."

"How long has it been?" Michael asks sympathetically. That's his other new voice, but he only seems to use it on Justin.

"About twenty seven hours."

"That must be hell for you," Michael says, rolling his eyes.

"That'd explain all the fire."

--

When Marlon is four weeks old, he finally torches some of Brian's stuff. Two brand new floral shirts, completely beyond repair. Justin is secretly thrilled; those shirts really were fucking ugly. Marlon seems to think so too. He sits staring at Justin amid the smoke, a brief moment of understanding. Their gazes fall simultaneously on the third new horrendous black and pink shirt, and Justin nods slowly and walks away.

Later, he cleans up the pile of ashes and throws them out with the day's paper. A week later when Brian is looking for the shirts, Justin will insist he's got no clue where they went.

This is how he bonds with Marlon.

--

After that it's a bit easier. Marlon seems less inclined to setting Justin's food on fire now that he's keeping the little beast's secrets. Marlon burns Brian's ugly new jacket and torches the terrifying new lamp, and Justin hides the remains, lies to Brian.

Brian probably knows, but there's not much Marlon can't get away with.

--

Justin wonders what will happen when Marlon gets too big to fit in Brian's pocket, too big to fit inside the loft. Not that he knows how big a full grown dragon really is, but the mythology generally seems to indicate it'll be fucking huge. He tries not to think about it too much, the long film noir nights of angsty contemplation that will ensue when Brian is forced to turn Marlon out into the wild.

Brian on the sofa, tumbler of whiskey, the lights down low. An endless pack of cigarettes.

Justin doesn't think about it. Instead, he makes salad for dinner and watches the news with Brian. Marlon unravels Justin's old woolen sweater on the floor, sharp claws unpicking, stretching, releasing. Old black yarn twists over his horns.

Justin ignores him, and eats his olives.

## The Tick Tick Boom

When they split up, Brian doesn't see Justin in every blond on the street. Platinum heads pass unnoticed, lithe bodies and big smiles. Brian doesn't see Justin on every corner, in every spoiled young twink, but sometimes he wants to.

When Justin really is in the room, Brian knows it. When he's not, there's something not quite right about the air, about the warmth of Brian's own body. He fucks men and wants them to be Justin. Closes his

fingers around thick, muscled necks, and dreams.

--

On Brian's thirty-first birthday, he gets totally fucking shitfaced. Chris Hobbs is on every corner, in every car. Behind the bar, pouring Brian's drinks. On his knees sucking Brian's cock. Chris Hobb's face is in the mirror when Brian brushes his teeth for bed. Brian wants to smash the fucking mirror.

He smashes that morning's coffee mug instead, a ceramic soap dish, an empty bottle of cologne. Justin's cologne, and that sets him off again, storming into the centre of the loft, sending a fruit bowl and a dozen green apples flying.

He wants Justin with a sudden ferocity that seizes his lungs and swells his throat. Something burns behind his eyes and he wants to take out that old scarf and wrap it tight around his neck.

Just don't think about it, he tells himself. Just don't think.

--

At the diner Justin pours coffee into chipped black mugs and looks as if he hasn't slept in days. They greet each other with straight faces and carefully blank voices that echo in the mostly deserted diner.

Justin smiles, suddenly. "Happy birthday," he says warmly, and leans over the counter to press a kiss against Brian's cheek. His lips are wet and soft. It makes Brian hard.

"It was yesterday," Brian says. He perches on a stool. "You're belated. I don't want to hear about it again for a whole year."

"Sorry," Justin says. He doesn't sound particularly repentant. "I won't mention it again until next year. When you're thirty two."

"Oh my god," Brian groans. "Fuck you."



Justin smirks and puts a chocolate donut on a saucer next to Brian's coffee. Brian stares at it, the queer scatter of hundreds and thousands against deep brown icing.

"I didn't order this," Brian says.

"I bet you didn't have a cake," Justin says. He holds a match to a tealight and lifts it up before Brian's face. "Blow out your candles."

Brian gazes at him above the flickering light of the candle, below the fluorescent glow of the overhead lights. Justin's hair is so long now, but Brian can picture the thick white scar beneath all that hair as if it were on display in front of him. His body throbs all over for a single second, but Justin is smiling as if he doesn't remember what happened a year ago on Thursday. Such a pretty smile.

Brian blows out the candle.

He takes a knife and slices the donut in two. He hands the considerably larger slice to Justin and says, "Did you bake it yourself?"

Justin laughs a little, but then his smile dims. Brian can see it all coming back behind his eyes, Chris Hobbs and hospital and that terrible absence of memory, the tremor of his hands, those fucking headaches that assault him without warning. Brian wonders if Ethan knows that Justin likes to drink chocolate milk and watch tv after the bad nightmares. He wonders if he can trust Justin to Ethan's care.

"Brian," Justin says miserably.

Neither of them eats the donut.

--

On Thursday morning, Brian tells himself that he won't seek Justin out, but he does. He rises with the alarm at six, showers. Dresses in his favourite Prada suit and a silver tie. He watches a little news and drinks a cup of coffee, and the whole time, he plans to go to work.

When he gets in the Corvette, he drives to Justin's place. Ethan's place, whatever the fuck. He's never been inside, but he knows the building. Knows that the catch on the front door is broken and anyone can just walk right in. He doubts Ethan even has a security system. The thought keeps him awake some nights when he's been smoking weed and getting paranoid. He wishes Justin could have moved somewhere safer. Some cozy fortress.

He stares at that shitty fucking door and hears the clatter of a bat against concrete in his head. Hears his own strangled no, no, no. And then just his cell phone, because it's half past nine and he's supposed to be at work. Cynthia harried and desperate, Where the fuck are you?

He pulls off without going inside. It's just another fucking day.

Just don't think about it, he tells himself. Just don't think.

--

He goes back that night without meaning to. He makes it inside this time, up the stairs. Ethan's door is covered in cracked wood veneer. The building smells terrible, like being inside a microwave. Justin

left him for this.

Somewhere between the shower and here he picked up a bottle of Beam and a bag of pot. He has to restrain himself from holding them out like flowers. He's not sure Justin would appreciate the joke.

Maybe he should have brought flowers, but he's never been able to do that. He has to do things his own way.

Justin looks pathetically relieved to see him. They stare at one another for a moment before Justin stands aside to let Brian pass.

"Sorry it's such a --" He's going to say mess, Brian thinks, but Justin seems to stop and reconsider as he stares around the room. "Shithole."

Brian laughs. It is a shithole. Plaster flakes from the ceiling and Brian thinks he might be getting asbestos poisoning just standing there. God knows how Justin survives, with his allergies. He remembers

wheezing, coughing fits in the middle of the night, sniffles in the morning over toast. Such a loser with the allergies, really.

Brian's first place was this crumbling ruin a few blocks from Debbie's place, a lease signed out of desperation because he had to escape the fucking dorms. That place with its tiny fridge and dirty walls. Jesus, he hated that place. He suspects Justin probably hates this one.

"You should fire your cleaning lady," Brian says. It's a joke he's used before, but Justin doesn't know that. He feels too anxious to be funny. This hysteria bubbles in his gut. Crumbles his bones into his

blood. Justin's blue eyes decimate him.

Justin settles into a nest of blankets on the shitty, coffee-stained couch. He used to do that sometimes when he first got back from the hospital, Brian remembers. He'd stop just shy of building a fort. One

of the blankets is tartan in shades of orange and lime, threadbare and worn around the edges. Brian can't believe he lives this way. Orange and fucking lime.

"Where's Ian?"

There are glasses that look reasonably clean on the kitchen bench and Brian picks up two, making his way toward Justin on the sofa. On the other side of the room is a dilapidated bed with rumpled sheets. Brian

wonders when was the last time they fucked in it. If it's only been hours.

"Late class, I think. He was gone when I got back. I had dinner with my mother." Justin gratefully accepts the generous tumbler of bourbon Brian hands him. "Everyone has been calling all day. Even Michael."

Mikey has been calling Brian all day, too. Brian answered twice just to let Mikey know he hadn't thrown himself off a bridge somewhere.

He settles on the couch next to Justin, but not too close. Some nights, way back when, Justin would somehow extend his nest of blankets to enfold Brian. To keep Brian safe in his fortress. Justin can be a pretty weird kid.

Justin opens his mouth and Brian hopes he's not going to talk about the bashing. Brian throws back most of the Beam in his glass and sees it in his head as always. The tick. Tick. Boom.

He fucking hates to talk about the bashing.

Justin's mass of blankets brushes Brian's thigh. "I haven't slept in days."

Tick.

"I've just been queening out over it like a little fucking faggot."

Tick.

"It's like I'm right back there. In the hospital. Just waking up."

Boom.

Brian has to close his eyes against the force of it. He passes that hospital on the way to work every day, and every time it makes him sick for a split second. Justin still doesn't remember, but Brian does. The doctors and nurses and all the fucking blood. These are the things that Justin can't ever possibly remember. The things he may as well have been dead for.

It presses boiling hot behind his eyelids, that memory. Wells and pulses. He covers his mouth with his hand. Always has to keep it together.

Justin had looked beautiful that night. That night and every night, but under the shadow of a hundred balloons Brian had wanted to tell him so. He'd wanted Justin to be proud.

Justin is staring at him intently and then Brian feels a warm hand around his wrist, sliding down to twist their fingers together. Justin squeezes tightly. He says, "Thankyou for being here."

Brian wants to be somewhere else, anywhere else that won't be this fucking suffocating with grief. Anywhere else that doesn't hurt Justin this much. Just fucking anywhere.

--

Justin doesn't want to talk about the bashing.

They sit together and get slowly shitfaced. Brian forgot how funny Justin can be when he's darkly depressed, or just stoned out of his mind. Justin ends up leaning on Brian's shoulder and telling him

stories about the first time he got stoned with Daphne when they were fifteen years old. They sound just like Brian and Mikey, really. It's almost surreal.

They talk about Brian's new campaign, and he can see Justin disapproves of Stockwell. There's a lot of shit Brian disapproves of in Justin's life, too, like this squalid little home of his and his unfalteringly terrible taste in men. He wants to say so, but he knows the kid would take that as a sign of his jealousy. Brian doesn't fucking do jealous, even if the thought of Justin in that filthy fiddler's bed turns his stomach.

Brian never forgets how young Justin is. It's in Justin's eyes with the grey of his misery, this fucking endless youth that splinters the confidence he's so painstakingly reconstructed.

He wishes that Justin wasn't a good little wife now so he could fuck them both out of this misery. He wishes that he'd beat the fucking shit out of Hobbs when he had the chance. Instead all he can do is

crawl forward uncomfortable on this fucking couch and bury Justin in his flesh.

Brian's weight breaks something inside Justin's head.

Thick, strong fingers grip at Brian's back and he's not even sure how Justin can breathe with his head buried in Brian's shirt like that. He feels the warmth of Justin's body through their clothes, and it's so

hard to be this close and not fuck him. He's so fucking hard.

Brian isn't sure which one of them is shuddering.

--

He wants to fuck Justin desperately. Three hours in and Justin's outside the blankets, now, fingers still desperate against Brian's skin. Brian remembers what it's like to fuck him. The release. Better than anybody he's ever had. The only cure for this sickness that's rising in his blood.

He kisses Justin's cheek, his temple. If they were straight, or fucking lesbians, Brian might murmur something sweet and encouraging into Justin's flesh. That's how Ethan finds them when he comes home from class with three of his friends in tow.

God, Brian hopes this looks bad.

--

It turns out it does, it looks fucking terrible, and Justin ends up storming out of the apartment when Ethan accuses them of fucking behind his back. Brian would feel guilty for the secret thrill that lodges in his cock when they start to fight, but he's too busy collecting the pot and his keys so he can follow Justin out into the cool night air.

Justin is leaning against a nearby fence, shuffling his toe against the pavement. Every time Brian looks at him tonight, he sees him as he used to be. He was so different then.

"Your little boyfriend is a fucking drama queen," Brian says. He slides a cigarette out of the packet and offers the deck to Justin. "And his friends, who the fuck are you hanging out with these days?"

Justin lights the cigarette gratefully. "Myself, mostly."

"I didn't come here to cause trouble," Brian says at length. They've been standing here staring at the dilapidated buildings for what seems like an hour.

"I know you wouldn't do that, Brian." Justin's cigarette is pinched between two fingers. "Not today."

"You wanna go for a walk?" Brian asks. "I probably shouldn't drive."

"No. I have to go back in, or he'll think I've gone home with you."

Brian wants to ask Justin to come home with him.

Instead, he leans over and kisses Justin warmly on the cheek. "Call if you need anything."

Justin won't. It terrifies Brian that Justin won't. It's obvious that fucking Ian doesn't know how to help him.

"Okay." Justin reaches out and clasps Brian's hand tightly. "Thankyou. I think I might have fallen apart if you hadn't been here for me. Not just today."

"You'd have been fine, Sonny Boy." Brian shoves his shoulder when Justin extinguishes the cigarette. "Now run along home."

That night, Brian sleeps in the driver's seat of his car. The next morning he'll wonder why he couldn't just catch a fucking taxi home, when his muscles ache and his head throbs. The next morning his fear

will seem ridiculous. Chris Hobbs is n't hiding in the fucking bushes waiting to jump out and strike. He's not following Justin's every move. He's all in Brian's head.

That night, though. That night when Justin is upstairs with Ian and his friends, when the tick tick boom plays constantly in Brian's head, it paints the world with a kind of bloody terror.

It's hard not to be afraid.

--

Less than two months later, they'll get back together in an explosion of joy and sex and sweat. A different kind of tick tick boom. It'll be Justin's warm hips beneath his hands, Justin's warm thighs against his skin. So fucking warm and desperate, pushing his way back into Brian's mouth. Always pushing. Justin doesn't seem afraid.

Brian is.

He knows at least two ways to lose Justin, now. It's like he loses him every year and finds him born again. Some mythical creature, returning again and again. Changed each time. Harder. A little bit older, every year. Older and so much hotter, that little bit more explosive every time Brian touches him.

He has nightmares every night but not like they used to be. Some nights he doesn't even wake up, just whimpers quietly and clutches Brian's arm. Some nights he wakes up and smokes Brian's cigarettes, sketches quietly until he can settle back down to sleep.

There are a lot of things to be afraid of, Justin tells him, blanketed in the silence of the loft at night. This thing between the two of them, that's not one of them. He always finds his way home in the end.

Brian is trying so hard to believe him. He'll make it there one day. He's just a couple of thousand steps behind.

Every moment with Justin, it's his heart instead of the bomb.

Boom. Boom. Boom.

## A Tragedy in Three Parts

It happens, as usual, when Ted isn't looking. One day everything is normal, he's moderately content and uncomplicated; the next, he realizes that he may be a little in love with Justin Taylor.

This is not one of those good surprises.

--

The first time he notices, Justin is sitting in Brian's boss chair at Kinnetik, doodling cartoon insects in the margins of a text book. Ted watches the graceful movements of Justin's hand; the way his fingers tremor occasionally as they curve the bend of a beetle's body. He sees the fleshy white underside of Justin's wrist, and it makes him hard.



He thinks this might be a problem.

--

Justin is beautiful, Ted thinks. He's always liked blond guys. Really, he's always liked most guys. Ted Schmidt has never really had a type, unless you count guys that are guaranteed to reject him.

In this respect, Justin is most certainly his type.

He thinks, that first night, that he probably could not have picked a more pathetic, hopeless, self-destroying crush. Justin Taylor. Justin Fucking Taylor, King of Babylon, the world. Worse, the much loved boyfriend of Brian A. Kinney. Ted thinks of Brian's endless closet of Prada suits, Brian's legendary cock, Brian's perfect face, flawless body. He thinks of the numbers he's seen skyrocketing in Brian's accounts, and decides very early on not to even think about acting on this new desire.

He begins to dream of Justin every night.

--

Ted's first crush was on a girl named Susie with – he vaguely remembers – curly blonde hair and the most perfect white china tea set. Ted isn't one of those guys that has always known he was gay. He had a thousand crushes on pretty little girls before he ever figured it out. Ted hates telling people that. It makes him feel like a late bloomer, which is what his mother always said he was.

Justin knew he was gay before he ever even knew what homosexuality was.

"I was eight," he tells Ted one night. They're waiting late at the diner for the others to show up. "This girl in my class asked the teacher what gay meant, and I remember thinking, 'That's me. That's what I am,' when she explained. And since then I've always just known."

"I was twenty one," Ted says. He's trying not to blush, because Justin is sprawled out on the other side of the booth like an offering to the gods. "It was one of those things where everybody knew but me. It's really embarrassing to

think back on the dates I went on with women. I think even they knew. It's ...” Justin’s lips wrap around the neck of his beer bottle, and Ted suppresses an audible gulp. “Pretty pathetic.”

Ted can remember the first conversation he’d ever had with Justin, just the two of them. He remembers it vividly, which is to be expected considering the event was fairly recent history. Some stupid idle chat about a book they’d both been reading, but it’s stuck in Ted’s memory on repeat.

He’s known Justin for four years, but they’d never really talked until Ted started working for Brian. In fact, he doesn’t think he was ever alone in a room with Justin until one evening, after hours at Kinnetik. He’s always been a little afraid of the kid. The idea of trying to actually talk to him usually triggered a vague sense of panic, as if Justin would be closely monitoring every word he said. Filing each dumb joke and faux pas away for future reference.

Ted imagines Justin and Brian collating their anti-Ted armory at the loft late at night, but then feels stupid. So presumptuous, to assume Justin thinks of him at all.

The first real conversation they ever had – the first conversation that ever meant something – was about Brian’s recovery, and Ted had been struck by the softness in Justin’s voice, like the timbre and treble of Justin’s voice was just melting through the phone line.

“I was just wondering how Brian seems,” Justin said. “He’s got the flu or something. Does he look terrible?”

“Why didn’t you just ask him?” Ted asked, not unkindly. It seemed very odd for Justin to call his cell to ask Ted of all people about Brian. Ted hadn’t even known Justin had the number.

Justin laughed. “As if he’d tell me.”

Ted hadn’t known then about the cancer. So much about that conversation wouldn’t make sense until a few days later, when it all came out. Still, Justin’s concern touched Ted. He wondered what it would be like, to have someone care that much about you. Justin’s heart was wide open during that phone call, and he suddenly seemed a lot less frightening.

“He seems...” Ted had seriously considered the possibility that Brian was battling a drug addiction. “Under the weather.”

Cynthia told Ted later that Brian had threatened Justin with a restraining order when he'd shown up at Kinnetik that morning. Ted had heard a dull thudding behind his ears then, and his body had ached for the crystal, to just get lost for a little while.

It hadn't occurred to him until later that he might have been angry for Justin, protective of Justin. It had been that waiver, that softness in Justin's voice that had done it. Something deep inside Ted recognized that softness, responded to it.

Ted thinks maybe that was the beginning of the end.

--

The dreams that come nightly are full of pale skin and Justin's low, sleepy murmur. They move slowly, tangled in Ted's sheets, ensconced safely in Ted's home. These aren't just sex dreams; there's so much warmth and domesticity there that it makes Ted ache for the reality.

In his dreams, Justin reads magazines on his couch and argues with him about being a "fucking Republican". Justin spends hours sketching in Ted's bed and drapes himself warm and pliant across Ted's back as they sleep. Justin fucks him tenderly, hotly, madly, sweetly, and says his name as he comes.

Ted aches for the reality.

--

His first crucial mistake is telling Emmett about what's going on in his head.

"Teddy, sweetheart, forgive me," Emmett says, clutching his shoulders, "but are you out of your fucking mind?"

Ted is. He really is. He's been watching Justin for months, talking to him. Justin laughs at his jokes and says he looks nice in green. Sometimes, Justin touches his shoulder when he talks, and smiles brightly when Ted walks into the room. Sometimes Justin smirks at him behind Brian's back, when Brian is queening or preening over a project. Everything Justin does makes it that little bit harder, that little bit stronger.

“I think I must be,” Ted tells Emmett, sinking deeper into Debbie’s couch. Debbie has gone to dinner with Carl; it’s just the two of them and this terrible secret, alone in the house.

“How did this happen?” Emmett’s mouth is opening and closing like a fish, his hand fluttering against his chest like Scarlett O’Hara.

“Who knows?” Ted replies. “It just happened, like it always does.”

“This is a disaster!” Emmett moans. Ted wishes he’d chosen to confide in someone more tactful and sympathetic, but in this instance Emmett’s reaction is probably the best case scenario. Ted can’t even imagine what Michael would say.

It occurs to Ted that he’s loved, in recent years, Michael and Emmett and now Justin. It’s like a sickness, he thinks, that he can’t differentiate friendship from love; he can’t separate the two. He wonders if Brian is next on his list, or maybe Ben.

“I know it’s a disaster,” he says. “Jesus, I know. You don’t have to tell me. It’s just that he’s so...”

“Unattainable?” Emmett offers. “Inaccessible. Wait, I know, I’ve got one. Unavailable.”

“I was going to say beautiful,” Ted says glumly. “What the hell do I do?”

“Well normally, sweetie, I’d say honesty is the best policy. However, in this case, honesty is only going to get you humiliated – or worse, unemployed – so I’m going to advise you to keep your fucking mouth shut, okay?” Emmett smooths his hand down the back of Ted’s skull and kisses his forehead. “I love you Teddy, but this thing between you and Justin, it’s not happening. It can’t happen, and it won’t. I’m sorry.”

“It won’t?”

“Justin loves Brian,” Emmett says. “Hell, we all love Brian. I don’t think you would really want to make them miserable that way, even if you could. You don’t have that in you, Teddy.”

“No,” Ted says. “Of course not.”

However, he thinks of his dreams of Justin’s toothbrush next to his, Justin’s fingers laced through his own, and maybe that’s a lie.

--

Ted often sits with Justin and listens to his stories of Hollywood conquests, luxuriating in the glee with which Justin savors his recollections, the hand gestures and chuffs of laughter. During his seven month stay, Justin fucked no less than thirty-seven celebrities, ranging from small time cable actors to major stars like Connor James to “that guy in the toothpaste ad, the one where he talks to his cat.”

Ted is in awe of Justin, his confidence, his bravery. When Ted was Justin’s age he hadn’t really experienced anything. He’d been terrified of the world and his place in it, terrified of every little last thing. Justin was the opposite. It seemed like he devoured the world at breakneck speed, every experience within his grasp. In Justin Ted sees a recklessness he’s always felt he himself lacked. Even after everything with Chris Hobbs, everything with Brian, Justin refused to back down from anything.

Ted thinks that with Justin by his side, maybe he too could learn to be unafraid.

--

Brian begins to get suspicious.

“You sure are gracing us with your presence a lot lately, Theodore,” he drawls one day when Ted appears at the loft under the pretext of consulting with Brian about urgent Kinetik business. Justin appears from the bedroom with mussed hair and swollen lips. Ted knows he has interrupted them fucking, and his eyes follow Justin as he moves to the kitchen to retrieve a bottle of water.

“Hey Ted,” Justin says casually. His sweatshirt is only zipped halfway, and Ted tries not to stare at his smooth, pale chest. There’s a deep red mark below Justin’s collarbone which screams at Ted all the things that Brian had probably been doing to him.

“Hey Justin,” Ted says with a thick voice. When he tears his eyes away from Justin’s blotchy skin, Brian is staring at him with hard eyes, and Ted knows he’s blown it.

“Why don’t you give me those papers to look over,” Brian says, feigning casual. “I’ll look over them and get back to you.”

“Actually –” Ted begins.

“We were busy,” Brian interrupts. “Fucking. Go home. I’ll get back to you.”

Ted leaves. He goes home and listens to *La Bohème* alone in near darkness, and feels an anxious ulcer growing and pulsing in his gut.

--

He stops going to the loft, stops dropping by the diner when he thinks Justin will be alone. He’d been informally teaching Justin about the visual conventions of opera for a project Justin was working on at the IFA; he emails Justin a list of links and resources in place of any further discussion. He attempts to remove himself almost completely from Justin’s life.

Justin does not comment. Ted isn’t even sure he notices.

--

A month after Ted fades out of Justin’s day to day existence, Brian is still watching him like a hawk. Ted isn’t sure what Brian is waiting for, but he knows his boss is constantly poised and ready for attack.

Ted thinks that Brian can’t possibly imagine he’d one day act on his desire for Justin. The idea is preposterous. Ted can’t even imagine where he’d get the confidence.

Finally one day at Woody’s, Ted snaps. Justin hasn’t even arrived yet and Brian is watching him, waiting. The surveillance makes Ted nervous.

“Jesus Brian, stop it!” he says finally. “I’m not going to do anything about it. I just keep feeling this way by accident.”

Brian blinks slowly. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Brian,” Ted says impatiently.

Brian’s lips press into a thin line. “Just don’t make him hurt you. You already know what he’ll say.”

Ted does know what he’ll say. That’s why he’ll never give Justin reason to say it.

--

The problem is that Ted isn’t really supposed to drink under the rules of his rehabilitation, but he’s lenient with himself on special occasions. On Michael’s birthday Ted has five glasses of wine that go straight to his head, and somehow Justin ends up driving him home.

The moment when his lips touch Justin’s is the most terrifying of his entire life, or it seems it.

Justin tastes faintly of beer and cigarettes, though Ted hadn’t seen him smoke all night. Dimly, Ted remembers that Brian had been chain-smoking all evening, that Brian had at one point been making out with Justin in a corner for hours. He wonders what else it is that he tastes between Justin’s lips, but then Justin’s pushing him away with both hands and saying, “Ted, what the fuck?”

“Justin,” Ted hears himself saying. His heart beats terrified within the cage of his chest. “I think I’m in love with you.”

Justin stares at him with his arms outstretched between them, hands still planted on Ted’s shoulders and pushing him gently away.

“Ted,” Justin says. “I promise you you don’t love me half as much as you think you do right now. Or you wouldn’t if you knew what a pain in the ass I am.”

“I’ve felt this way for months,” Ted says desperately.

“I – I think I just thought you wanted to fuck me,” Justin says. He takes another step back. “You know what I’m going to say, right?”

Ted doesn’t think his heart is beating in his chest anymore. “I think I need to hear it. I think it might help.”

“I don’t feel the same way. I never will.” Justin’s words are harsh but his eyes are gentle, and he reaches one hand up and touches Ted’s cheek. “It’ll be okay.”

“You couldn’t ever love me?” Ted asks.

“Jesus,” Justin says and drops his hand. “Ted, I’m not going to do this dramatic bullshit, okay? I’m just – not. Goodnight.”

And then he’s gone, and Ted is left alone in his apartment, stinking like red wine and cheese crackers. He can’t believe he just did that.

This might be a very big problem.

--

At first, Ted isn’t sure if Justin has told Brian about it, but Brian seems to alternate between almost frightening compassion and thinly veiled fury all day, so it seems that he has. Ted isn’t sure what that means. He isn’t sure if Justin will ever speak to him again, and he’s too afraid to ask Brian.

A few days later he runs into Justin at a pharmacy on Willis and Burke. He apologises awkwardly for his behaviour the other night, and Justin shifts from foot to foot but does not avert his gaze.



“We can be friends,” Justin says. “That’s all.”

“That’s all,” Ted echoes.

“It wouldn’t ever be right between you and me, Ted,” he says. “I think you know that.”

“I do,” Ted says. “I do know that. I promise.”

Then he thinks of his dreams of Justin, Justin in his bed and his kitchen, his shower, a beach forty years from now in Florida. He thinks of all that, and his promise feels like a lie.

## Working Against Me

When it happens, Michael gets a hug and some promises. Late afternoon sun stretching across the hardwood floor. The two of them settled on the futons Brian has fucked Justin into a hundred times before. When it happens, Michael gets comfort.

Justin gets the click of a lock and a Blockbuster fine for damaged merchandise. In the bus on the way home he studies the dvd - Wonder Boys because Brian likes Tobey Maguire, even if Justin disagrees - the long crack in the centre where it bounced against the floor.

Justin gets an empty bed. Justin gets three days of nightmares, Brian lying pale in a hospital bed somewhere. Justin gets Daphne's sympathy and long hours on the computer. Googling cancer, testicular cancer, rate of recovery, radiation, probability of recurrence. Googling Robinowitz to make sure he's the best.

Justin gets only Brian's anger. Brian's screaming. Brian's silence.

He wills his phone to ring.

When Justin sees her, Deb is still pissed at Brian and thinks nothing of his absence. Justin doesn't tell her, because he thinks it might just about kill her. Sometimes he thinks Brian is her favourite son.

He calls Brian fifty times like a stalker.

He's furious at Michael. For selling him out, even if he didn't mean to. For receiving everything that is denied to Justin. Furious because he knows, he knows that Michael can't possibly look after Brian the way he needs. Twenty years of experience, and Mikey still can't handle Brian the way that Justin can.

He goes to the loft and uses his key, but Brian has thrown the deadbolt and that's the first time that Justin thinks that maybe this is for real. He imagines not being with Brian in six months, in a year. Time hasn't stretched this endless since he felt Ethan's hands in his hair in the warm morning sun. Time crumbling meaninglessly along with his three am curfew.

He is furious with Brian.

He loves Brian so much.

The fifth day it's wrenching, it's him waking up at three am and having to drink himself to sleep. It's an empty bottle of whiskey and kneeling over the toilet, Daphne saying, "He'll come around," and Justin thinking, maybe he won't, maybe he really really won't.

The sixth day is worse.

A website uses phrases like mature teratoma and lymphatic invasion, and Justin thinks of Fight Club, Bob's bitch tits, Remaining Men Together, and he wishes he had a more useful knowledge base. He types left handed because his right is throbbing from the stress.

The eighth day is the enlightenment, and Michael's redemption. Justin has almost convinced himself he doesn't care, but it suddenly makes so much sense in that insane Brian Kinney neurotic spectacular way. Oh, Brian,, he thinks with a long suffering sigh, and that's when he does the groceries.

As if he'd fucking leave. Justin loves Brian Kinney to death, but sometimes, he's a fucking moron.

He tells him that, later. In the dead of night. Bed not empty anymore, thank god. Brian lying limp and exhausted. Smelling slightly of puke and clutching Justin's elbow, murmuring and unsettled in his sleep.

Sometimes, he thinks life would be easier if Brian didn't love him so much.

## Chart Topper

In retrospect, it was probably Justin's fault that Brian happened to be tipsy drunk. He'd been meeting Brian at Woody's after work, but after work turned into after coffee with Daphne, after driving his sister to soccer, after dropping off some sketches for Michael. After three hours in which Brian entertained himself with a bottle of Beam, some nice imported beer, and two or three blowjobs fumbled and sweaty in the bathroom.

By the time Justin arrived, Brian was loose and smiling, elbows spread out across the bar. Loose and smiling and offering Justin a welcoming one armed hug. A laughing, wet, open kiss against his temple. Fingers in his hair. Mumbling, incoherent greetings. The press of glass into his hand, because Justin was, apparently, worthy of the final dregs of Brian's bourbon.

They didn't stay long.

At the loft, Justin shoulders him towards the bed, half-listening as Brian regales him with tales of his many recent conquests. The first guy was hot but didn't cover his teeth. The third guy had blonde hair like Justin's but wasn't near as pretty. Justin patiently guides Brian up the steps.

"Justin," Brian says as the collapse against the sheets, his eyes turned soft-focus like a vaseline lens. "Justin?"

Justin slides his hands up Brian's chest, beneath Brian's t-shirt. Slides the cotton over his head and kisses Brian's bare chest. "What?" he says gently.

Brian's crooked smile, something childlike and sweet behind his eyes. Something drunken and mostly mumbled in his voice. "You're my favourite."

Justin laughs, nuzzles his nose beneath the bone of Brian's jaw. "I know."

"No, really. You're my -" Brian loses focus for a minute, swipes his hand across his mouth. "My top ten."

"Really."

"Like Britney," Brian mumbles. "Triple platinum."

"Screaming teenage girls?"

"Porny centrefold," Brian says. "Go get the camera."

"Go to sleep, Brian," Justin orders. Presses kisses against Brian's cheeks. Loves him so much, sometimes. Even when he's stupid and drunk and caving in on himself like this. Loves the way Brian loves him, cluelessly. Loves being Brian's favourite person in the world.

He watches Brian sleeping, so close to a coma. He curls himself against Brian's back, and says, "You fucking idiot."

Brian does not stir.

## nearly there

Once upon a time, Brian absently believed what everybody said behind his back. That he loved Michael and Michael loved him and that really they should be together, but Brian kept fucking up the process. He didn't think about it a lot, but occasionally when particularly high, he'd roll his joint between his fingers and think, 'Yeah, they're probably right.'

It takes a few years with Justin to figure out that if it might be his destiny to be with Mikey, might be written in the fucking stars, but if that's true then fuck destiny and fuck fate because Brian Kinney will do whatever the fuck he wants, and he wants Justin.

It takes another year for him to figure out that Michael was never his destiny to begin with. That Michael can be a lot of things, his best friend and the person he's loved longer than anything in the world, his sidekick, his superhero, the ground beneath his feet. Michael can be love. Justin can be so much more than that.

Pretty much by the time Brian fucks Michael in the yard at their old high school, he's already figured out it's a fucking bad idea.

--

Justin knows. Not that he fucked Mikey, specifically, but knows something, and Brian hears it in the absent, unstable treble of Justin's voice on the answering machine. It's been three days since they last spoke, and Brian misses him even more than he did before, with an infantile ferocity that overrides all the saner voices in his head.

He didn't fuck Michael because he misses Justin. That's the excuse of pussies, like that two bit fiddler Justin ran off with a while ago. He hangs out at Deb's to watch television because he misses Justin. He works insane hours because he misses Justin. He spends close to nine hundred dollars a month on long distance phone calls because he misses Justin.

He fucks other men because he's Brian Fucking Kinney and he can. He fucks Michael like something he's always meant to do, but never quite got around to. Like he's working his way through some fucked up to do list, miles to go before he sleeps.

He listens to Justin's message three times because Justin says I love you and at some point, Brian became pathetically grateful for that fact. Then he goes to bed.

--

Brian dreams that Michael moves into the loft and wants to put his giant Captain Astro over the entrance way, and a cardboard cutout of Rage in the bedroom. Michael's comics where the art books should be, Michael's stupid pajamas in the closet. In his dream, the loft smells different, and Brian can't find his way around in the dark.

Brian wakes in a sweat at 3:47am. The loft is silent, but somewhere out on the street a drunken man is singing show tunes, or some variation thereof. Brian can't stay in his bed a fucking moment longer. He showers, swigging from a bottle of Beam beneath lukewarm water. He leans his forehead against the wall, and for one of few moments in his life, he wishes he wasn't such an asshole.

--

As usual, Justin doesn't react the way Brian expects him to. After four and a half days of avoiding all his calls, Brian finally sits down with a joint and a bottle of Tequila and dials Justin's number.

It turns out he doesn't need the Tequila.

"Jesus, Brian!" Justin says. "You fuck! I thought you were going to tell me they found more cancer, or something." He sounds relieved, and Brian mostly feels what he felt before, which was guilty. "I even called Michael to interrogate him, but he was weird too. At least now I know why."

"Was he?" Brian says. "I wouldn't know. I haven't talked to him."

Justin is silent, and Brian feels something close to panic struggling within his chest. "I'm sorry," Brian says.

He's glad when Justin doesn't say, 'Sorry is bullshit' another parrot-like recitation of the laws of a time Brian barely remembers.

Instead, Justin says, "I never really thought you'd do it."

Brian did, once upon a time. Not in any tangible way, not in any kind of thought he could capture in his mind, but in a transient, unintelligible way, he'd always thought it would happen one day. One day when Brian finally decided it should. He'd always known he would make the first move.

He doesn't tell Justin any of that, but he thinks maybe Justin knows. He's a pretty smart kid.

"So where do we stand?" Justin asks, and Brian hears the telltale flick of a lighter, a puff in, a puff out. Justin only smokes when he's stressed out.

For a minute, they're both silent. "I wish it didn't happen," Brian says. "It was ... unproductive." He means the sex was bad, and Justin knows it.

Justin exhales heavily, and Brian imagines his right hand shaking around a cigarette, and winces. "Brian," Justin says seriously. "If you tell me I've got nothing to worry about, then I'll believe you."

"You've got nothing to worry about." He means it. He thinks Michael might hate him a little now. He thinks that's why it never happened before.

"Okay," Justin says bravely. "Okay."

"Are you?" Brian says. The sound of Justin's voice is making his throat ache, and he lights a cigarette of his own. "Okay?"

"I think so, mostly," Justin says. "I might be crying a little bit."

Fuck. Fucking, fuck. Son of a fucking fuck fuck fuck.

"Justin," Brian says desperately.

"No, no," Justin says, and laughs a little. "Better now than when I'm actually around to queen out and murder you both." He snuffles a little, and he's so much braver than he used to be. No allergies for Justin Fucking Taylor. "Are you okay?"

Brian thinks he might have died a little in Michael's eyes, but that's okay, mostly. He couldn't be a god forever. The sex was bad, and Michael was disappointed. That's okay.

"I miss you," Brian says instead of answering.

"I know," Justin replies. "Come visit me soon."

--

Michael lets himself in using his key. Brian is reading a magazine on the bed, and Mikey walks slowly up the stairs, standing beside the platform and staring impassively at Brian's face. The colored lights over the bed make shadows across Michael's cheeks. . It's incongruous with the way Brian feels starkly lit, like he's been split wide open. Like he's on the operating table again, giant fluorescent lights burning overhead. The lights were the shape of Michael's eyes.

"Hey," Michael says. He's looking at Brian as if he'll have some answer as how to fix this whole fucking mess.

"Hey," Brian says. He's got no clue.

"We... really fucked up," Mikey says. "I can't even look at Ben. Justin called the other day, I felt like the world's biggest cunt."

"Don't worry about Justin," Brian says.

"Fuck you!" Michael crosses his arms tightly across his chest, his fingers making white moons against his biceps. "I'm not the kind of guy that is comfortable fucking his friend's boyfriend!"

"Maybe you're just not comfortable fucking me!" Brian says. "The feeling is fucking mutual, trust me."

Brian throws his magazine to the side. Michael's mouth is hanging open a little, and his arms clench impossibly tighter. "I didn't think it would be that..."

"Terrible?" Brian offers. He taps a cigarette free of the deck and lights it, trying not to watch Michael's shifting feet.

"Awkward," Michael finishes.

"Terrible," Brian repeats. "Sit down."



Michael does. On the floor. Like a fucking five year old. At Brian's look, he balks. "I'm not getting into bed with you!"

Brian stares. Michael's arms clench across his chest. Beneath his blue t-shirt, he's starting to get cleavage. Brian arches a brow.

"Have you told Ben?" Brian asks patiently.

"Have you told Justin?" Michael retorts, and he looks like Debbie in drag.

"Yes."

Michael stops at that, mouth slack. He blinks. "Fuck."

Brian shrugs.

"Fuck." Mikey repeats. "He's going to think I sent him halfway across the country just so I could like, seduce you or whatever!"

"Didn't you?" Brian asks.

"Fuck you, Brian. You're the one that bought that fucking shit."

"It was just E, Mikey. Just E."

"Yeah, well." Michael rests his head in his hands. Brian wonders if he has slept recently, and feels a little bad for torturing him.

"Justin is fine," Brian says, and doesn't add that they're fucking lucky that Justin is fine. That Justin could have been a whole lot fucking worse, and two years ago, he would have been. Brian doesn't tell Michael they made Justin cry.

Michael's sigh of relief is almost comical. "He just ... didn't care?"

"It has nothing to do with him," Brian says, but that's not what he means.

Michael's snort of disbelief is less funny.

"I didn't fuck you because of him," Brian says. "I fucked you because –"

"You're an asshole?"

"Because I'm an asshole."

"I'm an asshole too." Michael scrubs his face with his small hands. Brian remembers them clenching hard around his dick. Too fucking hard. "The first week we met, Justin told me I was waiting for you to finish jerking me off. I keep thinking he's right. Maybe I have been waiting to get that handjob."

Brian smiles a little and hands Michael a cigarette. Michael stares at the cigarette as if he's not quite sure what to do with it. "Maybe I've been waiting to give it to you."

"We're so fucked up."

"Call it an extreme case of blue balls," Brian drawls. "If I'd just fucked you fifteen years ago, we would have been fine."

"Why now?"

Brian blinks. "I guess I had to do it some time. Michael," he says. "I fucked you because of you."

Michael nods slowly. "Then I guess we're fine anyway."

They are fine. But Brian knows they're different.

--

If Brian spends the next three weeks in Hollywood, it's not because he's avoiding Michael. Or Ben. Not completely, anyway, because at least seventy percent of it is Justin, and Brian's need to – not grovel, exactly. Reassure.

Justin seems okay.

Michael says Ben isn't okay, and Brian would feel worse if he'd ever considered it happening again. He hasn't. Not for a single fucking second. Not after Michael came all over his hands on that dark basketball court. Not before that, either. Brian would feel worse if he didn't think Ben would get over it.

Justin introduces him to movie stars and the lead singer from The Strokes. Mostly, though, he seems to want to stay at home on the couch with Brian. Brian wouldn't mind, except Justin has a really fucking uncomfortable couch.

He wants Justin to come home.

The second week of his visit, Mikey calls, and Justin answers the phone. Brian can feel the impending silence aching in his teeth, and he has the urge to grab the phone, to save them from whatever the fuck is about to happen.

Justin just says, "Hey," and asks about their comic.

Brian wonders how the fuck he got so lucky, and when Justin got so fucking mature. Probably when he was waiting around for Brian to catch up.

Brian takes the phone and talks to Michael, hears Ben in the background, and thinks he's nearly there.

# An Absence

The first thing Justin misses is Michael's wedding, and he tries to pretend that's not a big deal. It is, though, and Justin feels an immense loss, like he's sold a kidney on the black market. Like he's woken up shaken and alone in a bath full of ice, and there's a gaping hole in his stomach, bleeding and festering and reminding him that there's something that should be there, but isn't.

Brian says he's being melodramatic. Brian smooths big hands over Justin's cheeks, using his thumbs to press Justin's lips into a smile. Brian looks at the dejection in Justin's eyes, and then tells him every detail of the ceremony, every detail down to the colour of the balloons and the name of the celebrant's wife. Justin thinks Brian might be making up a lot of these details, because they were things that Brian would never care about, or remember. He does it to make Justin happy, though, so Justin wraps both arms around Brian's waist and squeezes, inhales the smell of Brian's cigarettes, and imagines him as Michael's best man. Imagines the look on Debbie's face, Ted and Emmett crying in the front row. Ben all happy and laughing, with his Roman nose. The denim of their jeans, and Brian's dour disapproval.

Still, Justin feels the loss.

--

The other first thing Justin misses is Brian's acid trip hell ride back to the states aboard what Brian would forever swear was some kind of neo-medieval torture device, and that is almost worse. He can see Brian's broken body, feel his clammy skin, taste the sweat and shifty tears that spilled on Brian's cheeks. He has nightmares about Brian's struggling breath, his overworked heart, the cancer waiting inside him. For his own sake, he clumps the ride in with Michael's happy gay wedding, because he's not sure he could handle them separately. For Michael's wedding, he feels a loss, but for Brian, he feels only shame. He should have been there. He should have been with Brian.

A few days afterward, Brian has him drive to an abandoned lot on the outskirts of the city, bicycle haphazardly shoved in the trunk of the 'Vette. They destroy it using what Justin suspects is the same sledgehammer Brian used to annihilate the lock on the back room of Babylon way back when, because Brian is the kind of freak that would go back and get something like that. The type that would go back and get it and then hide it in one of the top shelves of his closet, waiting for Brian's next surge of destructive hysteria.

"It was so important to you," Justin says, staring down at its mangled remains. They'd fucked it up together because Brian had difficulty using only the one hand. Justin rotated his wrist and felt the answering tug of abused muscles.

Brian says, "I don't need it anymore," and lights his cigarette.

Justin stares.

"It served its purpose," Brian continues. He slings his good arm around Justin's shoulder, and Justin clutches at his wrist. Brian nudges twisted steel with his toe. "I fucking hate cycling."

Justin knows he does. He can list from memory Brian's weird likes and dislikes, knows them by instinct and experience. For instance, he knows that Brian hates Alabama, though he doesn't think the topic has ever been raised. He knows that Brian hates Alabama the same way he knows Brian hates Baz Luhrmann films. He just does.

"Come on," Brian says. "You have a flight to catch."

Brian kisses him goodbye at the airport and makes stupid jokes about traveling salesmen and wives left at home, but Justin looks at him and already feels the absence, a hysterical mad kind of longing that leaves his hands trembling and his cheeks pale. He touches Brian's jaw, looks away so that Brian will not see the dampness welling up behind his eyelids. Michael is already standing in the background, waiting to drive Brian home. Justin waves, and Michael smiles tightly, lifts his hand like a phone against his ear.

'Call me,' Michael mouths, and Justin nods. Finally looks back to Brian, who is staring at him with a raised eyebrow and a stiff upper lip. Brian slides his hand across the nape of Justin's neck and smiles gently. Justin watches the muscles working in his jaw.

Brian presses the side of his face against Justin's, slides his hand up alongside Justin's ear. "I'm proud of you," he murmurs, and Justin feels something threatening to bend and snap within his chest. He nods mutely, incapable of saying anything for fear he'll queen out and beg Brian to let him stay, which would just be stupid and embarrassing.

He wants to go back to the loft and climb into the shower with Brian. He wants to hang out at Michael's store pretending to actually get some work done, wait tables at the diner, complain about the gross female things Daphne leaves around their apartment. He wants to know he'll be coming home tomorrow.

He's not, though. He's not coming home for a long time, because suddenly six months is fucking forever, and can't imagine not touching Brian for that long.

Brian kisses his temple and Justin hugs his side, presses desperate fingers against his back, his face into his chest. Closes his eyes and breathes Brian's cigarettes and thirty dollar soap smell, feels the scratchy knit of Brian's sweater against his skin.

"Later," Brian says gives him a nudge away, but then brings him back again, kisses him the way he does when he's trying to say 'I love you' but doesn't know it.

Justin bites him hard on the lip and hopes it leaves a mark.

"Love you," Justin says. "Later."

He calls Brian from the plane and says, "I'm proud of you too."

--

He's never lived on his own before, and he thought it would be quieter than this. The world seems to live within his walls, the constant thrum of music and car alarms. Brian's loft is like that, sometimes, but it seems to rest so far above the rest of the world that Justin has never really noticed. The loft is a quiet place, wrapped up in the silence of Brian's universe.

As he tries to sleep the first night, he thinks of Brian's huge windows and Brian's long floors, the white walls and washed cement of Home.

He clutches at his sheets, hears the steady beep of a truck reversing, and curses the moment he ever heard Brett Fucking Keller's name.

--

The second thing he misses is Carl moving in with Debbie, which Brian seems to think is the funniest thing he's ever seen. He leaves a message on Justin's machine while he's at work.

”There’s all this grey shit in the closet,” Brian says, snorting and puffing on his cigarette. “And a gun holster hanging over the back of the kitchen chair. Debbie’s barely restraining herself from sticking fucking rainbows all over it.”

Justin listens to the message three times, imagines brown, beige old Carl in Debbie’s Technicolor dreamcoat home, and dreams of her lasagna.

## a presence

The first time Justin finds a photo of himself in the loft, he stops and stares at it for a full five minutes, brain buzzing as he assures himself that yes, this really is happening. Brian is sleeping on the new couch, face mashed up against the leather, and Justin glances at him as if he would really consider asking him for answers.

It’s a framed photo. Black leather frame, black matte insert. Black and white photo of Justin just-woken-up, bleary-eyed and cotton-mouthed, rumped blonde hair, but smiling. Skin pale against dark sheets. Justin barely remembers Brian taking it. He thinks it might have been the morning after this year’s King of Babylon contest, the morning after too much E and too many guys and having a threesome with Brian and the winner. Brian had made fun of him for being so fucking high, and Justin had seen extra colours til three in the afternoon.

He thinks it might have been then. He knows there are other photos, of him drawing or fucking or taking a shower, and he knows that Brian has them all neatly organized in secure files on his computer. He knows that if he clicks on the file ‘Disneyland’ and types in the password (‘brando’, that gigantic nerd) he’ll come up with a page full of photos of Justin on his knees, Justin smiling, Justin’s cock, Brian’s mouth. Justin working on Rage, naked and focused in the middle of the night. Justin chopping onions and pointing a knife in Brian’s direction. Justin spread out sleeping sock-footed on the floor. Justin giving Brian the finger. Brian tries to pretend it’s a file full of porn, but Justin has seen the truth.

He knows about the photos. He’s just never seen them on display before.

--

The first time Brian frames one of Justin’s pieces, Justin walks past it fifteen times before he notices. The sixteenth time, the landscape of Gayopolis stretches before him on the wall of Brian’s office, blue lights twinkling against the glass. A whole world created by Justin and Michael, working tirelessly into the night. It seems to fit here, in Kinnetik. Rage’s other kingdom.

"Brian?" Justin says. Brian glances up. Justin gestures at the frame hanging bright against a white wall. "Artists expect some kind of financial compensation for their work."

Brian glares at him, shifting papers around his desk. "Don't you owe me thousands of dollars?"

Justin stares at him blankly. Brian ignores him, but they go to Justin's favourite restaurant for dinner, and Brian buys expensive champagne.

--

When Michael tacks a photo of Brian and Justin cuddling at Deb's to his fridge, Justin lets out a surprised burst of laughter, because it's fucking Michael, and it's so out of the blue.

"Michael?" Justin says, gesturing to the photo. Brian's grinning face, pushed drunkenly against Justin's chest. Justin's arm around his shoulder. So fucking happy that night, everyone getting along. Everyone well and glowing from the wine. In the periphery of the photo, Gus' hand grabbed at Brian's jeans.

"It's a nice photo," Michael says defensively, crossing his arms over his chest in that way he has. Justin remembers the first night they met. Arms crossed and defiant, determined that Justin get lost the fuck now.

They've come so far. Everything has come so far, and sometimes, when he notices, it freaks Justin out. He remembers when Michael hated him, and Brian may as well have, and that was only three years ago, but it feels like fucking forever. Forever since they were all stupid kids, because Justin knows he's not the only one that has grown up.

He thinks of Michael's excited midnight calls to his cell, Brian's early morning wake up calls. The way Brian loves him, now. More openly than ever, every day crossing some boundary that had seemed concrete and intransient before. Every day taking some step towards what they're supposed to be.

He looks at the photo, and he remembers the first dinner at Deb's. Brian pretending to ignore him but stroking his thigh beneath the table. Michael glaring at him with barely concealed malice. Ted and Emmett mostly unaware of his existence, except when it suited them. Lindsay and Mel enthralled by his presence because he was 17 and sweet, and they had their own baby boy asleep in the den.



Justin remembers those days fondly, but they seem so far away. Three fucking years, and he barely remembers who those people were. Barely knows them, and if he walked into their houses the way he is today, they wouldn't recognize him.

He's actually pretty fucking proud of that. Pretty proud that he knows them now, when it turns out they're probably the best, most human people he's ever met.

He takes a couple sodas from the fridge and gives one to Michael. He thinks things have turned out pretty fucking well.

## Private Message

**jtrage:** hey, asshole.

**bkinney:** I can't believe I downloaded this fucking thing.

**jtrage:** it's because you miss me. 😏

**bkinney:** What the fuck is that???

**jtrage:** huh?

**jtrage:** you mean the emoticon?

**bkinney:** Emoticon.

**jtrage:** that's what they're called. that's what everyone calls them. i guess they're a little after your time. 😊

**bkinney:** That one looks like it's blissed out on E.

**jtrage:** it's me, politely mocking you.

**bkinney:** Fuck you, you have an unfair advantage.

**jtrage:** click the little man in sunglasses.

**bkinney:** 😏

**bkinney:** That's you.

**jtrage:** 🙄

**jtrage:** i don't get why you're so hostile to this concept. you've used chatrooms before.

**bkinney:** People hardly make smiley faces in the kinds of chat I partake in. You just send around photos of your cock and wait for some hot guy to offer to suck it.

**jtrage:** you poor thing. you have to use the internet to get laid. 😏

**bkinney:** You're the most annoying person I've ever met.

**jtrage:** you wound me.

**jtrage:** your proclamations of hate, they are full of credibility.

**jtrage:** it is clear that you despise me.

**jtrage:** my life, it is over.

**bkinney:** Fuck you.

**jtrage:** i'm supposed to be working.

**bkinney:** Great fucking employee you are. Why are you there so late?

**jtrage:** i'm not, i'm at home. i brought some stuff with me.

**bkinney:** All work and no play, Sunshine.

jtrage: i think i play too much. it's actually getting kind of boring.

bkinney: Yeah?

jtrage: yeah. we go to all these different clubs that look exactly the same, and we do the same drugs, and talk to the same people, who all look the same.

jtrage: it's very discomfoting.

jtrage: and no-one sees how funny it is.

bkinney: Poor Little Justin Taylor. 😊

jtrage: 🙄

jtrage: i guess i'm homesick.

**BUZZ!!!**

jtrage: thankyou for your sensitivity.

bkinney: I just wanted to see what would happen.

bkinney: You're boring when you indulge in this self pity shit.

jtrage: i'm just saying i think it'd be more fun if you were here.

**BUZZ!!!**

jtrage: just say, 'you too', brian.

bkinney: You're not taking drugs from people you don't know, are you?

jtrage: no, mom.

bkinney: One might worry if you did.

jtrage: one might, might one? 😊

bkinney: Yes.

jtrage: i've been using condoms, too, and wearing my seatbelt. though i can't promise not to talk to strangers, since that's all there is here.

bkinney: That's because you're incapable of making friends.

jtrage: leave me alone, people are annoying.

bkinney: Yeah.

jtrage: i miss you.

jtrage: if you buzz me again, i swear to god i will kill you.

bkinney: It's pretty boring here. Without you.

jtrage: so you miss me too.

bkinney: A little. Maybe.

jtrage: this sucks. 🙄

bkinney: Yeah.

jtrage: any chance you can make it out here soon?

jtrage: 🙄

bkinney: Maybe.

jtrage: please?

bkinney: How desperate are you?

jtrage: i'm so lonely i'm thinking about getting a cat. 😊

bkinney: I'll get Cynthia to work something out.

bkinney: You are not bringing a cat into the loft.

bkinney: You're allergic to cats! You'll start wheezing and coughing all over the place, and then you'll be no use to me.

jtrage: brian, calm the fuck down, i'm not getting a cat.

jtrage: i was messing around.

jtrage: oh, fuck. i have to go. brett is here. 🙄

jtrage: he's so annoying, i swear to god.

jtrage: he thinks we're like, friends and stuff.

bkinney: 😏

jtrage: shut up, i have to go.

jtrage: 🙄

jtrage has signed out

bkinney: ...

bkinney: 😏

## The Documents

Brian gets his affairs in order. He makes notes before he sees his lawyer, neat columns of who should get what. He deletes the list three times and starts over. He plays with the formatting endlessly, putting names in bold and shifting the alignment of the text.

Mikey

Michael

Michael C. Novotny

He's never written a will before.

Brian sits back in his chair and watches the lights of the city moving across his hardwood floors, his stark white walls. Justin's hardwood floors, Justin's stark white walls.

He makes a note. A note that says, 'The loft', beneath another that says 'Naked Guy'. Brian thinks maybe he should scratch them both and write 'Loft & Contents', because last time that's what the list amounted to anyway. Loft. Recliner. Mies Van Der Rohe coffee table, Phillipe Starck juicer. All these little pieces of his designer flesh he'll leave for Justin when he's gone.

He stares at the words burning black against the screen, and changes the font to blue.

--

Brian gets his affairs in order. He sits in the lawyer's office Monday morning, watching the midday sun bouncing off his lawyer's bald head. Brian thinks of Vance, and adjusts the sleeve of his Armani suit. He wants to be buried in Prada.

The lawyer says to put that in the will.

--

Justin is furious with him, and that itches at Brian's skin beneath the buzz of radiation. Justin smiles and comforts and cleans up his puke, and someplace inside he's silently seething, silently fuming, silently turning himself inside out.

Brian asks him about it, tired and weak from spewing. His ribs ache.

"You're pissed off at me," he says quietly, resting his head against the tile. He feels old and malnourished.

Justin kisses his temple, smooths sweating hair behind Brian's ear. "Nah."

"Fuck off, you are too."

"Of course I am, you piece of shit. When all this is over, you're taking me to the Bahamas to grovel for my forgiveness. You asshole."

When all this is over, Brian thinks, and wants desperately to fight with Justin now.

"No Ibiza?" Brian murmurs, drowsy and sinking. He shudders, and then Justin has plastered himself to Brian's back, warm and small and pressing moist kisses to Brian's neck.

"Nah," Justin says. "It's a long way to go for a bathhouse with sand."

--

"I'm leaving you the loft," Brian says one day without meaning to. Justin is slicing carrots to make vegetable soup, and the knife pauses in mid air and wobbles dangerously.

"I'm going to pretend I don't know what you're talking about." Justin is calm, and goes back to slicing the carrots into tiny, neat cubes.

"I'm talking about my will." Brian leans both elbows against the bench, watching as the set of Justin's mouth quivered and quaked. The carrot begins to look mutilated.

"Shut up, Brian."

"Justin -" Brian is beginning to think maybe he should take the knife away, and then it clatters to the bench, spinning a wide arc that reflects the light and makes him dizzy. Carrots tumble to the floor like fucked up snow.

"I can't hear this."

Justin moves away, stepping over to the steel girder in the middle of the floor, pressing his forehead against it like the fucking drama queen he is. Brian watches the heavy rise and fall of his shoulders, and moves up close. His hands either side of Justin's body, he presses in tight, trapping the kid between his body and the steel.

"Rock and a hard place," Justin mutters, and Brian can hear the underlying panic in his voice. "You're not going to die, Brian. Christ."

"Okay," Brian says.

"Not 'Okay'. Say, 'You are right, Justin. I am not going to die.'"

Brian is silent. Justin sighs heavily, crushing his face against the pole. Brian thinks he might be crying.

”Justin, I –“ Brian stops, because he’s never been able to say this. Never really wanted to say it, but something in him wants to say it now, wants to say it with the urgency and ferocity that can only be borne of being scared out of your fucking mind.

”Don’t,” Justin says finally, so quiet Brian can barely hear it. “Don’t do this.”

”I –“

”Brian.”

”I –“

”Brian.”

”Don’t you dare say it, asshole.”

”Don’t say I love you?” Brian says quietly, sliding his hand below the fabric of Justin’s t-shirt, softly rubbing his stomach. “Will the real Justin Taylor please stand up?”

Justin loses his shit. Doesn’t speak to Brian for three days, just quietly makes the soup and cleans the toilet and presses against Brian’s back at night. Justin doesn’t sleep; every morning Brian finds half-shreds of sketches fluttering beneath the sheets, in his hair, along a wide path to the kitchen.

Then Brian says it again, and this time Justin almost smiles.

Almost.

--

Michael is pissed off about the will too, and Brian is beginning to think that they're all in denial. He tells Michael this, giggling and guffawing around a joint.

"Yeah, well, you're in reverse denial!" Mikey squawked, tugging the joint out of Brian's reach.

"I'm what?"

"You're acting like it's like, a dead certainty that you're going to die!"

"It is."

"It is not, you asshole. The doctors said --"

"What the fuck does this have to do with doctors?" Brian laughed. "I'm gonna die one day, Mikey, and if I want Justin to live in my house and you to drive my fucking car when I'm gone, then I need papers and that's my business."

"Brian --"

"Leave it the fuck alone."

"Tell me you don't think this cancer will kill you."

"I don't think this cancer will kill me," Brian repeated. Michael gave a sigh of relief, which Brian ignored. "But there's nothing like having your balls nuked to remind you that something else will."

--

A few weeks pass, and Justin forgets, but Brian doesn't. Brian makes copies of his will in triplicate, locks them up all over. Brian pays attention to his health. Doesn't go to Babylon that much. Quits smoking, except for pot. Quits taking E, but drinks like a fucking fish. Starts eating a lot of fresh fruit and vegetables, and starts drinking decaf. Justin tells him that without caffeine he's like the living dead anyway, so Brian goes back to regular.

He starts saying things when they occur to him, and sends Michael a lot of stupid emails. Arranges to take Justin to Tokyo. Invests money for Gus' college fund.

Every time he says the word 'love', Justin eyes him like he's grown a pair of tits. Brian starts saying it more often just because the look on Justin's face amuses him.

Brian deals with things, his own way.

Then one day he wakes up, and he's Brian Fucking Kinney again, so he goes to Babylon and fucks six men in two hours, and fists a seventh before dawn. Justin is visibly relieved.

They go to the diner. Brian makes fun of Ted, sneers at Melanie, teases Hunter until Justin nearly explodes. Justin consumes three plates of bacon. Brian looks at him in disdain, pokes at his grapefruit, and then steals all Justin's eggs.

Justin says the word 'love', and Brian scowls.

Justin calls it the resurrection of the great Brian Kinney. Justin says they should celebrate this day every year, like Easter.

The next year, they go to the Bahamas. Brian fucks the dive instructor and takes too much E, and they argue the whole time about Justin's decision to turn down a job offer in New York Fucking City. The argument culminates in Justin screaming that he's a maladjusted fuckwit, and Brian storming out and spending the night fucking a cabana boy on the beach.

Justin declares it the best holiday he's ever taken. Brian considers crashing the car off the next fucking bridge.

--



Brian gets his affairs in order. Lines up three copies of that fucking will and burns them, one by one. He watches Lindsay's name crackle and burn with the heat inside the chamber of the building's incinerator, and smokes three cigarettes.

He watches the will burn away to nothing, and he almost feels free.

## Stage

Brian Kinney does not fall in love. He stumbles and staggers, veering drunk and wild into excruciating lust and desperate affection, tumbling angrily into respect and tenderness. He falls into a lot of things, but he refuses to believe that love is one of them.

Justin thinks Brian is full of shit.

--

"Get me some juice."

"No."

"I want it, though."

"So get up. The fridge is right there."

"It's too far away!"

"Christ. You are such a princess. Here."

--

They live in a kind of daze that lends itself to bliss, but they're both so fucking crazy that most of the time it's chaos. The kind of chaos that involves brutal fucks against the big metal door, dazed snuggling against the back of the couch, mornings punctuated with cigarettes and stains that line the curve of Justin's flesh. Paint stains, finger stains. Bruises. Smudges of charcoal along his arm and clouds of chocolate on his mouth.

Brian thinks he's beautiful.

--

He watches Justin in the shower, the stretch and pull of muscles beneath fine white skin. Leans against the wall in his suit and tie and thinks about the way Justin's skin tastes in the morning and the moisture of his lips at night.

He's been back at work three weeks and it's like he never left.

"You're not going to scrub my back?" Justin calls out, grin luminous and heels bouncing against the tile. "I could drop the soap, if you want. Pretend to be your bitch."

" 'Pretend'?" Brian snarks, and he's moving towards the shower now, shedding his clothes like a forgotten skin. Under the warm spray and against Justin's back, and no matter how much he does this Justin feels new every single time.

"I'm not your bitch," Justin teases. "I'm your love muffin."

"Shut up."

"Your sweetheart. Love of your life, apple of your eye, reason for living. Pookie, schmoopy, honey bear."

"I didn't know delusional was in this summer."

“I so am. You so know it.”

“If you’re anything to me,” Brian says gruffly, “it’s a pain in my ass.”

“I’m happy to be that too, if you’re asking.”

“Hardly. Turn the fuck around.”

“Only ‘cause you asked so nicely, schnookums.”

“Christ. You’ve been hanging out with Emmett again, haven’t you?”

Justin grins but shakes his head, droplets of water liberating themselves from his messy hair.

“There were newlyweds at the diner. It was almost obscene.”

“Did you kill them?” Quiet, lazy voice, murmured against Justin’s cheek. The water is going lukewarm, now. By the time they get around to fucking it’ll probably be ice cold, so Brian shuts off the water and hustles them into the warmth of one giant black towel.

“I tried, but Deb wouldn’t let me poison the chocolate sauce. Said I could go to prison.”

“It’s a sacrifice you’d make for the good of fags everywhere.”

“For the good of mankind, really. I’m so selfless.”

Brian chuckles and kisses Justin’s temple. “That’s my little good Samaritan.”

“Oh, Brian.” Justin’s sigh is dramatic, his eyes wide and mocking. “I love it when you call me pet names.”

“Okay, Cupcake. Get on the fucking bed.”

--

They go to Babylon and the lights make Justin’s hair look strawberry red then ocean blue, and Brian’s so high that he wonders if Justin knows he has a technicolour head. He has technicolour eyes, certainly, always has, and they flash and sparkle at Brian through the crowd. Michael is talking somewhere to his left, his voice incessant and rhythmic and indecipherable. It blends with the Chemical Brothers and floats into the roar of the crowd.

The guy Justin is dancing with is hot, all caramel skin gliding and throbbing to the beat. Brian watches in fascination as this guy - this hot, tall, older guy - melts and sways to Justin’s every whim. Justin will take the guy back and fuck him, drawing all eyes and all cocks in their direction.

Brian knows Justin really likes to put on a show. It’s a show now, in the grinding of Justin’s hips, the scrape of his teeth against his conquest’s jugular, and Brian thinks that Justin is almost as good at this as he himself is. Justin’s loping walk as he moves away, the smirk he tosses over his shoulder. It’s all this illusion of absolute perfection, and only Brian knows the truth.

Justin has a scar buried in his hair and a broken tooth at the back of his mouth. Justin dreams of talking sheep and sharp-nailed bubbles, and wakes up whining and panting into Brian’s skin. Justin talks too much, cares too hard, and refuses to exercise to save himself.

Justin is sometimes an absolute mess, but Brian doesn’t care. He just enjoys the show.

“Does that ever bother you at all?” Ted asks when Justin disappears from sight. Ted’s got those eyes gone hollow and dark from sleep deprivation, and Brian thinks he looks as if he has cancer.

“Mm. No, Theodore.” Brian feels floppy and boneless and he sinks against Ted’s shoulder. He watches the bare space where Justin was and thinks about the kid’s broken tooth and fucked up dreams. “S’not really him at all.”

--

Brian falls asleep watching TV with his head on Justin's thigh, and dreams the dreams of the truly stoned.

Michael is talking to him wearing one of Justin's sweatshirts, and Justin sits silent on the kitchen bench, wearing a cowboy hat and a drooping cigarette.

"Emmett joined the circus," Michael says. "He said he always wanted to be just like you."

Brian stares at himself in the mirror and sees his face, his white clown face, stark and depressing above the collar of his black leather jacket. He sees the black eyeliner dripping from his eyes, his lips beautiful and red, blood stained, bee stung, a thousand other romance novel cliches. His hair is messy and sticking up all over like he just fucked somebody.

"You look hot," Justin says. His voice is low and drawling and southern. "He isn't as good at it as you."

"You are, though," Brian replies. Justin's lips twitch and smirk and the light of his cigarette burns Brian's eyes.

"I'm better," Justin says. "No-one even knows I'm doing it."

Brian wakes up to the feel of Justin's lips on his hair.

--

The people in the new art department are for shit. Brian is tempted to take some work home to Justin, but somehow he thinks that's probably above and beyond the call, so he fires a couple of them and lures Mark from Vanguard back to his side.

He's been back at work six weeks, and it's just the same as it was before.

--

They eat dinner together and Justin bitches about the new cook at the diner, who keeps grabbing his ass when he passes through the kitchen to get more ketchup.

“He’s like, totally old and gross,” Justin says. “Kind of like you.”

Brian flashes his gaze over Justin’s face and kicks his feet under the table. “Brat.”

Justin giggles and chomps through his chicken.

--

They fuck before Brian leaves for work at some god awful hour of the morning. Their mutual silence is punctuated by the grunts and grinds of the traffic outside. Brian thinks Justin is too tired to make a noise, but when they come Justin flops against the bed laughing.

“What?” Brian asks, running his fingers over Justin’s shoulders, feeling the shudder and quake of the afterburn in his lover’s body.

“Nothing,” Justin says. “I’m just feeling stupid.”

Brian wishes he didn’t have to go to work.

--

Brian Kinney does not fall in love. Love is just a fantasy - a show straight people put on in bedrooms and wedding chapels.

Brian prefers to put on a whole different show.

# Nuisance

Brian is bored. And he's high. And where the fuck is Justin when you need him, and what the hell is that smell? Oh. He spilled the whiskey again. It doesn't matter, there's no furniture to stain. No TV, and no stereo, and no fucking internet. He lives like a monk.

He has a phone, though, and he's holding it in his hands. Holding it by the antenna and swiveling it around and around. It leaves black light circles in the air. He knows the number. He's known the number forever, because he'd wake up panting and blank in the dead of night, and his fingers went wherever Justin was.

565-3203. 565-3203. 565-3203.

The voice that answers makes Brian's wrists hurt. He can feel the heaviness in his veins thick and pulsing against his flesh.

He fucking hates this guy.

Hates this guy like he hates Chris Hobbs and Craig Taylor and everyone who has tried to take Justin away from him, ever. Hates him like he hated Mikey in that moment at Lindsay's party, when his friend just couldn't keep his big fucking mouth shut.

"Ethan Gold," the voice says. Ethan fucking fuckass Gold.

"Is your refrigerator running?" Brian asks. His voice bubbles and cracks over the words.

"What?"

"Is your refrigerator running."

"Yes."

"Well then shouldn't you throw yourself out a window?"

"Who the fuck is this?"

Brian slams the phone down and takes a pull of his joint.

Three shots of whiskey, and he calls again. If Justin were here, he'd say Brian needed to get a fucking job, but he's not, so Justin can go to hell. As long as he takes Brian with him.

"Hello?"

"Is I.P Freely there?"

"You again."

"Is he?"

"No."

"Why the hell not? This is the number he gave me."

"You sound familiar," Ethan says, and Brian feels his whiskey swirling and burning in his gut.

"Yeah, I fucking well would. I bet you've heard my voice in your nightmares, you two bit fiddling fucker."

"...Kinney?"

Brian slams the phone down again. He sits on the floor humming an old Lou Reed song, and then he calls again.



"Eeeethan," he says. "Oh, no, it's Ian, isn't it? I never could get straight on that."

"Fuck. Off."

"No. You."

"You called me!"

"Yeah, well. I'm bored, and you have no life to speak of. Tell me a story, Ethan."

"I'm hanging up now."

"A romance. Prince, princess, all that shit. Tell me the story you told Justin."

"Go to hell, Kinney."

"Okay, how about I tell it?"

Brian flicks his zippo and lights his last joint.

"Once upon a time, there was a beautiful prince, and he met a lying son of a bitch who locked him in a castle and forced him to listen to the sounds of cats dying for hours at a time. The evil fiddler couldn't give a blow job worth a shit, and then the prince left. The End."

"I didn't -" Ethan protests, but Brian's already continuing.

"No, wait, there's a sequel. You'll love it."

In and out with the smoke, rolling through the air in thick, lazy waves. "So the Prince comes home to his kingdom and hangs around for a while doing nothing and being a pussy. And then he travels to the neighbouring city and finds his lost true fuck. They have the best sex anyone has ever had in the history of the world, and the Fiddler throws himself off his fucking tower. Maggots eat his decomposing corpse, and the Prince gives the King a blow job. The End."

"What a touching story," Ethan says. Brian can hear his gritted teeth in his voice.

"I know. I'm thinking of going into children's books."

"I'm thinking of cutting off your dick and making you eat it."

"I hear it's a delicacy in Japan."

"Fuck. You."

Brian feels no small amount of satisfaction when the dial tone rings dull against his ear.

Just in time, too, because there's Justin, pulling the loft door open, skidding through with a grin on his face. "Hey!" he calls from the fridge. Straight to the fucking food, the little piglet. "What have you been doing all day?"

Brian shrugs, leans back against the steel column. "This and that." he loops an arm around Justin's shoulder as he sinks to the floor beside him. "Working on my novel."

Justin stares at him incredulously. "Your novel."

"Mm-hmm." Brian offers him the joint and smiles lazily. "It's a fucking masterpiece."

# The Triumphant Artiste

Two heads warm against his thigh, and this is the first time Brian's felt calm in weeks. Of course, this is the first time Brian's really felt anything in weeks, because everything before this was beyond his comprehension, pain dulled by his refusal to feel it.

He lets one hand sift gently through Justin's clean, cool hair, noting that it's longer and coarser. He doubts Justin's spending much of his money on half-decent shampoo. If he knows Justin - and despite everything, he does - the kid has been washing his hair with soap. He watches as Justin slides the joint between his lips, inhales. He watches the smoke trailing a familiar path on the release of Justin's breath, and exhales with him.

Mikey is talking, and Brian is glad that his friend didn't object when Brian suggested - demanded - that Justin should stay. He's glad that Michael seems to have some clue as to what was going on, whereas before ((you should have left him lying there)) he seemed determined to be a dick about it.

It's not Brian's job to protect Justin anymore, but he will anyway.

Justin's head shifts against Brian's stomach. He's listening to whatever story Michael is telling about fucking a bear when he was 24, giggling stupidly and running his fingers over Brian's palm. Brian is fighting hard not to grab Justin's hand possessively and not let go.

In time, Justin will do it for him.

Brian takes the joint from Mikey's fingers. He needs to get high, really fucking high, because it's hard to be this close to his lover and not fuck him. And he has no doubt that Justin is still his, his in every way that counts. In Brian's mind, Ethan is little more than a trick who stayed too long.

He tries not to think about how Justin was a trick who stayed too long, and then turned into so much more.

"I nearly fucked a bear once," Justin says suddenly, his hand sliding up Brian's wrist and lingering there, stroking out portraits in the flesh. "Or he nearly fucked me. I was way too fucking drunk, so I just kept falling over, and I guess he lost interest."

"A bear?" Brian tries not to sound incredulous. "Jesus, Sunshine, what happened to your good taste?"

“I was seventeen and horny?”

“There’s this thing called jerking off, you want me to demonstrate?”

Justin’s giggling around the smoke in his lungs, spluttering and coughing. Michael sits up and turns to face Justin. He’s shovelling food into his mouth, and talks around a tongueful of noodles. “According to my Mom, little Justin’s got plenty of experience with that already.”

Justin waves his right hand in the air as he passes the spliff to Mikey. “Not quite as much as you, Michael. I’m at a disadvantage, remember?”

Brian doesn’t want to remember. Thinks of the taste of weed and the lights at Woody’s and the line of Justin’s dick, but that bat keeps flashing through his head.

Without meaning to, Brian’s fingers curl around Justin’s left hand and hold on tight. Justin’s eyes roll upwards and meet Brian’s, and they stare at one another. Justin smiles slightly, and the sound of Michael’s voice becomes white noise.

Brian needs to get high. Brian needs to get really fucking high.

--

Ethan waits for Justin. He waits for Justin for twenty minutes, thirty minutes, and then when he realises he’s been well and truly stood up, he walks to the nearest pay phone.

Justin gets caught up in his artwork, and Ethan’s not quite sure how that happens. His music has momentum; he builds to a crescendo, and point of climax, and then there’s the after, the freefalling, and he’s never known how to stop when that happens.

Justin’s work isn’t alive like that, though, so Ethan can’t understand why he can’t just pull himself away.

He empties a pocketful of quarters into his hand and feeds them into the payphone. Dials the number. Hears the buzzing ring, and wonders if Justin will even pick up the phone.

He does, and the sound of laughter rings in the background.

“H’lo?”

He sounds as if he’s trying to fight off a fit of giggles, and Ethan’s not sure he’s ever heard Justin giggle before.

“Jus, it’s me. Where are you?”

“Ethan! I’m - Hey!” There are muffled rustling sounds, and the clattering of the phone hitting something hard. “Quit it! That - that tickles, quit it. God, you’re such a spaz.”

“Are you with Daphne?” Ethan asks uneasily. He’s noticed that Daphne doesn’t really like him, and it doesn’t really bother him, except that Justin sounds warm and affectionate and Ethan doesn’t want to share that.

“Daphne?” Justin says, “She’s in California.”

“Where are you, then?”

“I’m -” Justin starts saying, and then there are more muffled voices in the background, deep laughter, high pitched giggling, and one of the voices sounds familiar.

“Are you with Brian?”

Ethan can’t fucking believe it, because just yesterday Justin was telling him that Brian didn’t want him back, that Justin wouldn’t go if he did.

“And Michael. It’s no big deal,”

Ethan hears Brian's voice again, and this time it's fluid and mocking. "Aw, does your little friend not want you to play with us?"

The other voice, "Give it here, Justin. Don't hog the goods."

Ethan finally finds his tongue. "What's going on, Justin?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing?"

"Nothing."

"Are you sure? You sound kind of - "

"I'm just hanging out with my friends."

Ethan can't hold back his grunt of surprise, because there is no way in hell that Brian Kinney is anybody's friend.

"They're my friends, Ethan. I don't have that many." Justin sounds petulant, as if Ethan is trying to take away his favourite toy. Ethan has the feeling he's already taken away Justin's favourite toy. Sometimes he gets the feeling that Justin hates him for dragging him away from Brian.

"Maybe I should come to get you?" (I'm not worried. I'm not.)

"No!" Justin sounds so vehement that it just spurs Ethan on.

"Why not? I'm coming to get you."

“You are NOT coming to get me. I’m not a child.”

“He should come get you,” Brian throws in, “Give us a chance to get to know little Eden.”

“It’s not necessary, E. I can take care of myself.”

Ethan knows, and that’s what he’s worried about. He scrabbles to find a pen in his pocket, and poises it against the back of his hand. “I’m coming to get you. What’s the address?”

--

Ethan is surprised by Brian’s building. He’s lived in some shitholes in his time, and this definitely qualifies, from the faded, flaky paint in the hall to the half-constructed elevator. His confidence grows step by step until he’s standing in front of the big steel door, knocking and waiting with baited breath for a response.

He wants Justin to answer the door, looking sweet and chaste and untouched by Brian’s hands. Instead, the door slides open and there’s that guy Michael, arms piled with food and a bag of chips hanging from his mouth. Ethan doesn’t want to ask how he got the door open.

“Mmmf, Mm.”

The guy turns and walks away and Ethan follows, because he can’t see Justin and he doesn’t want to be dismissed like that.

He doesn’t want to be impressed by the place, but he is. The sound of Justin’s laughter bounces off the walls and ceiling, the sprawling hardwood floors, the white leather couch. Ethan is struck by how different Justin’s life must have been in this place, this fucking palace in the middle of an urban slum. There’d be no scrounging for food or rubbish pile furniture, no sleeping through the fevered moans of the straight couple next door, no wanting for anything, no wondering if you’d make next month’s rent.

Ethan’s always thought that the way he lives his life is romantic. One day, people will buy his biography and read, enthralled, about how he rose from tragic poverty to conquer the great symphonies of Paris, Rome, Vienna. He’ll emerge the triumphant artist, violin in one arm and Justin on the other, descending to a chorus of applause.

He thinks the way he lives is romantic, but the way Brian lives is glamorous, like a scene out of a film noir movie. He thinks about Justin and his talk of design, the way Justin sometimes gazes mournfully at their bed before he climbs inside, and Ethan feels a pang of panic because in no way can he offer this.

“Ewan,” Brian’s voice calls jovially from beyond the Great White Couch, and Ethan feels a burst of hatred deeper than anything he’s ever known, because he looks up and there Justin is, practically in Brian’s lap, leaning and giggling and swooning and Ethan just knows he’s high. “So good to see you again.” Brian’s lips twitch and stretch, smirking, pouring forth lilting, sarcastic words. “Any friend of Justin’s is a friend of ours.”

“The pleasure is all mine,” Ethan sneered. “Justin, you ready to go?”

Brian’s hand is on Justin’s arm, around his shoulder, and Ethan sees long fingers stroke through the thin material of Justin’s shirt. He plays a concerto in his mind, because Brian Kinney is not going to get to him.

“I’m having fun,” Justin says.

"He's having fun," Brian repeats with a broad smile.

“You want an m&m?” Justin holds up a plate of m&ms, divided into colour factions. Brian plucks a red with a long fingers and slides it into his mouth, turning to grin at the blonde, displaying the ruby candy on his tongue. For a moment, Ethan is heart-poundingly sure that Justin’s tongue is going to snake out and meet the older man’s, but the two just grin at each other. Justin tidies his collection, grumbling. “You messed up the order. It was perfect.”

“My heart bleeds.”

“You destroyed my utopian society!” Justin cries. “I was going to be the next Hitler.”

“I fucked a guy that looked like Hitler once,” Brian says, and Ethan watches as he takes a drag of a short white joint, inhales, exhales, smoke sliding slow through perfect lips. Ethan hates him. “I was tripping. He kept asking me to call him Steve. It was weird.”



“Yeah, someone expecting you to remember their name? I hate that.” Michael is grinning. Ethan feels like he can’t understand this world at all, like he’s not standing in the room. Justin leans against Brian and Brian touches Michael’s knee with his foot and Michael just doesn’t stop eating.

“Your husband is quiet,” Brian says to Justin, his voice muffled by blonde hair. “Is he shy?”

“You fucker,” Ethan says, stepping up to the white couch, staring down at his lover. “Justin, let’s go.”

“I don’t want to.” Justin says, not looking up from the candy he is slowly collecting and rearranging in a pattern of flowers and stars.

“He doesn’t want to,” Brian echoes, smiling mockingly at Ethan. Ethan gets the feeling that Brian feels he’s won already.

“I want him to. Will you come for me?”

“Take off your coat,” Brian says. “Stay awhile. Pretty sure Justin will.”

Ethan wants to be sparkling and witty, eloquent. He barely manages surly. “Shut up.”

Justin takes a hit and offers the j to Ethan. “Want some?”

“No. Let’s go.”

“Hey, Justin. Throw me the Cheese Doodles.”

Ethan watches the blur of blue fly from Justin’s hands to Michael.

“How come you’ve got all this food?” Justin asks Brian, their faces close together. “You’re going to turn into a lardass.”

“Like Mikey?” Brian suggests, and Justin bursts into a fit of fresh giggles at Michael’s righteous squawk. Ethan’s only been high a few times, but he has vague memories of finding every little thing funny, from the colour red to the way he tied his shoelaces.

He sees the ashtray on the coffee table, full of crumbling butts and ashes. Justin’s warm laughter echoes in his ears.

“Hey, remember that guy with the ass dimples?” Justin’s saying, talking quickly, “And he like, wanted to fuck me. And you went totally psycho.”

Brian shifts. “I didn’t go psycho.”

“You were high! And you told him to fuck off and come back when he had something better to offer!”

“You should be thanking me.”

Justin shoves Brian, laughing. “Fucker! Why? Apart from the ass, he was hot.”

“Not good enough for you. I fucked him once, I know.” Brian’s laughing himself, grabbing hold of Justin’s wrists and holding them to the side. “You have high standards, princess.”

“I do not!”

“You totally do,” Michael says, waving a Cheese Doodle in the air. “Remember that guy you were dancing with a couple weeks ago, with that cool scar? You wouldn’t fuck him because he was a lousy dancer.”

“I fuck Brian, and he’s a lousy dancer.”

“But I’m irresistible.”

“You’re a cock blocker.”

More shoving, and Ethan is about to scream at them to get a room. He’s still standing behind the couch, knuckles white as the leather. “I want to GO, Justin.”

But Justin and Brian have tumbled to the floor, and Justin is laughing into Brian’s side, squealing and squirming and wriggling away from Brian’s tickling fingers. Ethan feels sick, and wants to pour freezing cold water over the pair of them, like a couple of horny dogs.

Fuming, he leaves.

--

Brian finds him a few days later, and Ethan wishes he were surprised. Justin had come back all quiet and sorry, looking at Ethan with large eyes that said he just wanted to go home, and that home was a million miles from here.

What Ethan saw that day, in that loft downtown, was Justin at home. Justin in socks and no shoes, Justin rolling around on the floor, Justin buried in his lover’s arms.

“Hi, Eric,” Brian says. He’s leaning against the lamp post, watching as Ethan packs up his violin. “How’s business?”

“Go away,” Ethan says. He turns his back, but Brian follows.

Brian just stands there, staring with one perfectly arched brow.

“Go. Away.”

“And here I thought we could be friends.”

“Why would you think something like that?”

“Because I’m a part of Justin’s life.”

“No. You’re not.”

“Yes. I am.” Brian leans in close, smile stretched sour over wolfish teeth. “But you won’t be for long. So make the fucking most of it.”

And then Brian’s moving away, as if the exchange was barely a pause in his day.

## Discovery Channel

Michael watches them. He tries not to, and when that fails, he tries to be covert about it, but most of the night his eyes are fixed on them, watching Justin’s body blanketing Brian’s, Brian’s hands twisting in the belly of Justin’s shirt, Justin’s teeth grazing oh-so-lightly against Brian’s neck. He knows that Ben catches him staring a couple times, gives him a quizzical look, but it’s okay, because that’s Ben. Brian’s too wrapped up in Justin to notice, or care.

Michael isn’t jealous. Not anymore. He can admit to himself that he wanted Brian for a long time, wanted Brian in that carnal fuck-me-now way. He can admit that when Justin showed up he wanted to tear the little shit’s head from his body and carry it around Babylon on a pike. He can admit that, for a while, for was a complete and utter shit about it.

Now, he can also admit that he never wanted Brian, but the idea of Brian. The way Brian walked and talked and fucked. The idea of being the one to tame the wild beast.

An image of leading Brian through Babylon on a leash flickers through Michael’s head, and the idea of it is nauseating.

So he’s given up on the idea of the Great Brian and Michael romance, but he still can’t stop staring at Justin all stretched out on Brian’s lap, and it’s not jealousy. Or, not much, anyway. There’s that little bit of envy lurking in his

brain because Justin seems capable of being everything to everyone in a way Mikey himself has never even attempted. He's Deb's cherubic son and Emmett's dancing buddy, Vic's kitchen hand, Ted's wet dream, Brian's fucking boyfriend. All these things that Michael used to be, wanted to be, sometimes still is, but with Justin it's like it's all effortless. Sometimes it's like Justin doesn't have to try at all.

But Michael isn't jealous. Not tonight. Tonight he's got Ben's arm wrapped around his shoulder and the taste of his mother's pasta on his lips, he's sleepy and sated and fucking fascinated by how weird the two of them are. Weird because Brian refuses to eat the garlic bread but is quite content to shovel it down Justin's throat, weird because Justin is all tipsy giggles and Brian doesn't seem to care, weird because they've been snuggling all night and Brian still insists he doesn't love the kid.

They're just strange. And Michael knows from strange, what with the freaks that flood his store at regular intervals.

Together, they're more likable than they are apart, though it pains Mikey to admit it. Since Justin came back, Brian's relaxed again, the set of his jaw looser, the curve of his lips more pronounced. Since Brian took Justin back, he's calm and wise and sometimes Michael wants to kill him for how confident he seems. Michael remembers being nineteen, and he thinks it is unfair that one person be that self-assured that young when the rest of the world has to struggle through that stage of interminable awkwardness.

Despite this, Justin's better when he's with Brian. He's funnier and he's calmer and he doesn't seem to have the perpetual stick up his ass that marked the fiddler's presence. He remembers the days of Justin's sour expression, Justin's snappish responses to the simplest questions, and he feels a flood of relief that he doesn't have to work with that anymore.

Michael watches as Brian murmurs in Justin's ear. That massive smile spreads across Justin's lips, and he leans back, twists his head to bite his lover's jaw.

"Mm, you taste like snow," Justin says, and if Michael hadn't been sitting three feet away, he wouldn't have heard it.

Brian smiles indulgently at him. "It's summer."

"I know." Justin settles back against Brian's chest, reaching down to twist their hands again. "So where'd you get snow?"

"Probably the same place you got all that wine," Brian chuckles against the side of Justin's face.

“Deb’s kitchen?”

“Yes. In Deb’s kitchen, it’s practically a winter wonderland. You should go make snow angels.”

“Snow devils.” Justin’s head rolls on Brian’s shoulder. “Angels don’t fuck.”

“Technically, neither do you.”

“You love it when I fuck you,” Justin murmurs so quietly that Michael has to read his lips just to make it out. He feels both his eyebrows shoot up of their own volition, because the thought of Justin topping Brian is probably the weirdest thing yet.

Brian captures Justin’s lips, kisses him long and hard, probably just to get the shit to shut up. Michael of all people knows that Brian’s not above using diversionary tactics.

Justin doesn’t seem to have tamed Brian. When Brian pulls away, he still has the eyes of a wild thing, only now he has Justin to match him. Justin is panting, grinning, and Michael remembers when they used to prowl through Babylon together, picking off the tastiest of the herd and devouring. He knows Justin isn’t into that anymore, but it’s a pity, because they were so damn good at it. Fluid and graceful, suave, where others - such as Michael himself - were stilted and clumsy and awkward.

He imagines them fucking, as much as he tries not to, and he knows there is something primal, violent, visceral between them, beyond the softness that they share in this moment, in Deb’s living room. He knows this because he’s seen Justin’s hickeys, the scratches down Brian’s neck, their swollen lips when they leave the backroom, not touching but for the light slide of Brian’s hand on Justin’s neck. He knows this because it hangs there in the air wherever they go.

Michael loves Brian. He even loves Justin to some extent, like an annoying little brother that sometimes acts older than he should be, older than Michael feels himself. But he’ll never love them like they love each other, in that sharp, painful way, so it’s probably best that he has Ben. Ben who needs to be loved gently but fiercely, Ben who is the kindest man Michael has ever met.

Michael’s not jealous of Brian and Justin. He’s just fascinated by them - like a documentary about lions on the Discovery Channel.

# A Diversion

Brian tends to make big emotional statements when he's pretending not to pay attention. Justin's noticed that if Brian wants to say something, really wants to say something, he'll stack the dishwasher or roll a joint. Start up the computer, check his email. Do anything to avoid looking into his lover's eyes.

They'd been arguing one day, sort of, and Justin sighed, "You don't believe in love, you believe in fucking, you believe in cock and ass and the fucking backroom, and that's fine. But when are you going to believe in ME?"

Brian had sucked in a breath, his eyes dark, deep, wounded. Justin lets out a frustrated breath, feeling it scrape and catch against his swollen throat. He'd looked at Brian for a long, tense moment, and then sighed, because it was pointless, and painful, and there was a Law and Order marathon on TV.

They were quiet for twenty minutes, thirty minutes. Brian was sitting in the corner smoking, and Justin felt hazel eyes burning against the back of his neck, the line of his back. He wanted to go over and curl up against his lover, snag the cigarette, take a drag. Feel the warmth of smoke in his lungs.

But Justin was tired and McCoy was yelling and for once he just didn't want to give in.

An hour later, Brian started moving around, and Justin heard the hiss of running water, the snap of a cupboard door opening. He tried his best to ignore his lover, let himself fade away in the grisly world of homicide, but as usual, part of him remained attuned to Brian's presence, Brian's existence.

When he heard Brian move up into the bedroom and begin to change the sheets, he got suspicious. Changing the sheets wasn't something Brian did himself, generally. That's what maids were for, and if they got dirty enough, that's what Justin was for. So hearing him do it now put Justin on edge, made his tummy flip, his hands clench. Not in fear, but... something else.

"Turn that off," Brian called out. His voice wasn't angry. He sounded tired, unsure. If Justin wasn't sure he'd be punished for so much as thinking it, he'd have thought Brian was vulnerable.

Justin complied, quietly, tossing the remote aside. He stood and made his way to the bottom of the stairs, watching Brian as he tossed the old sheets aside and pulled out new ones, stark blue grey against his hands.

Brian knelt on the ledge, his hand sliding along the side of the mattress. Justin watched the muscles move and play in his lover's back.

"I - I do, you know that, okay?" Brian still didn't look up at him. "You fucking know. So don't start this 'You don't believe in me, I'm just some poor stupid useless housewife' shit, because it's fucking retarded."

"It's not - "

"Shut up. You do know."

"Yeah. I guess."

Brian sighed in frustration, looked up, met Justin's wide open eyes. "And you know - you know that if I were to believe in love - and I'm not saying I do - you know that it could only ever be you."

Woah. Woah, woah, woah.

Justin's head was spinning. He thought that this was probably the closest Brian would ever come - the closest Brian COULD ever come - to a declaration of love. He felt his heart thump wildly and pathetically against his rib cage. He wondered if Brian would object to being bowled over in a frenzy of hugs and kisses and stupid, mushy whimpering.

"Brian - "

"Justin, whatever you're thinking, don't fucking do it. I swear. Don't."

Brian had torn his eyes away and was busily - anally - fixing the bed sheets. Justin had never seen more precise hospital corners in his life.

"Okay. I won't."



Brian grunted. Justin noticed the tension in his back, wished it weren't so hard for Brian to feel this way. He worries that one day Brian's going to notice how head over heels in love he is and just flip out and have an aneurysm.

"But is it okay if you fuck me now?"

Some of the tension subsided, and Brian looked up, a slight smile playing on the edges of his lips.

"Now? I just changed the fucking sheets."

Justin grinned. "So fuck me in the shower."

## Long Distance

They see each other, occasionally. On business trips, holidays, pseudo-illicit meetings in five star hotel rooms. On the first such occasion, Justin asked Brian if he was going home to his wife upon their parting. Standing in the doorway, wearing a towelling robe and a shit eating grin.

Brian doesn't have a wife - or any sort of equivalent - to go home to. Neither does Justin, but they both have their jobs and their lives, in separate cities. They didn't plan it that way, and sometimes the distance hurts, hurts like nothing else ever has before, but somehow, they survive. They're not a couple. They don't have an agreement or rules or an explicit commitment. Each meeting unravels with the knowledge that either of them could walk away at any time, but neither of them want to.

Brian has Gus and Mikey and a cascade of faceless, nameless tricks. They're never blonde, never bright, never sunny and charming, because he gave up trying to replace Justin long ago. He takes what he can get of his lover - the only lover he has ever really had - and lives the rest of his life in lazy amusement, occasionally thinking of Justin, pulling out his cell phone, deliberating over that long-remembered number, and then snapping it shut and stuffing it in his pocket. If he went running to Justin every time he wanted to, they'd never be able to live their lives.

That is the point of their whole fucked up system. They want to live their lives. Brian wants Justin to be everything he can be, and that includes going to New York, going to Paris, going to London. That includes galleries and long hours in the studio, arguments with agents, finding just the right shade of red to complement the sounds of Autumn.

It's not that Brian doesn't want to be a part of that. It's that he's got his own responsibilities. Gus is getting bigger and bigger, wanting his father around more and more. Gus is ten years old and awkward, too smart for the kids his own age and too weird for those his senior. He looks up to his father, who he feels is cool in a way he himself shall never be. Gus needs Brian around, around almost all the time, and not in New York and Paris and London.

Justin tried to stay, but Brian couldn't bear the thought.

"It's a big fucking world, Sunshine. And you have the potential to be a real part of it. If you think I'm going to let you stay here and be a fucking stay at home wife - "

Sometimes Brian wishes he'd let Justin stay. He wakes up on Sundays and remembers the smell of Justin's minty lip ointment, the taste of his flesh, the slide of his skin. Justin used to wear cotton sweats around all morning, the soft, worn fabric floating over that fantastic ass and driving Brian crazy.

Justin is successful. Brian hangs his paintings in the foyer of his agency with pride, impressing the ever growing clientele. "I know the artist," he says with a secretive smile when asked about the works. Beautiful liquid colour rolling and grinding through motion, black streaks, eyes in the darkness, that feeling of indescribable joy and freedom. Those paintings remind him of Justin's smile.

Their meetings are not a secret, but they are private, somehow sacred - though Brian would never admit it. When Justin walks through the door, he switches off his phone, hangs up a Do Not Disturb sign, and the two of them laze and fuck and talk alone together in the thick intimacy of the afternoon.

For two people who meet four or five times a year, they know each other remarkably well. They don't talk on the phone - Justin's rule - or write emails. They know each other by instinct and experience. When they argue, it is out of frustration. The mysteries which once plagued their relationship are lessened, now. They have accepted the unspoken truths which once hung black and terrifying in the heavy air of the loft. Justin knows what Brian feels for him, now. He knows what to expect.

Justin has had several minor romances over the years, but he always breaks it off when he feels the relationship should progress beyond friendly fucking and the occasional Sunday brunch. It is not that he is not ready for commitment, as Terry patiently accepted, or that he is a fuckin' heartless prick, as Logan screamed and railed in a little bar in Brittany. It's that Justin can't imagine - just flat out can not picture - building a life with anyone but Brian. After all, he already HAS a boyfriend, in his heart, in his way. The commitment Justin feels towards Brian is not one of obligation, but one born from Justin's own nature, from the peace he feels lying in Brian's arms. His relationship with Brian - weird and inexplicable as life - just is. Neither Brian nor Justin have the power to negate it. They both stopped trying long ago.

--

A year and a half after Justin moved out, after Brian stood in the airport lounge and watched that plane take off, he comes home to a message waiting for him, the light on the answering machine blinking bright red in the darkness of the loft.

Justin's voice sounds the same as always, and it makes Brian's stomach bottom out.

"Bri? It's me. I sent you an invitation, but I just wanted to tell you in person 'cos I'm so excited and, well - you know. My first solo show! It's only a small gallery, but it's something, right? If you can come - I want you to come, okay? I want you to be there, Brian. Please try. I love you."

Brian hadn't received the invitation yet, and for one absurd moment before Justin mentioned the show and the gallery, he was absolutely sure that the little shit was going off to Vermont to get married, and calling to tell Brian all about it 'in person' as some kind of consolation prize. Brian knew even as the thought shattered into his brain that it was ludicrous, but he still breathed a sigh of relief - and no small amount of pride - when the truth was revealed.

Brian always knew his kid was fuckin' brilliant.

He was the only one of the family to attend the opening. The others had made arrangements to come throughout the next month, in twos and threes here and there, and Brian was glad. He didn't need them hanging around, making demands on Justin's time and attention.

He sidled up behind Justin, who stood talking to a pair of Bohemian looking women, dreadlocks and coloured shirts and pierced lips. He slid his arms around Justin's waist from behind, felt him jump and then relax. Smelled the clean shampoo smell of the younger man's hair.

"Brian?" Justin's hands went to the arms encircling his waist, felt for the cowry shell bracelet which encircled one wrist. "Brian!"

When Justin turned, his smile was blinding, and he threw his arms around his lover's shoulders, a messy pile of bones and flesh and needing to get closer. "Hey," Brian murmured against his neck. No-one else was as warm and tasty as Justin.

Justin pulled back to study Brian's face, look for changes or marks of the passing of time. Besides the pinkness of a healing shaving cut, there was nothing. "I wasn't sure you'd come, you know."

Brian smiled lazily. "Achievement is the only thing worth celebrating. Wanna show me around?"

He followed Justin around all night, meeting the people that wandered in and out of the gallery doors. He played the dutiful partner, smiling and being charming, quietly expressing his satisfaction when he thought Justin wasn't listening.

A lot of the works on the wall were new, so new that Brian had seen barely a quarter of them, but he recognised various faces staring back at him, including his own. They were good, fucking good, and Brian felt glad that he'd shoved Justin out into this world kicking and screaming, because he clearly belonged here, at least for the time being.

Justin held his hand and Brian let him, just to see the look on the artist's face as he beamed at him between rounds with potential buyers. "What do you think?" he asked uncertainly, watching Brian's face as he studied the paintings on the wall.

Brian glanced at his lover. "Stop fishing for compliments. You know what I think."

Justin's cheeks turned pink and he buried himself against Brian's side. Felt the slide of Brian's cotton shirt against his arm. Felt Brian's heartbeat against his cheek, the twisting of Brian's fingers beneath his own. Listened to the sounds his lover made. Wondered if he really had to stay in New York after all, because as amazing as this show was, it couldn't compete with feeling Brian all around him once again.

"I miss you," Justin sighed. He waited for Brian to turn cold, stiff, unresponsive, but he didn't.

"I know."

Justin thought maybe Brian missed him too.

--

Occasionally, Justin allows himself the pleasure of verbally expressing his love. Usually, it's when Brian is asleep or distracted or in a relaxed, happy mood. The kind of mood that is all too infrequent. It no longer bothers Justin that Brian does not return the phrase; he knows Brian, he knows when Brian is thinking it and trying not to. He doesn't wonder if Brian loves him. The answer is obvious in every moment, every touch, every flicker of Brian's eyes over his skin.

--

Five years after Justin moved out, he lets himself into the loft and gazes around at the hardwood floors, the moonlight streaming through the windows. The place is achingly familiar, even now, even with bits and pieces of strange furniture, new artwork on the walls - Justin notices with warmth that some of the pieces are his own - and the sound of an unknown voice echoing in the vastness.

It doesn't bother him - much - that Brian has company.

The voice is warm and manly and too comfortable for Justin's liking. Although he doesn't mind Brian's tricks, the thought of anyone else being at home in this place, in Brian's place, floors him. His skin breaks out in goosebumps, his right hand throbs momentarily, and an unseen fist grabs his heart so fast and tight he's sure it's going to burst.

And then he relaxes, because he knows how Brian really feels.

"Brii-an," he calls out, listening to the bounce of his voice against walls and windows. He loves this place. He goes straight to the fridge, grabs a bottle of water. It was a long flight.

His lover appears - shirtless - at the top of the stairs, his gaze alive with smiles and surprise. Justin grins up at him. He can't think of anything to say, because it's so unbelievably good to be standing here speechless, Brian in his hand and Brian six feet away.

"Hey," he says finally. He puts down his water, leans against the counter. The stainless steel bench top is cool against his fingers.

“Hey, yourself.” Brian steps down, moves towards him. They kiss over the kitchen counter as if they do this every day. As if Justin wasn’t in Rome just yesterday morning.

“If I’d known we’d have company, I would have dressed up.” Justin is smiling wryly. To Brian, he looks amazing. Soft royal blue t-shirt, dark jeans, that hair, that smile. Those blue eyes, twinkling at him. Amused beyond his years.

“If I’d known you were coming, I wouldn’t have had company.”

“I know.” Justin kisses him again. Brian tastes that peppermint lip ointment and has to smile.

“He’s just -”

“Brian,” Justin rolls his eyes. “After all these years, you really think it matters?”

“Did it matter to begin with?” Brian is already moving back towards the bedroom, ready to toss out the trick that rolled lazily between his sheets. It was moments like these that Brian had to reluctantly admit that Justin had him right where he wanted him.

--

“How long you here for?” Brian asked, his fingers skimming and swimming in Justin’s blonde locks. “I’m already dying to get rid of you.”

Justin rolls his eyes, kisses the other man’s jaw. “Uh-huh. You totally seem like you want to get rid of me - what with the raging hard on and all.”

“I don’t have a hard on.”

“You did before.”

“Exactly. Now it’s gone. That’s your cue to leave, remember?”

“I’ve never been very good at following a script.”

“Too many big words for that little blonde brain. Seriously, how long?”

There is silence for a moment, and Brian feels a strangeness in the air. He feels a crackle of hesitation, the kind of static electricity hum of indecisiveness.

“Jus?”

“I’m gonna stay here a while.” Justin says finally. “Get my head sorted. Get some of my inspiration back.”

Brian is silent, torn between absurd, ecstatic joy and stubborn worry. Justin has rarely suffered from a lack of inspiration, that he knows of. Justin has been known to be hours late for dinner because the glimmer of a stainless steel bus stop was calling his inner artist’s name.

“You’ve been having trouble?”

Justin shrugs, lays his head against Brian’s shoulder. “Just tired. And a little homesick, I think. I keep having dreams about Deb’s cannelloni and the bar tenders at Woody’s.”

“Homesick for the Pitts. That’s pretty pathetic.”

“Not just for the Pitts,” his voice is quiet, the gaze he lays upon Brian meaningful.

“I know.” Hazel eyes smile, chin butts into Justin’s shoulder. “It’s still pretty pathetic.”

“I know.”

They kiss, and Brian tries not to think about how easy it will be to get used to Justin's presence once more. The knowledge that it isn't permanent, might never be permanent, hovers on the outskirts of his mind, but he ignores it, pushing Justin into the mattress. The younger man laughs and squirms as they fuck.

It's not a happy ending, because nothing is ending. It's just a pleasant interlude.

--

Justin hangs around for a year, and they try to live a quiet, simple life together. At times, Brian is disgusted by how domestic they've become, at others, he would stay home and knit in front of the fire as long as Justin would stay. They go to Babylon and dance, but there is less talk of threesomes, less drugs, and more smiles, more laughter. Brian takes a break from his habitual cynicism to indulge in Justin's presence - and makes up for it for being a cranky old bastard the minute Justin leaves.

The looks of pity on the faces of those around him are nauseating, so he throws himself back into his new clients, his new campaign, the tight ass of the new bouncer at Babylon. He resents the implication that he's some kind of lovelorn, pathetic loser, stuck in an endless cycle of loneliness and despair.

He's not. He's just living his life, the way it has to be.

## Like That

"Mikey," he said dully. "Mikey."

Mikey had brought him a bottle of juice, hospital brand Orange juice, but it sat unopened in his hands. On Sundays, after his shift at the diner, Justin smelled like oranges. Brian had never known that he'd noticed that, but it came back to him now with startling ferocity, and he felt his stomach turn.

He couldn't look at Mikey. Not without feeling a dull wail rising inside himself. It filled his head, his veins. He flinched away from Michael's touch, saw his friend's hurt face, and wanted to explain, but how could he?



Sorry, Mikey. He was sorry he'd tried to love Michael like that for years, and couldn't. Sorry that he'd thought that there was someone that he maybe could love like that. Sorry that stupid fucking love - or damn near it - had got Justin killed.

Brian was sure Justin was dead.

He'd never considered the possibility that he felt something other than surprising animal lust and mild affection for the kid. He'd sort of let himself drift around Justin, towards Justin, let him hang around, because the brat was fun to play with, and gave maybe the best blow job Brian had ever experienced. It hadn't occurred to Brian that it was possible to fall in love without meaning to, until his lips had left Justin's in that parking lot - that stupid fucking parking lot, stupid fucking prom - and he'd felt a great blooming inside of him, like some bastard romantic poet had been born within.

And then, Justin's smile as he walked away. The great swell of pride Brian had felt at bringing that smile to his kid's face. Then the curl of Justin's fingers around that scarf, that fucking scarf, and then there was just the stabbing echo of Brian's own frantic footsteps, the swoop of wood on air, and Justin's blood soaking into the concrete.

No

He willed himself to picture Justin's face, Justin's smiling, happy face, and thought that if it meant he'd catch Justin singing the theme song to Buffy in the shower Monday morning, he'd be fucking ecstatic to tell the boy that he sort of maybe loved him. He'd call Justin 'Darling' and bring him flowers and sing him a fucking Bon Jovi serenade just to hear him cracking his knuckles in the silence of the night.

No

Justin wasn't dead, wasn't dead, wasn't dead. Dead was cold hands and blue lips, skin paler than fine bone china. Justin couldn't die, because Justin couldn't shut up for five minutes straight, let alone an eternity. Brian had a sudden, unwanted image of Justin lying silent on the white leather couch in the loft, his grey cement skin rolling in waves down his stiff body, eyes open and unseeing, blonde hair matted and stained with blood.

Justin wasn't dead because he was Brian's only chance to really live, and the kid would never let Brian down.

waste away with me ...

--

“Brian?” Michael whispered, daring to reach up, touch Brian’s lion brown hair. His friend was unresponsive, gazing unseeing into the flat white wall ahead. Michael wondered why they always painted hospital walls that awful cream colour, that colour that gave you nothing to escape into, nowhere to hide. He wished, momentarily, that Emmett had decorated this lonely hall, that there was something to take you away, something to shock you into another world of leopard print and pink feather boas. Anything but this unending, relentless white.

He’d been pissed, when Brian called, pissed because he thought it was just Brian holding him back again, having his cake and eating it too, but then he’d heard the tremor in his old friend’s voice, heard the silence resounding after Brian said his name, and then there was nothing but fear.

Mikey.

Brian, what the fuck? I’m getting on -

Mikey...

Brian? - - Brian, what’s going on?

I think I hurt Justin.

What? Brian -- Are you high?

They took him away, and they won’t tell me anything.

Brian, what happened?

But Brian couldn’t say anything, couldn’t tell him, and it was up to a harried teacher, Justin’s calculus teacher, to explain what had happened, and even then, Michael got a sort of scrambled egg version of events, and it took him a few minutes to decipher that Justin had been attacked - bashed - at the hands of a classmate, at his fucking high school prom, while Brian watched and screamed and went quietly, privately insane.

Michael had never seen Brian look quite so calm and yet out of control at the same time. Really, it looked like Brian had just shut down, turned himself off to the turning of the world and gone away to some quiet place, probably with Justin and a year’s supply of lube. It looked like that, and yet every now and again a tear would slip down Brian’s face and Mikey would feel his heart break, because he knew Brian was trapped inside himself with his pain, his worry, his fear. Not trapped inside a nightmare, like that time Brian accidentally overdosed on K, but trapped inside reality - and alone, completely and totally alone, because Justin was in a coma and Mikey was never really part of their world.

That’s why Justin scared him, that first night. When Brian was with Justin, he slipped into another world, a world with no place for little Mikey, a place where Michael couldn’t even attempt to follow. If he’d said this to Brian, he would have refuted it with no small amount of hostility, but Michael knew what it was he saw in Brian’s eyes, even if Brian himself didn’t.

Brian had loved that kid, in his own way, in his own time. If Michael hadn’t believed that before, then the knowledge that Brian had danced with Justin in a room full of eighteen year old breeders was proof enough. Brian’s feelings were always in his actions, and this... Christ.

And now Justin was lying in there while the doctors operated and no-one would tell them anything because they weren't family and Brian was too afraid to talk to Jennifer. Daphne had come to talk to Brian, earlier, had hugged him, kissed his forehead. They'd had a whispered conversation, and Daphne laughed even as she couldn't stop crying.

Michael had never really spoken to Daphne, had barely seen her across a crowded room, but as he stared at her in that long too-white hallway, he'd felt a deep, throbbing sympathy for her, because he knew if anything ever happened to Brian, it would just about kill him, and here she was, 18 and alone and turning to her best friend's lover for comfort - a lover who could barely hold it together himself. Brian, who sat boneless in a scarlet drenched silk scarf, and Daphne, still in her prom dress, crumpled and torn, now, her pretty face streaked with tears. A big orange car crash.

She'd gone away to find Justin's mom, but Brian stayed. Michael wondered if Brian would ever be able to move again, ever be able to think again, without thinking about Justin's blood soaking the pavement, Justin's blood streaking his face, Justin, Justin, Justin.

"No," Brian said aloud, his eyes unfocused.

"What?"

"He's not going to die, Mikey. That little shit is not going to die."

"Brian..."

"He wouldn't do that to me." Abruptly, Brian stood, the legs of his chair squealing against the linoleum. "I'm going for a fucking cigarette."

How could Mikey argue with that?

# This Is Not A Pick Up Line

At first, Gus tried to ignore the guy standing next to him.

“You’re Gus.”

At first, he tried to ignore the guy standing next to him. He’d heard all sorts of stories about New York weirdos, mostly from Emmett and Grandma Deb, and he could never be sure how much of their tales were truth. He did know that when strange thirty year old men in jeans and leathers jackets approached you out of nowhere, it was generally considered wise not to encourage them.

However, Gus figured that your garden variety psychopath would generally not know your name, and his curiosity got the better of him.

“Who are you?” he asked insolently, turning to stare at the man front on. A glimmer of recognition grew in his mind when he met crystalline blue eyes, but he could not place the face, the name, the shag of messy blond hair.

“It is you,” The man grinned. “I knew your parents.”

Gus stared at him. As a rule, he didn’t like strangers. Babysitters. New kids. The endless parade of men that wandered through his father’s life. Generally, strangers didn’t bring anything good until they weren’t strangers anymore.

“What are you doing in New York? Are your moms with you?”

Shook his head warily. Gus was all too aware that he still didn’t know the man’s name, or anything about him at all, despite the fact that his smile and his movements spoke of a familiarity long forgotten. “No. I’m on a class trip.”

The guy looked to either side of Gus and then around the busy street. “I know they’ve been trying to reduce class sizes, but isn’t this taking it a little bit far?”

Gus smiled sheepishly. “I kind of skipped out on the trip to Wall Street. Don’t tell my moms?”

He saw the loneliness that settled over, turning those blue eyes grey. “You don’t have to worry, we don’t talk much anymore.”

“Justin!”

The call came from a few metres down the footpath, turned the blonde’s attention away briefly. He nodded to a guy holding up a takeout bag, called back, “I’ll be right with you, hang on.” He turned back to Gus, smiled reluctantly. “I better go.” He dug his hand into his pocket, pulled out a stiff white business card printed in stark black lettering.

Justin Taylor

antidote designs

Gus stared at the card, wondered what the fuck was going on. He’d been hit on by guys before, he was 16 and looked just like his father and spent way too much time on Liberty Avenue for a straight guy, but this didn’t feel like that. He didn’t know what it did feel like, but it wasn’t like that at all.

“You need anything while you’re out here, give me a call. And say hi to your moms for me.”

And then the guy - Justin - was walking down the street, taking the paper bag from his friend, and disappearing into the crowd.

--

“Mom?”

“Gus! Honey, how’s the trip? Are you behaving?”

Gus thought with some satisfaction of the day he’d had, stealing away unnoticed from his boring class schedule and exploring New York his own way. “Uh-huh.”

“You sound so convincing,” Lindsay drawled. “You really are a terrible liar, Gus.”

"I ran into some old friend of yours," Gus said quickly, hoping to distract her. He dug the card out of his pocket, staring at the black letters. "Justin Taylor?"

His mother was silent for a moment. "Justin?" A quick intake of breath before she continued. "You saw Justin."

"Yeah. When I was getting lunch. He recognised me."

"We haven't spoken to Justin in a very long time. How is he?"

Gus felt an uneasiness settle in his stomach. "Did he do something wrong?"

"Oh, Gus, don't be so dramatic," his Lindsay laughed, sounding less shocked now. "We just lost touch after he moved to New York, that's all. How was he?"

"I don't know, I didn't get his life story. Just spoke to him for a few minutes. He looked normal. Gave me his card. Said to say hello. How d'you know him?"

"He was a - friend - of your father's."

Gus snorted. "One of Dad's many mistresses? No wonder you lost touch. S'kind of pathetic that he's talking to me, don't you think?"

"No, Gus. It wasn't like that at all." Her voice was muffled for a moment, talking to someone in the background. "I have to go, honey. Mel just broke a vase."

"Mom's a klutz."

"We love you, Gus."

"Yeah. You too. Whatever. Bye."

Gus hung up.

--

He lay awake all night trying to place Justin's face, going through the many faces that he'd seen in his father's loft, when it struck him with frightening clarity.

His mother kept a startling array of photo albums, pulled them out when she got tipsy and nostalgic. He'd seen the one from his second birthday only a handful of times, because the photos were over exposed and just the sight made her sad. Occasionally, Mom - Mom as in Mel, and Gus wondered why he hadn't worked out a better system of identity before now - would pull it out but Mom as in Lindsay would just end up ranting about how she'd like to sue Kodak for screwing over her negatives. Generally, they avoided that album altogether.

Gus remembered one photo, though, a photo with 'some guy' and his father, and a two year old Gus sitting on his father's shoulders, his tiny hand tangled in a fistful of blonde hair. He'd never asked about the guy, figuring he was just another one of his father's many lovers, despite what the calm, happy smirk on Dad's face might say.

He'd heard the stories about Brian Kinney. Heard them from Michael, who related them with a kind of vicarious glee, and from Mel-Mom, who rolled her eyes and made snappish, affectionate comments. He'd heard about how Brian did tricks, not boyfriends, how monogamy was for straights, how Brian was the last great gay Casanova. He could imagine it, wondered what that guy was like.

Now, his dad went through boyfriends like he might have done tricks. Gus had given up trying to accurately remember their names long ago. There were there one month, two, three at most, and then they were gone, and his father didn't seem to really care. He didn't know whether or not they were monogamous - honestly, he didn't really give a shit, because he didn't like the guys that much anyway. If he thought his dad did, he might have given them a chance, but Brian seemed to barely notice their existence.

Sometimes it felt like Gus' was the only existence Brian did notice. Even if it was only in his weird Brian way - dropping off obscure presents and forcing Gus to read Atlas Shrugged and standing up for him when his mothers were being righteously bitchy. Gus had never doubted that his father loved him, that he loved their whole family, but he doubted that Brian could love anybody else.

Gus couldn't connect the lonely man he knew with the smiling guy in that picture.

--

He stood in the hall outside his hotel room, staring at the phone in one hand and the business card in the other. He didn't want to wake up Adam. He didn't feel like answering his friend's questions, didn't feel like being accused of matchmaking. He had a very clear image of Adam dancing around him singing songs from Fiddler on the Roof, and he shuddered.

He wanted to know things, but he didn't know what they were. He had the strongest urge, suddenly, to know all about his father, know all the things his father refused to tell him. He didn't know if Justin could tell him that, but he figured it was as good a starting point as any.

The sounds his phone made as he dialled frightened him in the stillness and silence of the hall, and he jumped.

"Calling your boyfriend, Peterson?"

The voice behind him made him jump again, and Gus turned to meet Jake's eyes.

"No, just your mom." The retort was lacking creativity, but the phone was ringing already so Gus gave him the finger and walked away, letting himself into the stairwell and settling down on the concrete.

--

"Hello?"

The voice didn't sound remotely groggy, and Gus wondered if Justin kept the same hours as his father.

"Was my dad in love with you?"

"Gus?"



“Yes. Was he?”

“You called me at 3am to ask if Brian loved me?”

“You weren’t sleeping,” Gus objected. “I can tell.”

“No, but we’ll have to send away to NASA to figure out the answer to that question, and I’m pretty sure they’re not open yet.”

“He did, then.”

“What? Gus, I don’t know.”

“He had to have. Because if he didn’t, you would have just said no. You wouldn’t have even had to think about it.”

He heard Justin’s sigh. Felt almost bad for bombarding him like this, but he figured that if Justin wanted to come up to him in the street and make him think all sorts of weird things about his dad, then he had to be prepared for the consequences.

“He loved me in his way,” Justin said quietly. “I’m sure you know all about that.”

“But he did love you.”

“Yes.” The voice was only slightly unsure.

“And you loved him.”

“Yes.”

“Do you still?”

“Even if I do, it’s none of your business.”

“If you didn’t, you’d have just said no.”

“That’s probably true.”

“I’m sorry for calling you like this. I know it’s rude.”

“That’s okay, Gus.” The voice was tired now. Justin sounded resigned, like a man being led to his death. “I know what it’s like to want to know things about Brian that everyone refuses to tell you.”

Gus had been trying to figure out his father his whole life. In the past couple years, he’d accepted half-formed answers, half-known truths, because searching was getting him nowhere.

“He has all these boyfriends,” Gus confessed. “And he doesn’t love any of them. I kind of always thought he wasn’t capable of it.”

Justin’s reply was dull, exhausted. “So did he. Go to bed.”

“Bye, Justin.”

“Bye.”

--

Gus dreamed of a loss so great it tore at his gut and made him scream and clutch at his mother. He was four years old and watching a car pull away, watching it get smaller and smaller, taking his friend farther and farther away. He wasn’t old enough to understand the words ‘New York’, but he knew instinctively from the set of his father’s shoulders, the hardness in his daddy’s voice, that Jus was going very, very far away, and would not return.

In Gus' dream, a four year old child wept for the loss of his companion.

--

He showed up at Justin's office the next day. He'd probably be caught this time, punished by teachers at their wits end. He didn't care. He stood across from Justin, stared at him. He wondered what Justin would be to him if he'd stuck around.

"We were friends," Gus said. "I dreamed about you - leaving."

"Lindz and Mel used to exploit my eagerness to babysit for you," Justin admitted with a wry grin. "You were a cool little kid."

"Could - could things be different between you and my father?" Gus had to ask it even though he wasn't sure he wanted to hear the answer.

"It's not that easy, Gus." Justin's eyes were dark, and he recognised the sadness that was all too present in his Dad's eyes. "It's been forever."

"Why can't it be that easy?"

"It's just not. It just can't be."

They stared at one another challengingly, and Gus saw the fear in Justin's posture. "At least - at least call him."

"I can't." The man heaved a sigh, rummaged around on his desk until he pulled a business card from a stack. He bent over, wrote a note on the back. Handed it to Gus. "Give him this. If he wants to call me, he will."

"Will that be enough?"

“Depends on if Brian’s still Brian. If he’s not, then I probably don’t want to hear from him anyway.”

--

Gus stood on the footpath outside Justin’s building, once again gazing down at the flat white business card. He flipped it over, read the words in Justin’s messy blue ink scrawl. He stifled a laugh.

So, What are you wearing?

If Brian’s still Brian. Justin knew his father too well.

--

Gus let himself into the loft, pausing in the doorway to make sure there were no illicit sounds emanating from the bedroom. He’d only walked in on his father once, but it had been enough to embarrass him for a lifetime.

Dad was sprawled on the couch, his eyes on the television. Gruesome footage of the San Francisco riots threw light on his face, as he tore his attention away and focussed on Gus.

“Sonny Boy,” he greeted his son warmly. “How was New York?”

“It was with school, what do you think?”

“You didn’t get laid, then?”

“No.” Gus dug around in his pocket and produced the card, holding it in his hands. “I got you a present, though.”

Brian took the card with a raised eyebrow that froze when he read the name emblazoned across the front. He turned it over in his hands, and Gus saw the amusement that mixed with the surprise on his face.

“His handwriting is still the same.”

Gus didn't think his father was as surprised as he should have been, considering he hadn't seen the guy in twelve years. “I thought you'd be more shocked.”

Brian shrugged, let his head flop back against the arm of the sofa. “I guess I expect him to pop up all over the place. He's sneaky like that.”

Gus wondered if his father could hear the affection in his own voice.

“You should call,” Gus said encouragingly.

“Nah.”

“You should,” he repeated more insistently.

Brian ran his fingers over the letters of Justin's message. “We'll see.”

--

Three weeks later, Justin answered his cell phone on the way to bed, hearing Brian's long adored voice floating down the line.

“I'm not wearing much at all,” his lover said. “What are you wearing?”

fin.

# Green Curry

He tasted like green curry. Brian's first coherent thought when kissing Justin for the first time in twelve fucking years was that he tasted like green curry, and all before that was mm good touch bite now.

He slid his hands into that thick blonde hair, grateful to know, now, that it is still lush and golden, not thinning and brown, when all he could do before was wonder.

It was the wondering that killed him. Not so much the thought that Justin might be bald, just that Justin might be bald and he might not know about it. That Justin might be sick or sad or happy or dead, and he wouldn't have a fucking clue.

Kissing him now, he knows that Justin tastes like green curry, and that at least is a start.

"Brian," Justin moans around their lips, their tongues, clumsily tangling and tasting. Brian remembers that Justin used to initiate whole conversations through even the most heated of their kisses, and the thought makes him smile.

He tugs Justin into the loft by the collar of that soft leather jacket, sliding the big door closed. For years, this place has been half a home, too empty, too clean, too devoid of almost everything. Consciously, he has never realised this, but the knowledge has pulsed in the back of his mind, the silence speaking more than chaos could ever say.

He doesn't speak as he leads Justin to the bedroom, to a mattress the blonde has never laid upon, sheets that have never touched his skin. Brian doesn't realise he's being reverent as he removes the other's clothes, doesn't recognise the adoration in the slow slide of his palm over Justin's stomach, but he knows he's fucking glad to see him.

Justin isn't a kid anymore, but he hasn't been for a long time, not when he took his first steps in New York, not when he made the choice to go, not in those last few years before he left.

The decision Justin made wasn't out of spite. He wasn't angry at Brian, he wasn't unhappy, part of him really did not want to go, but they parted with a kiss and no promises, waiting to see where the roads would lead them.

For Justin, all roads lead back to Brian. He's sure there's got to be some lame folk song out there that expresses this exact sentiment, and he feels all corny and Meg Ryan for even thinking it. The seventeen year old boy that lingers stubbornly inside crows happily about fate and destiny and true fucking love, and if pressed, Justin would not necessarily disagree.

He's spent a lot of time thinking about why Adam chose that day to drag him to that deli that Justin hated with the fire of a thousand burning suns, why Gus' school chose that day to visit Wall Street, why they just happened to be in the same place at the same time, Gus looking so much like Brian that it was impossible for him to be anyone else's son. He's spent a lot of time thinking about it, deciding over and over again that he doesn't care, because it got him where he needed to be.

Where he needed - Brian's lips - sliding down, Brian's teeth, marking his flesh, Brian's tongue, Brian's cheeks, Brian's hands, Brian's hair...

Justin lets out a strangled moan as Brian nuzzles into his hip, murmurs something quietly against his skin. He imagines Brian having a gentle conversation with his cock, discussing music and the weather and whether or not Green was the new black, and had to let out a bark of laughter, because Brian wouldn't discuss those things with anybody - but he probably would with Justin's cock.

Brian met Justin's eyes, lifting his head so Justin could see his grin. Large hands slid down pale thighs, smoothing the tension which mounted with each added pleasure. Their eyes speak of shared memories of sweaty backrooms and this very bedroom, Justin's mother's bathroom, Brian's Jeep, Debbie's backyard, Michael's stairwell. Those moments when the teasing touches and sly glances grew too much and they had to escape, find the closest thing to privacy available.

Justin doesn't want to get caught up in a back and forth of "Remember the time...", so he yanks Brian up by the shoulders, kisses him hotly, desperately, the way he wanted to kiss those hundreds of guys in New York but couldn't. He tried, tried to goad them into tugging at his lips with their teeth, tried to turn them into Brian in his mind, but it was never quite right, and the wrongness would send Justin into a funk that lasted for days.

He slides his hands under the soft knit of Brian's sweater, scratching his shoulder bones with blunt nails. He yanks the sweater off, throws it aside. He's never been able to believe Brian's beauty, especially in retrospect. Lying awake, jerking off alone in bed, he often decided that he must have imagined the ethereal smoothness of Brian's skin, the curves and angles of bone and flesh.

He didn't, didn't imagine any of it, and it's kind of like discovering that Santa Claus is real and that he's planning on bringing you a vintage Mustang for Christmas.

"Christ, Brian," Justin murmurs, his hand sliding down the ridge of Brian's firm stomach, feeling mesmerised and grateful. "Fuck."

Brian swoops down and they're kissing again, and Justin is struggling to undo Brian's jeans. Struggling because Brian won't even let him breathe, won't tear his body away enough to give Justin any kind of leverage, and Justin doesn't know if he's grateful or frustrated. He wants the feeling of Brian's weight pressing down on him, but he wants naked flesh possibly even more than that.

As usual, Brian just wants Justin. He's never met anybody with a more fascinating flavour. He wonders if it's because Justin eats so much, or if it's just because he's Justin, and decides it doesn't matter, as long as he continues to taste as good as he does in that moment. Brian spreads kisses over his lover's jaw, feeling the first hint of stubble breaking through the flesh, feeling the firmness of bone beneath the skin.

Finally, Justin snaps open the last button, and together they work to slide Brian out of his jeans. Brian grinds his erection against Justin's, pulsing heat, smooth skin, unbearably hard, twitching and begging and oozing.

He lifts himself up to stare down at those fiendish blue eyes, feels Justin's hand rolling the condom down his dick. He remembers the first time, the fear and sweetness that turned him on so much, but somehow this new self assurance, this want-you-now confidence is better.

His nails are digging into Brian's back, Justin knows, hanging on tight with the intensity of his lover's fingers stroking his ass, sliding lube around the hole, stretching him, preparing him in that achingly familiar way. One finger, two fingers, moving firmly, and by the time Justin is ready to scream out "Now!" in desire for more, more, always more, the head of Brian's cock is there, and pushing inside.

Every song Justin has ever heard is ringing in his head.

He hasn't been fucked much since he left Brian. In twelve years, he's been the bottom a handful of times, and it hurts a bit, but he doesn't tell Brian to take it easy. He wants it like this, wants the lasting pain, wants it hard and fast and making up for everything they'd missed.

They're not kissing. They're just staring at one another, foreheads pressed together, smelling one another, tasting one another on the air. They fall into rhythm, as they always have, and the part of Justin that can still think coherently is reminded of African drums and a chanting chorus.

"Brian," Justin gasps. He wants to tell Brian he missed him, but the maddening thrust of Brian's cock inside him makes it impossible, so he just tightens his hold and rides out the waves of pleasure that shatter his mind into a thousand little half-formed thoughts and images. Brian's hand on his cock and Brian's lips on his cheek and Brian grinding desperately into his ass, and it all joins together and blurs and twelve years worth of everything stiffens and splinters and suddenly -



Justin comes with a cry.

He feels Brian shaking above him, feels the vibration of Brian's groans through his body. They came together, and later, when Justin is lucid enough to appreciate it, this fills him with a fuzzy contentment, because in that moment, he and Brian were perfect together.

They collapse together, Brian's lips moving over Justin's collarbone, Justin's hand in Brian's hair. They pant and heave, and the weight of Brian pushing him into the mattress is one of the best things Justin has ever felt.

"We're still pretty fucking good at that," Brian groans against the side of his lover's neck. It's the first time he's spoken since Justin showed up.

"We should teach a class," Justin agrees.

"Nah. Takes natural talent."

Brian presses his mouth against Justin's temple, and they lay there bathed in sweat and cum, warm and sticky and sated. Brian's never had this with anyone else, not with the thousands of tricks nor the dozens of pseudo-boyfriends, because the second he'd had them he just wanted to get them away.

Justin he wants to draw inside himself. The idea of separation fills him with dread, twelve years worth of dread, so he traps Justin on the bed with his long limbs and the force of his own will, and together, they drift off to sleep.

Brian's last thought is of green curry and crayon fingers, smiles, gasps, murmurs, and the fact that there's no-one that fascinates him quite as much as Justin.