



Fruitbat

Author: *Micah Carver*

Category: LGBT+

Description: Si . . .

It's Halloween and my birthday. No one ever remembers that though. The party my friends wanted to throw became my responsibility again, but I just don't have the bandwidth for it tonight, so I'm sneaking out to get some air.

The grumpy shop clerk is lucky I'm there to help when he takes that gnarly fall and smashes his head on the shelf.

Danny . . .

I took this nightmare convenience store gig so I could pay my bills while waiting for a literary agent to finally discover me. That was four years ago, and I haven't been inspired to write anything new for even longer than that.

Of course, I slip and knock myself out in front of the prettiest zombie I've ever seen. I keep telling him to go, but he insists on sticking around.

Total Pages (Source): 23

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:53 am

1

Si

10:32 pm

Music penetrates my ears and takes my body. I need it to carry this day away on smooth undulating waves. Thudding bass resounds in my chest, and lyrics fill my head as a gentle pulsing aura envelops me. I give in to the music, shutting out this crowded room, bursting at its seams with my so-called friends, and their friends.

The songstress pleads for her lover not to prove her right. But they always do, don't they?

My knees bow and sway, twisting my hips from side to side. My head rolls and my arms flail over my head, like a marionette dangling from strings, tied to the ceiling .

The air inside my bubble vibrates as I close my eyes and surrender to the melody, bumping shoulders with the eclectic horde of costumed characters, swallowing me at the center of my living room.

My housemates insisted we throw this “ Slasher Bash, ” celebrating Halloween, by inviting anyone relevant in our contact lists. They love any opportunity to boost their social standing. I'm not sure why my apartment became the primary venue, considering this party was never my idea, but I didn't protest when I had the chance.

I do enjoy people a lot of the time. There's a euphoria in being surrounded by them,

even when they're not genuine connections. Everyone carries wisdom and enrichment, giving and taking, whether they're aware or not. Community makes the world a better place. Right?

It's also exhausting.

Not one friend at this party has remembered that Halloween is also my birthday. Your 30th is supposed to be a big one—It certainly doesn't feel like it.

Mallory's birthday is just two days after mine as it has been every year since we first met. Obviously, you'd think my best friend would remember my birthday, with our dates being so close together. She's dropped hints about her gift-list for weeks. I got her a slouchy cream cashmere sweater from her favorite boutique up the street, because she practically assigned it to me. I don't like to disappoint, even though I'm always the one disappointed. Maybe that's my trauma response ?

I'm used to sharing my day with the beloved holiday. It goes down the same way, every year. I wait for the "happy birthdays" that never come but no one ever forgets "Happy Halloween. "

Nanny Grace used to remind everyone, including my parents, when I was a kid. She raised me and my four older siblings, and dedicated more of her life to us, than her own children, while our mother and father jetted around the globe. She was the one person I could count to remember my birthday, until she passed when I was thirteen. I've been forgotten ever since. I don't understand how people forget so easily I don't forget dates, they stick in my head like flies to a spider's web.

"Si!"

Damien's voice is light years away.

I carry on, rocking and rolling to the music.

“Hey—Josiah!” he shouts in my ear and his hands clamp my shoulders, reeling me from my trance.

“Yeah?” I shout back over the noise of the party, edged with frustration, as my bubble pops.

“Did you get tequila?” Damien’s black pupils are dilated and rimmed with blood-red irises. Those costume contacts are so creepy .

His floppy black hair is slicked back with some greasy gel and his face is powdered white with a drip of crimson corn syrup, trailing the edge of his mouth, dry and cracked to his chin.

“Yes, it’s in my room. I’ll get it.” I flag my index finger, adding, “One sec. ”

My fangy housemate folds back into the herd.

Damien, Mallory, and I have known each other since we were little, attending all the same fancy private schools and pushed to socialize in our parents' pretentious circles. I'm not so sure they'd bother with me, if my father wasn't who he is.

I weave through the crowd and up the hall, stopping by the bathroom, because my bladder is ready to burst.

A trio of ladies that I vaguely recognize, stumble out, laughing and poking at each other. Barbie in neon roller skating gear, a platinum-haired black-cat in a negligee, and Patrick Star, swiping white residue from her nostril on the back of her pointy foam sleeve.

I press against the wall so they can pass, and quickly lock myself into the toilet with the cloud of skunky smoke, swirling around my head as I relieve the ache in my belly.

The mirror is a nasty bitch tonight, reflecting frazzled curls, sun-bleached from the past summer, and my tinted-gray face is smeared with dark shadow around my eyes. I've been binging The Walking Dead episodes all week. Dressing up as a zombie was the obvious choice for my costume. The simplest solution, after I left the decision until the last minute, and needed to think of something quick. Procrastination is my best skill.

I got crafty, chewing up a t-shirt with dull kitchen scissors, to make my jagged crop top. Leaving my belly exposed, because I'm gay, it's Halloween, and slutty costumes giving skin are standard issue .

A hollow-eyed zombie mimics me In the mirror, sucking air through my teeth, and blotting my hands on a towel, before traipsing to my bedroom, slipping through the door, and latching it shut behind me.

I lean on the closed door, blowing a long exhale to express my aching lungs. Have I been holding my breath all night?

The refuge of my room is intoxicating, or maybe that's the contact high from the smoky bathroom?

I scoop two bottles of tequila off my computer desk, and set them on the floor outside my door, before barricading myself away from the muffled chaos.

Someone will find them, eventually. I just want to disappear for the rest of this night.

A draft of chilly air sneaks under the cracked window, carrying faint voices that fade

in passing, as people make their way down the sidewalk outside.

I haul the window open and slink out to the fire escape, closing my eyes, and drawing the autumn air into my nostrils. I fill my diaphragm, hoping to steady my sloshing mind from the four vodka-cranberries I had earlier.

Wrought iron clinks and moans as I descend into the dark shadows of the narrow alley.

The street is abandoned and barely lit by a sparse scattering of streetlamps. I live on the second floor of a three-story industrial-style building, sandwiched between Mallory and Damien's condos on the other two floors.

I round the corner and follow the sidewalk, toward the park, that's only three blocks over. It's a nightly trek I started several months ago. —Doctor's orders. Exercise and fresh air are supposed to help me sleep. Insomnia is a total nightmare.

I knot goosebumped arms around my naked waist, wishing for a moment that I had grabbed a coat. —It's freezing tonight.

Meh—the exertion will warm me up eventually.

Passing through a gap in the split-rail fence that surrounds the park, I trod along the crushed gravel path, stones popping under the rubber soles of my sneakers.

Distant voices chatter but move away, as I stroll into the forested oasis at the center of the city. When you venture deep enough, modern civilization disappears from view, more-so after dark.

The new moon is bright, casting looming shadows behind bare trees. Petrified leaves flit across the path on whispering wind, escaping piles, waiting to be collected and

hauled away. A fluffy pair of raccoons rummage through a trash bin, pausing to gawk at me, before carrying on when I'm clear of their territory. Glancing back over my shoulder, I spy ringed tails flitting from the top of the can. Too cute.

Typically, I turn left at the fork, and loop back home, to climb into bed and stare at the ceiling until morning, but tonight I veer right. The party will go on until daylight, so I'm in no rush to return.

This path leads to a bridge that crosses into the grittier half of the city, over the river that cuts straight through. I've got nothing else to do, so might as well explore the other side.

A pack of monsters and ghouls are draped over a park bench, up ahead. Their beastly leader prances around them, reenacting a tale that has the group cackling like a clan of hyenas.

I approach cautiously, trying to maintain a confident stroll. Their gossip simmers, as they focus on me, interrupting the fun. I should have looped out around them and hid myself in the shadows. It's too late now. A nervous grin creeps up my cheeks and my heartbeat is thumping again. Please be friendly.

They're in their late teens or early twenties, I can't tell anymore. I've reached an age where young people are suddenly intimidating.

My face is hot and I chew my lip to still the quiver. My throat tightens, but I force a swallow, so my voice is clear.

"Hey." I manage a smile.

"Hey." The flanneled furry storyteller studies me.

His curious pack stares me up and down with narrow eyes as I pass.

Hold it together Si.

Once I reach a safe distance, they carry on with their cackling, like I was never there.

Heavy air squeezes from my gut and I drop my shoulders with relief, exiting the opposite side of the park through another gap in the split-rail fence.

The wide stretch of highway is clear, when I check both directions, and step into the crosswalk.

The bridge is straight ahead and the other side of the city is just past the river. I have no idea where I'm going, but I guess I'll Know when I get there .

Headlights sweep the road in front of my feet as a grumbling vehicle barrels around the corner.

I turn my head toward the dark-tinted SUV, that's headed straight for me. Its LED bulbs are blinding, and screeching tires echo over the river.

I freeze, clenching my eyes and brace for impact but my body lifts off, and I tuck and roll into a somersault, crashing against the midway.

The beastly truck roars and its wheels sear the pavement with blood-curdling wails, reclaiming its speed, and races down the street.

"Asshole!" I scream at the taunting tail lights, trailing off into the night. My hands tremble and my head is spinning. I climb back to my feet and lean on my knees, trying to catch my breath and calm my pounding chest.

“Jeesh!” I wheeze, swallowing my guts back down until they settle where they belong.

I swipe a bead of sweat from my brow and carry on, shaking my head to reset, and whisk that terrifying moment away. My eyes might crawl out of my head, but I’m okay.

This half of the city smells different, bizarrely sweet. It reminds me of fried dough, from the carnivals that Grace used to take us to, coated with a generous dusting of confectioners sugar.

There aren’t any trees on this side of the city, just lots of concrete and brick. The buildings are decorated with graffiti and there are bits of trash scattered about .

That would never fly in my neighborhood. The privileged residents of Park Row would tear the mayor a new asshole over a candy wrapper on the street.

I giggle at the flash fantasy of my mother, arranging a brunch with all the stuffy socialites, passive-aggressively inciting a protest, while sipping mimosas and plotting the mayor’s political downfall.

Maybe they should get brighter traffic lights for that intersection before the bridge.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:53 am

2

Danny

10:59 pm

That repulsive doorbell chimes, announcing my arrival and triggering the twitch in my left brow, as I push open the heavy steel-framed glass door. Its hydraulic hinge expels a peeved sigh, quitting mid-close and slamming shut behind me. Same, door—same .

The sour stench of ammoniated lemon stings my sinuses and the barely audible hum of harsh fluorescent light clenches my jaw.

This place makes my skin crawl.

I've worked the nightmare shift in this hellhole convenience store for four years now. Are food and shelter really necessities? My dreams of making it in the literary world have yet to manifest. Fuck these inhumane shackles of capitalism.

It might help if I write a new piece this decade.

The manuscripts in my tattered messenger bag—slung across my body—with my barely functioning laptop—have been rejected by every damned publisher who's seen them, too many times now.

“Hey, Danny!” Delila is always so fucking perky.

It's 11 o'clock at night for fucks sake. Her bubbly personality shouldn't erk me the way it does. I remind myself. That's on me.

She's probably just happy I showed up again, relieving her from this hellish duty. I don't know her well enough to be sure, we just pass in the night, as shifts change.

"Hey." I pander half a pained smile. Is it possible to pull a muscle in your cheek?

"I like your shirt!" She beams with far too much enthusiasm.

"Thanks," I respond, unable to keep the disbelief out of my tone.

My shirt is black—or used to be—with some old band logo, so shattered and faded it just looks like bits of paper went through the wash, and I couldn't be bothered to peel them off. But okay.

Delila always makes some sort of complimentary remark. I look like shit, but she still puts in the effort to be kind. Good for her.

She tears open a box of chocolate bars. "I'll leave these for you. The shelf needs restocking. "

Great.

She slips two into her pocket, tilting a shoulder to block the security camera's view.

My eyes roll.

This place doesn't pay enough to afford anything above basic necessities, so we collect our own bonuses from time to time. It's not likely anyone is checking the footage. I don't even bother being discreet anymore, no one seems to care. I haven't

been fired yet.

The owner is probably just using the place for some shady money laundering scheme. I've never met them, only heard it's some young entrepreneur with more capital than they know what to do with. The missing goods definitely go unnoticed in finagled bookkeeping. I can't remember the last time I was asked to record inventory, it's been at least two years.

"Okay—It'll give me something to do." I scoot past Delila, into the office where I drop my bag, and clock in. The archaic machine hung on the wall sears a barely legible 10:59 onto the yellow strip of cardstock.

Right on time.

Delila pops in the door and punches her card before I even step out of the way. She smells like sour pickle—her favorite snack, according to the half-empty jars left in the office every night—and cheap fruity shampoo. Some sort of mixed-berry bullshit. Not the gag-inducing combination you'd imagine though, it reminds me of those deceptive kombucha drinks in the fridge at the back of the store. They smell okay but taste rancid .

Delila gathers up her things, slipping into a short-waisted metallic-lavender quilt jacket. Her thick corkscrew curls are swept up into a twisted nest atop her head. I envy her creamy brown skin.

A lack of experiencing daylight these past few years has left me pale as a ghost. There's not much reason to leave my tiny studio apartment, after I get home, just past dawn. I sleep through most days. Once upon a time, I savored the night and it's peaceful bliss, before I took this fucking gig. I figured I could write, while getting paid. That's the dream isn't it? So much for that. I usually end up staring at a blank screen and blinking cursor, for hours on end, before trolling internet forums the rest

of my shift.

“Have a good one,” Delila says, looping the strap of her purse across her breast, and wedging it tight against her hip. “Happy Halloween.”

“Oh yeah, you too.” I’d forgotten, even though decorations have been up all over town the past week. I slept through any potential trick-or-treaters. No one was about to knock on the door of my 3rd-floor walk-up anyway. I wouldn’t answer if they did.

That fucking doorbell chimes again, as she struts out, and down the sidewalk, before the door slams.

My teeth clench and I have to close my eyes for a brief moment of meditation. I could probably just lock up, go home, then come back before the morning shift takes over, no one would even notice.

But, Fuck it . I’m already here .

I flip the tap of a tall silver thermos, in the line-up along the wall, and fill a paper cup with a dark roast brew.

Standing in the center of the store, facing the camera, I blow ripples over the black sludge, and slurp. My eyes narrow and glare up at big brother’s lens, challenging the tiny red pin-light beaming back at me.

I suppress the intrusive urge to flip my middle finger at the camera. It doesn’t deserve that.

This coffee is disgusting, it’s probably still the same batch that the morning shift brewed and has sat all day. Or worse, the same pot I brewed last night, that still hasn’t been changed.

I spit it back into the cup and turn on my heel, stomping toward the sink, at the back of the store.

The place is grossly familiar. Nothing ever changes. Shelves take months, even years to empty and just get refilled with expired junk from the moldy storage room in the basement. Some of the garbage has probably sat here longer than I've been an employee. The thick layers of dust prove my theory.

I round the grocery shelf into the farthest aisle but my footing doesn't quite make contact, and slips out from under me. My right heel glides over some slick barrier coating the floor and my arms flail, reaching for the plastic barrel end-cap—which should be full of hard ciders—hoping to catch myself but it tumbles sideways, under my weight, and I pull it down with me.

My head bashes against the sharp corner of a steel shelving unit, and my breath catches, before the world blurs into a spiraling dark tunnel.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:53 am

3

Si

11:11 pm

“Oh no!” I bolt forward. My legs carry me so quickly, I’m floating over the pavement, and leap onto the sidewalk across the street. A doorbell jingles as I storm through the storefront and scurry to the fallen clerk’s side.

He’s laid out on the hard floor, coated with a sheen of soapy water, from a fresh mopping.

I watched him slip, after I’d stopped to stare, flailing like an over-the-top actor from those old, silent films. It was comical until his head bounced against the metal shelf, so hard, that my own skull cracked just bearing witness to the impact.

He’s out cold .

I reach for my pocket to collect my phone, realizing I left it at home. “Dammit!” I mutter, my sneakers struggle to grip the slick polished concrete as I pull myself up and skate toward the check-out counter.

There must be a phone here? My eyes scan the wall of booze bottles and cigarettes, then dart to the cubby compartments under the cash counter.

Nothing .

I skid through an open door frame, into a small office. My eyes dart around the cramped space, before noticing the tattered messenger bag, left on the single chair. This must belong to him? I tear it open and reach inside, searching for a familiar shape, parting an old laptop from a bundle of file-folders holding thick stacks of papers. Several pens clink against a chapstick tube and I feel the recognizable shape of an inhaler for asthmatics. Damien keeps one on him at all times.

I tuck the little life-saving device in my pocket, thinking he might need it when he wakes up.

There is however, no phone in the bag, or its front pocket.

Dammit!

I rush back out and kneel next to the conked stranger. His chest is rising and falling under a faded t-shirt— Well, that's good —and his soft belly is peeking out from under the hem. — Cute . His thick arms are sprawled out, with one still reaching up, toward a shelf, hanging by his fingertips. His shaggy brown hair is clipped tight at the sides, then cut into a choppy mullet, that's soaking up mop water from beneath him .

I twist back, spotting rolls of paper towels, lining a shelf across the way. Crawling over the soapy residue, I grab one off the shelf, tearing the plastic wrap off it, and wrap sheets around my hand, tucking the roll under my arm. Then I shimmy back to the fallen man, on my knees, and sop up some of the mess around his body.

I need a second roll, to clean myself up. Ammoniated citrus is definitely not my signature scent.

I don't know what else to do, so I curl my knees to my chest, lean against the wall of refrigerators, and wait.

I watch him lie there and monitor his breathing, ready to squirt the inhaler between his pouty bowed lips when needed.

“Mmm...” he moans, stirring after several minutes.

I roll onto my knees and shuffle to his side, sweeping a wavy strand of hair off his forehead, as his warm-maple eyes pry open. He squints under the harsh fluorescent lights.

I hover over him to shade his sight.

“Hey.” I say with a smile.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:53 am

4

Danny

11:27 pm

“What the fuck?”

Blinding nothingness dims and I focus on the ghoulish blonde grinning over me. His buttery curls are mangled and poking in all directions. Smoky rings frame hazel eyes, and his skin is the color of spoiled chicken. He glows from a fluorescent halo of the buzzing ceiling lights overhead.

“Don’t get up,” he says.

I’m not about to listen to a zombie, huddled over my vulnerable body. What the fuck just happened? I grip a shelf and pry my sore back off the floor, shimmying a reasonable distance away from the mind munching stranger .

“You’re hurt. Sit still, do you need some water?” He flings a fridge door open, gathers a plastic bottle, and shoves it in my face.

I bracket my temples with my palms, to squash the pulsing throbs, and guard my precious brain from the hungry ghoul.

He scurries around the corner on all fours, and returns the same way, rattling a bottle of Tylenol at me.

“Take some,” he commands.

I accept the water and the pills, but glare at the suspicious stranger, now gnawing his lower lip with thick buttery brows, caved in concern. He sits back on his heels, places both hands on his knees, and tilts his head. Like a good boy.

Prettiest zombie I’ve ever seen.

The zombie’s mouth stretches, in a half smile, that pulls at the stone-pale skin across his face.

The pain subsides in my head and back, disappearing as if it was never there, and I move to pull myself up.

He rushes to his feet and grabs my arm, offering to hoist me.

I look up into glistening blue-green pools, specked with golden shards, and melt for a moment.

“I’m okay.” I pull my arm from his grip and climb to my feet, tugging my shirt back down to cover my belly. My back is drenched, and I reek of mop fluid.

The floor is scattered with wet patches, slowly evaporating, and the bright yellow—caution: wet floor— sign is still sandwiched-up and leaning against the rolling bucket of water, at the back of the store .

For fucks sake, Delila? She forgets to put it out all the time. This isn’t my first slip-and-fall, thanks to her. If the store ever had customers, they could cash out big, with a lawsuit. Wait—could I?

“Are you okay?” The zombie leans into my peripheral.

“Fine, “ I bite.

The kindness in his eyes is tender. I relent, softening my tone, and adding, “I’m okay,” as I meet his stare.

His half smile arcs fully and his brows rise in relief.

“Oh, good.” He rocks on his feet, latching his arms behind his back, pushing his bronzed belly forward, under a tattered crop top. A sparse trail of sunny hairs travel from his navel, down into the waistband of white underwear, peeking over blue jeans.

I swallow the thickness collecting in my throat.

“I saw you go down . . . from across the street,” he says, twisting his body and pointing out the glass storefront. His shoulders are broad and flex, poking out of frayed sleeves.

I tug at the hem of my old t-shirt—too small for my plump body—to double-check that my midriff is covered and avert my eyes to the drink coolers, when he turns back to face me. My cheeks burn.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” He steps forward.

“Yes.” I say shortly, “I’m fine.” I scoot behind the shelves, kicking the mop bucket, and cross the back of the store, on trek to my station at the counter.

“Thanks for checking on me.” You can go now .

He rounds the front and meets me at my destination, all without taking his eyes off me.

I slip into my cave, behind the register, trying to hide away from the shameful fiasco. Leave it to me, to make a fool of myself, as a gorgeous stranger is passing by the window.

“That was an intense fall,” he comments, leaning on his elbows, over the counter.

I’m sure.

My eyes are drawn to the flex of his biceps and the arc of his long neck. His big bright eyes look me up and down.

I want to shrink into a cubby under the cash register.

“I’m Si,” he offers a hand.

I ignore the greeting and crouch, pretending to carry on with important work, shifting about candy bars in the box Delila left for me to put away.

He folds his arm and props himself up, peering over the cash register at me.

“Danny.” I finally respond, turning my head to stare at the empty space on the candy shelf in aisle two, assessing the urgent task at hand. “Well, duty calls.” I hint, heaving the box into my arms, as I rise to my feet.

Si’s eyes follow as I make my way down the aisle.

He dangles from his elbows, off the counter, kicking his feet, before hopping back. His sneaker squeaks as he bounces up behind me.

It’s going to be a long night.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:53 am

5

Si

11:37 pm

He's kinda cute.

— And looks so uncomfortable.

“Can I help?” I reach for the box. He really shouldn't be working, after that crazy tumble.

“I'm okay.” Danny recoils away from me. “You don't have to stick around. I've got tons to do.” His cheeks glow pink. “Thanks again, for checking on me.”

“Danny, you just took a serious fall. You passed out—For quite a while.” I wing my arms and shift weight onto one hip, insisting he hand me the box. “I'll hold these for you. You can load the shelf.” Compromise .

He pauses, staring at the gap where the bars fit, before huffing and propping the box against the shelf with his knee but letting me scoop my hands under for support.

I smile, dig my heels into the floor, arch my back, and grin.

Danny chews his lip, and furrows his brow, grabbing fistfuls of wrapped bars and shoving them into their designated space.

His dark t-shirt is worn-thin and faded. The fabric pulls taut over his thick body. The blush, lingering on in his button nose and big ears, slowly settles back down to match his pale skin. Tiny punctures in his ears hint at traces of old piercings he's let go of.

His mullet is a tangle of glossy waves, and his body heat carries the scent of sweet cinnamon toast. His black jeans aren't as faded as his t-shirt and hug the curve of his plump ass and tree-trunk legs deliciously.

I push my bottom lip forward and blow, to dry away the bead of sweat forming on my left brow.

His warm maple eyes meet mine.

I smile but he shies away. Though I'm sure I see the far side of his mouth curl, slightly.

He finishes loading the shelf and takes the empty box. Our fingers touch for a second, igniting a pop of electricity that surges through me, curling my toes.

"What's next?" I ask.

Playing shopkeep will be fun!

"Not much, really." He waddles back to the counter.

"Are you by yourself all night?" I'm curious .

"Yeah," he huffs, ripping the bottom of the box open, stretching the cardboard flat, and tucking it into the back office.

I lean over the counter and browse a selection of plastic lighters, standing at attention

in their display, tapping each with the tip of my finger.

“That must make for a long night?” I pretend to read the back of an unscratched lottery ticket, while peering through my lashes at him.

He’s scoping out the store, mapping his next task, looking lost.

“Maybe you should sit down for a bit.” I worry, nodding at the folded metal stool, leaning against the wall.

“I’m okay,” he shrugs, unfurling the seat and plopping down on it anyway.

“How long have you worked here?” I ask, twisting a crunchy curl around my finger, breaking the gel cast, and tugging the softened strand.

“Too long,” he says, as he wrinkles his face in distaste, avoiding eye contact with me.

I push off the counter, and spin on my heel, traipsing down an aisle to browse the selection of goods.

It’s your typical convenience store. Snacks, cleaning products, air fresheners, a self-serve coffee station, an empty plexiglass box with a heat lamp for warming whatever quick meal is usually on display, and two walls of refrigerators that wrap the rest of the store .

I collect an energy drink from a cooler, strut back to the front, drop it down on the counter, and reach for my wallet.

“Shit!.” I left it at home with my phone. “Never mind.” My face cooks as I start back to return the can.

“Take it.” Danny calls after me.

“I don’t have my money.” I retort, spinning back toward him.

He folds his heavy arms across his chest. “It’s on me.” His grin is sly and a dimple dips in one cheek.

I melt.

“I can pay you later, give me your number and I’ll Apple Pay you.” Smooth, right? I smile.

“Don’t worry about it.” He lifts off the stool and moves toward the row of coffee pots, hauling one off the shelf and trudging toward the back of the store.

I pop my can and take a long swig, setting it back on the counter, following him with my eyes as I round the far side of the store, and meet him at his destination.

He bends to set the thermos on the floor, and his shirt rides up his back, exposing milky skin, peppered with a dark patch of hair that swirls into the crack of his ass cleavage.

I lick my lips and swallow the pool under my tongue.

He cranks the faucet of the deep utility sink and reaches for the thermos.

I beat him to it, hauling the silver cylinder up and into the basin, pushing him aside with my hip. The static of his body tingles down my side as he stands close, watching me fill the jug.

I peer coyly, over my shoulder, and smile.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:53 am

6

Danny

11:59

Who is this guy?

Si hums and shimmies, bouncing on one hip and tapping his toes, while water gushes into the thermos. He glances back at me, with that pretty grin and fluttering eyelashes.

“Good?” he asks, nodding toward the coffee station, waiting to be directed to the next course of action.

He’s so fucking cute.

I wave an arm and bow my head, inviting him to pass. I follow his proud trot, with my eyes glued to his tight little ass, swishing and swaying with each step, it’s hypnotic.

I need him to leave .

He grunts, heaving the container up, onto its perch.

I scoop in to help and the back of my arm grazes his warm naked belly. A blaze consumes me like an arid forest. My face is singed and I can feel it glowing. I jerk

away as soon as the thermos is in place, and shuffle back into my clerk cave, to hide the inconvenient swelling in my pants.

“What’s next?” he floats over, drapes himself across the counter—dangling his legs—and beams with excitement.

“That’s it,” I shrug. “We’re done.” You can go now. “I just wait for my shift to end.”

The room blurs and spins for a moment. I close my eyes and sit on the wobbly stool. Holding myself together with a smile.

His eyes are big and his lips bow. “Should we take you to the hospital?”

“No,” I bark out with a short laugh. “I don’t have insurance.” Or the money, to cover a hospital visit . “I’m fine.”

“There’s a clinic a few streets over, isn’t there?” He steps around the counter and places a hand on my shoulder.

I’m on fire again. My bones crackle in flames, sweat condenses on the top of my head and the center of my chest.

“I promise. —I’m good.” I short circuit, rising from the stool, and sweep away from him. I scoop coffee grounds into the brewer, and pour the thermos of water into a reserve, before flicking the machine on.

He’s propped against the counter, watching me with his hip jutted out under that perfect tanned belly, crossing his ankles, and arching a sculpted brow. He chews his bottom lip and stares at me with narrowing eyes .

“Did you go to Hudson Academy?” Si looks puzzled.

“No.” I say with a chuckle. “—I went to public school.”

“Have we met before?” He taps on his lip with the tip of his index finger.

My gaze lingers on the lucky digit, touching that pink pillowy mouth, while his eyes search the ceiling for a clue to the mystery.

The coffee pot gurgles and spits, before settling into a steady drip, stirring me from the trance.

“You’ve probably come in here before.” I’d remember. Now I’m trying to recollect. He is familiar, but I have no idea why. “Do you have a party to get to?”

He pauses studying a pack of butterscotch candies and flicks a confused look at me from the corner of his eye.

“You’re all dressed up, like the walking dead,” I explain. Just minus the gore.

“Oh yeah!” he exclaims and giggles. “I forgot.” He looks down at his tattered clothes, and then into the sliver of a mirror, flanking the side of a sunglasses display. His neck flushes pink, beneath the gray makeup.

I roll my shoulders and grin, as I spigot myself a fresh cup of coffee. The first sip clears my swimmy mind.

“I left the party, actually.” He spins back over the counter, propped up on his elbows.

I perch on the stool, waiting.

“It’s my birthday,” he confesses quietly. His pretty face drops and the gleam in his eye dims. His elbow bumps the energy drink he had clearly forgotten for a minute,

and he raises it for a sip.

“Happy birthday.” My curiosity is piqued by his sudden mood shift. A knot twists in my gut and I have an intense urge to hug him, but I won’t.

“Thanks.” His eyes spark again as our gaze meets. “You’re the first person to say that today.”

Now, I really want to hug him. “I’m sorry.”

He shrugs. “When’s your birthday?” he asks and leans toward me, wagging his brows.

His mouth looks delicious. His lips probably taste like candy. I bet he’s sweet all over . I sip the bitter brew in my hands.

His blue-green and gold-flecked eyes are staring through me, waiting for my answer.

“July 5th.” I swallow.

His pupils dilate, “You’re a holiday baby too!” he chimes, then adds, “Almost.”

“Yep,” I chuckle. “—My mother used to tell me the fireworks, on the 4th, were for me.” My throat catches on the sweet memory. I haven’t thought about that in years. Why did I even share that?

“That’s so sweet.” His brows cave over his empathic eyes.

Is he going to cry?

“My parents have never remembered mine, no one does.” He spins away and studies

the same package of butterscotch candies. “Halloween is always more important.”

The wisp of curls, clung to the back of his neck, capture my stare .

“Our nanny was the only one who ever remembered.” He props a pair of cheap sunglasses onto his nose and checks his reflection, before placing them back on the display and spinning around. “Is there a bathroom I can use?”

“Sure.” I point to the dark doorway at the back corner, past the mop bucket, “just through there, the bathroom is at the bottom of the stairs.”

“I’ll be right back.” He smiles and trots down the grocery aisle.

Be careful.

Over the shelf I can see his frazzled mop bounce, all the way through the store.

The nanny?

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:53 am

7

Si

12:13 am

Rickety wood stairs creak and whine as I descend into the basement. Concrete block walls narrow into the shadows at the bottom. The cold air of open space, to my left, triggers goosebumps up my arm and the open door to a small bathroom is straight ahead, barely visible in the darkness. I pull the string—tickling my ear—dangling from the raftered ceiling. A bare bulb flickers and chases back the dark, exposing piles of boxes and clutter, draped in cobwebs. The room reeks of damp and mildew.

I poke my head into the toilet closet, search the wall with my fingers, and flip a switch, igniting a frame of lights surrounding an old dressing-room-style mirror above the sink .

I close myself in, twist the faucet on, and study my ghoulish face in the reflection, scoffing at having forgotten I was dressed as the undead. That must have been a frightening sight to wake to. —Poor Danny. No wonder he freaked out.

I fold over the sink and splash my face, using the pads of my fingers to scrub the Halloween makeup away. The best I manage is smearing it into a muddy mess. I peek out to the hoarded storage area, looking for something to help, and spot an open box of paper towels.

I collect a fresh roll, then notice a rack of hung clothes in a far corner. I squeeze past

stacked boxes, to peek at the selection, hoping I can replace my tattered costume. There just happens to be a purple button-down, my best color. It's slightly large but I can work with that.

I slip back into the toilet, wash my face, change my shirt and reconfigure my dampened curls.

The button-down sags on my frame but I roll the sleeves and leave my ragged crop-top in a pile on the clutter, before switching all the lights off and race the shadows, chasing me up the stairs.

Danny is still perched on the stool, swigging his coffee and gazing out the window at the quiet street. His pale cheeks are softly flushed in peachy hues and the artery in his thick neck pulses under his skin.

He turns toward me as I round the shelves and cross the store, heading back to the counter, giving him a slow spin along the way .

One dimple forms at the edge of his half-smile. His gleaming eyes scan me from head to toe and back, lingering on my chest for a moment.

I puff up, to give him a little show.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:53 am

8

Danny

12:29 am

Where'd he get the new shirt?

Without that ashen makeup, his fresh sunkissed face, rosy cheeks and hazel eyes glow.

“That’s better.” Si swigs from the energy drink. The edge of his brow lifts and his wet lips stretch.

Careful, I could get drunk off that smile.

Billowing purple fabric, contrasts toasted skin and honey-glazed ringlets. The top three buttons are undone, taunting me with samples of his bare chest. I miss his belly, but this works too .

I slip my tongue over my lips, cross my eyes into the cup, and dump the last of the coffee down my throat but it doesn’t quench my thirst.

“So what do you do? —While you’re waiting for your shift to end?” His pecs cleave as his arms fold under his chest, propped on the counter.

He’s like a curious stray puppy that’s out adventuring for the first time. I’m sure

someone is wondering where he is right now.

“This is it.” I wing my arms out and slowly spin. I hate to admit, this is what my life has become.

His cheeks lift, under squint eyes, and that wide intoxicating smile beams. He’s brighter than the sun and his gravity has a hold of me.

“I don’t think I’ve ever been here. —We must know each other from somewhere else?” He chews his lip and rocks on his elbows, studying me intently with apatite eyes. I bet they match the crystal I have at home, right down to its purpose of attracting joyful energy. The little gem isn’t so successful at its intention, but he is completely brilliant.

My darkness would only dim his light.

“Are you sure?” He’s definitely familiar but I can’t place him in any memory. I’m usually sharp, when it comes to recalling faces and their associations, so it’s baffling.

I’m probably still shattered from the fall?

“Maybe you’ve come in and just don’t remember?” I ask.

He stares at my face, puckering his lips .

My cheeks singe and my dart away, spotting an askew shelf of crackers that I hadn’t noticed earlier. I desert my post and make the convenient adjustments, scoping out the rest of the aisle for more tasks to busy myself.

I turn back, but he’s still draped over the counter, arching his back, and peering at me from behind his shoulder. Presenting his perfect ass, on display, and I’m hungry. If he

doesn't get out of here soon, I'll devour him.

"Wait, do you know Trent Wagner? Were you at his and Chad's wedding?" Si rises onto his hands and his back caves deeper.

Fuck me...

I bite my lip, shaking my head, "No."

Si flips over and lays back, stretching his shirt wide open, above and below the fastened buttons across his navel.

Is he posing on purpose? Tease.

"I have no idea who that is." I drop my chin and stare at a box of cheesy bits.

"Hmm . . ." he does a slow lap around the gift card display, dragging his finger across the glossy cards. They clap back and swoon under his touch.

I need that finger to drag across my skin.

I tug down the hem of my insufficient shirt, but it won't hide the lump forming in my jeans, so I twist away and fill another paper cup with a slow trickle of steaming brew, until my excitement subsides.

"Would you like a coffee?" Why am I offering? He really should get going .

"It's so quiet. You don't play music while you're working?" Si stands with feet firmly planted at shoulder width, his ass cheeks clenched and his long torso convex, extending his flat belly forward on his hip bones, as he studies a random gift card with furrowed brow and pursed lips.

The room spins for a second, so I lean on a shelf until my blood finds its way back up to my sensible head, and I'm steady enough again to answer.

"I do. Delila—on second shift—likes to work in silence." I shuffle into the back office and flip the stereo on, peeking back out to the shop floor. "Any requests?" Why do I keep inviting him to stay?

He shrugs and smiles. "What do you usually listen to?"

"Good question." I twist the dial and find a familiar beat, turning the volume up . . .

A raucous voice bellows lyrics about fucking like animals.

Oop! Not that! I quickly turn the dial further, until a yacht rock ballad from decades past, serenades us from the ceiling.

"Oh. —I love this song." Si calls back.

Of course he does. I giggle to myself before turning back to Si.

Xylophone keys chime over a smooth rhythmic beat, counting notes, and a saxophone wails the sweet melody. A whiny singer begs to sail away to where they've always heard it could be free.

I watch him sway as I sit on the stool and sip coffee, suppressing the urge to join .

"This reminds me of Nanny Grace." His face is dreamy. "She used to listen to this music, while cleaning up our toys, or prepping dinner." He twirls down the center aisle, rolling his head and closing his eyes, mouthing the lyrics.

I turn to gaze out the window but stare at the Si show, broadcasting in the dark glass.

I'm mesmerized by his body movement and free spirit. He bops and shimmies around the back of the store, mouthing the lyrics of the sweet song.

"Do you still see her?" I ask.

He turns back and scoots three steps forward, pausing to straighten a row of potato chips.

"No. —She died when I was thirteen." He swipes the back of his hand across his cheek and smiles up at me. Fluorescent light bounces off his glossy yellow curls.

"Sorry."

"It was a long time ago," he shrugs. "She was like a mother though." He trots back to the counter.

"I lost my mother ten years ago."

"Sorry," he frowns, leaning in on folded arms, squeezing his pecs together.

"Thanks," I swig.

—and gulp.

"What about your father?" His apatite gaze fixes on me.

"I never knew him."

"Me either, really." Si folds his wrist and dangles the energy drink in his fingers, swirling the fizzing fluid in the can. "My parents both traveled a lot." His eyes climb down to my grungy t-shirt .

I wish I had worn something nicer, but I hadn't expected this night to be different from any other.

“I’m sorry you’ve lost your parents.”

“Oh no. My parents are alive, just too busy,” he chuckles. “They’re sitting on a yacht, somewhere off the coast of Santorini. —I think?”

Fancy.

“A yacht?” I scoff.

His sweet face flushes red.

—And now I feel like an asshole.

“Yeah,” he spins and floats away to the dairy cooler.

“You really don’t need to hang around this place. It’s going to get boring real soon.”

“I don’t have anywhere to be.” Si folds over with his nose inches from the glass door, displaying rows of milk and cream.

Are you sure about that?

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:53 am

9

Si

1:42 am

I sense Danny wants me to go, but I don't think he's okay. He still seems jarred by the fall and may need me. I'm not leaving just yet. It's too early to go back home. Our house parties don't end until the sun comes up. My friends can use my place as long as they need. I'm occupied with more interesting distractions.

Looking from the side of my face, out past the storefront, the murky stillness of the streets is eerie outside the blackened windows.

Where is everyone?

Halloween isn't over. Technically, it's a new day, but there are still several hours of the night left .

My eyes drift back to the cooler.

"Hmm . . . Coffee milk, is that good?" I quirk my brow and peer back over my shoulder.

Danny's eyes race away from my backside. I can't help but grin. I'd give him a little shimmy, if he were still looking.

He's not really my type. Is he? I'm not sure that I have a type. The guys I've dated just happen to be cut from the same mold, conventionally polished with big-money aspirations and bizarre adoration for my parents. They just happen to be the sort who ask me out, I guess

Danny is cute, in a way I don't usually gravitate toward. He's dark but handsome, and a bit rough around the edges. His body is thick and solid, with curves in all the perfectly proportioned places. His chest and belly look like the softest of pillows, I just want to curl up against him. He's shorter than me, by a few inches, but I've always been lanky and awkward. The boys in my sixth-grade class talked me into playing basketball that year. It was a nightmare. I never finished the season.

I spin on my heels, curling my shoulders, and stuff my hands in my pockets, strolling back to the counter.

The entry bell chimes as the door swings open and a young couple materialize from the dark void outside the mirrored glass, squeezing past me, heading straight for the back of the store.

Danny's eyes narrow and track their every move .

The pair huddle in front of the cooler, under the far-end portion of the wall, labeled "wine, spirits and beer" in bold white lettering across the top.

"Do we know them?" I lean on the counter and whisper.

Danny's intense stare doesn't waiver. He also doesn't seem to hear me. I gently tap his forearm with my finger. Static sparks our skin, and startles his focus back to me.

He rubs the charged area of his arm, creasing his brow with saucer-wide pupils boring into me.

“Do we know them?” I repeat, in a softer whisper, as I see them approaching in my peripheral vision and step out of the way.

“Fruitbat?” the male queries.

He’s as tall as I am, dressed in a vintage Cranberries: World Tour t-shirt with ripped skinny jeans painted onto his spindly legs, checkered Chucks on his feet and goopy mascara clinging to his eyelashes.

Danny doesn’t speak, but his hands grip the edge of the counter, flexing those delicious forearms. I want to drag my tongue up his milky skin and sample his decadence.

“How the hell are you?” the guy carries on. “Ames, you remember Fruitbat, don’t you?” He turns to the petite brunette with angular features, wearing a black camisole over a little white t-shirt, under a black leather jacket adorned with silver grommets and a leather miniskirt with chunky boots. They’re the sort that used to fearfully intrigue me as a kid.

Very retro-goth. They must be coming from a Halloween party too .

I shimmy to the side of Danny’s counter, hiding between magazine and gum displays, while he acquaints himself with old friends.

10

Danny

2:10 am

Ames nods. “Hey Danny.” She’s still soft spoken and her sweet face hasn’t aged a bit since high school. Neither of them have. I remember hearing about some wild car accident they were in, right after graduation.

“Hey.” I groan, dragging the six-pack of beer toward me, clinking glass bottles against each other.

“What have you been up to, man?” Grayden is still seeped in arrogance. Maybe I’m just triggered by my old nickname.

I’m not surprised these two are still together. He’s an asshole, but she was always infatuated, for some reason. I suppose Grayden’s confidence could be construed as attractive. His pale blue eyes, jet black hair and chiseled features help the cause. Ames could do better though. She was always kind and put others before herself. We might have been best friends had her choice in men been a bit more tasteful.

The cash register beeps as I scan the purchase. “Twelve seventy-eight.”

“Man, things are expensive now.” Grayden slaps a bill on the counter. “Hey, are you still writing?”

I'm surprised he remembers my hobby. But then, he used to tease me about it.

"Yep." I brace for the snide remark that I know is coming.

The time he snatched my journal out of my hands, when we were about sixteen, and read an entry aloud in front of our entire social circle will always live in my mind. It just happened to be a page where I confessed filthy sexual fantasies involving our friend Bobby—outing me to everyone.

I was mortified and that was the moment he branded me "Fruitbat." I didn't realize its meaning until a few years later.

Bobby did end up being my first—everything—a few weeks after. So maybe I owe this prick a thank you?

"Good." Grayden smiles. "You're really good, you know?"

Huh? I wrinkle my face, "Do you want a bag?" Bye now.

"No." Grayden chuckles. "It's great seeing you."

Maybe he has matured?

"Sure," I grunt.

"Later, Fruitbat," he says as he gathers the cardboard basket of beer with a wink and clinks toward the door.

My face sings .

"See ya around, Danny." Ame's warm eyes smile and she follows Grayden back into

the night.

I slide the cash drawer against my hip, until it hitches shut.

“They seem nice.” Si floats around the counter.

“That guy was such an asshole.” I grumble. “Ame’s okay.”

“Why’d he call you Fruitbat?” Si’s eyes quirk and candied lips purse.

“I was the queer goth kid of our friend group, back in high school.”

He leans an elbow on the counter, hooking his thumb into the waistband of his jeans, hanging off his hip. The edge of his nipple barely peeks at me from under his slack collar, before he catches the shirt from falling off his shoulder.

My cotton tongue scratches my throat.

“It’s a cute name,” he beams.

“Ironically, it’s a slur, he might as well just call me a faggot.” My brows wing up, “it’s also a term to describe a loser,” I say, biting my lip.

“Oh.” Si looks stunned. “That’s—”

“I didn’t know at first.” I interrupt. “Honestly, I’m not sure Grayden knows what he’s saying. He’s not the brightest.” I chuck.

Si shrugs. “Own it. It’s still cute.” His grin lights up. “We are faggots after all.” He winks and twirls up on the ball of his foot, prancing toward the coffee bar. “And you’re not a loser.”

I smile so wide, my cheeks hurt.

I think he might be magic.

11

Si

2:27 am

Danny needs to smile more—like that. He’s absolutely stunning. His flushed cheeks squinch maple eyes—that gleam—even under fluorescent lights.

“So, you’re a writer?” I ask, tapping each spout on the row of coffee thermoses.

“I dabble,” he mutters, shying away.

I skip back to the counter. “What do you write?”

“Garbage, according to the publishers.”

“I doubt that.” My eyes drop to stacks of candy bars along the front of the checkout counter and I drag my finger across the wrappers. “Wait, the papers in your bag. Is that your book?” My face burns as I realized my confession to nosing through his things.

His brow wrinkles and he stares through me.

“I was looking for a phone earlier.” I swallow the thickness in my throat. “Sorry.” I swig from the lukewarm energy drink still sitting next to the cash register.

“Oh . . .” Danny shifts uncomfortably, red with shame or anger. I can’t tell which through the scowl.

Smile again, please?

“I bet it’s amazing. I have a friend in publishing. Her taste is horrendous, don’t tell her I said so.” I say, waiting for his face to soften.

The edge of Danny’s mouth presses that single adorable dimple.

Phew!

“Could I read some?” I drape myself over the counter and kick my feet. My face is close enough to capture a whiff of cinnamon-toast, mixed with a tinge of coffee breath.

“Sure,” he says uncertainly.

—But he doesn’t move to collect the bundle of papers, so I wag a brow and a finger, asking for permission to gather them from the office myself.

He nods, uncomfortably averting his eyes out the window.

I trot back to the desk in the office and pull the stuffed folders out of his satchel, then return to the front counter and lay them over its surface.

He watches me, meeting my eyes before shyly dropping his to the stacks again .

“Are you sure?”

He nods, saying “Go ahead,” then adds in a rush, “They still need more editing.”

I hug the precious treasures to my chest and stroll to the back of the store. Sitting cross-legged on the floor, in the far corner, under the “wine” section of shelves, I spread the top folder open on my lap.

“They’re kinda dark . . .” he warns.

I smile back at him and dig in.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:53 am

12

Danny

2:48 am

I slink around the counter, so I'm hidden from Si's view, and busy myself, straightening the rows of gift cards that he touched. His energy still lingers on the plastic and tingles my fingertips.

I stretch my neck to peek around the aisle. Good , he's still there, huddled over the pages, chewing his cheek and caressing his chin with the backs of his fingers. I can't tell if he's engrossed in my writing, or hating every word.

His eyes lift up, find me, and he sucks his lip in.

I spin around to tidy the shelves of vitamins and pain reliever bottles, my face cooked, and my head spinning again. Deep inhales and smooth exhales steady the dizziness, packing little stars away.

I should eat something.

"Are you hungry?" I call over the shelves.

"Starved!" his voice chimes back.

"Do you like cheap pizza?"

“Of course!”

I gather two boxes from the freezer and lug them to the back office, popping the personal size discs onto a rack in the dingy toaster oven, and twist the time and temperature dials, before waddling back out to the retail floor, grabbing a glance at the beautiful zombie—folded around my work—as I pass by. His elbows are propped on his knees, his hands holding his cheeks up. His sweet lashes flit as his eyes float back and forth. I still can’t tell what he’s thinking.

I rearrange an endcap of candy lip glosses—wondering which one might taste like him—chewing gum, and automobile oil—this store has no rhyme or reason—until the scent of baked dough, herbed sauce and toasted cheese fills the air.

Ding!

The oven chimes and I report back to the office, peel two sheets of paper towel off a roll, and use them to plate the steaming saucers.

Si is standing in the doorway as I turn back, startled.

“Your writing is so good!” He beams.

I study his wide eyes and broad smile. He seems sincere.

“I’m no critic, but honestly, I love it! ”

Oh, he’s just being kind. “That’s nice of you.” I mutter, avoiding his gaze as i plop down on the chair and blow on my pizza.

“Danny, I’m serious. It’s really good. You’re magnificent.” He perches on the edge of the desk with his knee inches from my elbow. I can feel his sweet heat float over

my arm.

No, you're magnificent. "Thanks." My face is cooked again.

"Why don't you self-publish?" He folds his pizza in half and bites the end like a taco, slurping up the sauce and cheese squeezing out into his chin.

"I don't know. —I've thought about it, but I imagine it costs a lot of money to market."

Si stares into his pizza-taco for a moment. "What about an investor?"

I giggle. He's adorable. "I wouldn't know where to find one."

He lights up, his eyes lifting to mine. "You just did."

I'm not sure how to respond.

"I'll invest in your book. —You don't need a publisher. That's all they do anyway, right? —Float some cash to cover the bills?" he shrugs like that's no big deal.

"You don't even know me. —and I think they do more than that."

"Meh. —I dunno why, but I almost feel like I do know you. —Ya know?" His eyebrow quirks and his shoulders curl.

Where did this magic man come from?

"I feel you, but I can't take your money."

"It's not even mine, really. It's my Dad's. He has plenty to go around." Si's grin

would be sinister if he weren't so pretty.

I fold my pizza and chomp it like a taco. Genius .

A splatter of sauce escapes his lips and falls onto his chest. He scoops it up before I can follow my instinct to lean in and lick it off his skin. He sucks the mess off his finger, and I have to shift my thighs under the desk.

“Do you feel like getting out of here and going for a walk?” I ask. ”I need some air.”

“But you’re working?” he says, tilting his head. “Yes! Let’s go for a walk.” He hops off the desk and twirls out of the office.

I stand up, adjust my pants, grab the zip-up hoodie hung over the back of the chair and knot it around my waist. That should protect me from any more embarrassing blunders tonight.

I strap my bag across my body and jingle the ring of keys out of its front pocket. “Let’s roll,” I cheer as I join him on the shop floor and lead out the door.

Stupid fucking bell.

“Will you get in trouble?” he asks.

“I doubt anyone will even notice. I could be lying dead on the floor, and no one would find out until morning.” I chuckle. Sad but true.

“Where should we go?” Si folds his arms behind himself and smiles wide.

“Wait.” I pull the hoodie from my waist and pass it to him. “You’re going to freeze like that.”

“I’m okay,” he chirps.

“Tie it around your waist then?” I insist.

His fingers shock my thumb, lifting the hairs on my arm, as he takes the hoodie from my hand. I am in awe of the exchange.

I twist my key in the door and lock the store safely away .

The autumn air is sharp, with just a hint of humidity, as rolling temperatures collide, creating a slight fog hanging over the tops of the buildings and a breeze scrapes crinkled paper wrappers across the pavement. The city smells sweet and nutty, like someone is baking peanut butter cookies.

“The park?” I suggest.

“Sure,” his eyes sparkle in the fluorescent light spilling out of the window.

And we start off on our trek.

13

Si

3:13 am

”The streets are so quiet, aren’t they?” I double-knot the sleeves around my belly.

“It’s late—or early . . .” Danny’s eyes are focused on the ground ahead of our steps.

“I guess.” My shoulder bumps his but doesn’t interrupt his stride. I’m So tempted to catch his hand, as it swings past mine, and hold on but I refrain, deeply inhaling sweet cinnamon wafting off his body.

There’s something about this man, I just can’t explain, his comfortable familiarity is baffling me. Where do I know him from ?

My pinky brushes his but his arm lifts away before I can snatch it up, clamping his fingers around the satchel strapped across his body. I ogle his soft chest and belly from the side of my face.

“You really liked my writing?”

My eyes jump up to his. Hopefully, he didn’t catch me staring. I smile, then nod, and say. “I’d like to read more.”

“I need to write more, ‘ he scoffs.

“Have you not been writing lately?” I ask, turning toward him. His brow is furrowed and his eyes are downcast.

“Honestly . . . it’s been years.”

“How come?” I tuck my thumbs behind the knot at my waist.

He lifts his shoulders, looking at something across the street. “I think I shut down for a bit.”

“Years . . . is longer than a bit.” I comment, staring at his thick bicep, peppered with goosebumps, challenging the taut sleeve of his thin t-shirt. “Do you want your sweatshirt back?”

“No, I run hot.”

Yes you do. “Okay.” I snicker.

Red and blue lights flash from around the bend, painting the side of brick buildings with violet hues up ahead. The surface of the river is lit up, reflecting the scene across the bridge, under a dark sky, illuminated by the pulsing strobes from three police cruisers and an ambulance.

We pause on the corner. The tiptoes of my sneakers hang off the edge of the sidewalk and a shiver snakes up my back, wraps my shoulders and sprouts a rash of goosebumps down the backs of my arms. I cross them over my chest and stroke my skin for warmth, before remembering the sweatshirt and slipping it on.

Danny’s dimple rouses me as he gnaws his lip.

“That intersection is so dangerous!” I zip up the hoodie. It softly slouches on my

body and reeks of heavenly spice. I'd bury my face and inhale, if he weren't looking at me. "I nearly got run over, when I crossed the street there earlier."

I shake my head and gaze back over the bridge.

The cruisers and rescue wagon are crowded around the scene. Half a dozen uniformed officers are talking with a slender man in running shorts, while a trio of EMTs are loading a stretcher into the back of their rig.

"That doesn't look good." Danny's eyes hollow as he notes the dark glossy body-length plastic bag on the cart. "Accidents happen there, too often," he says, glancing at me, "Let's head this way."

With a static poke at my arm, he brushes past me and leads onto a different direction.

I skip two steps forward to match his stride and peer back at the emergency crew for a brief moment.

"The mayor needs to do something about that." I'll get my mother on the case.

Our new path follows parallel with the river.

I recognize a tattoo studio, as we stroll by, where Mallory got her dainty daisy shoulder piece while I watched. It looks abandoned, but I can't tell if it's just closed for the night, or for good .

"Why are you blocked? Isn't that what it's called? Writer's block ? I shove my hands in the hoodie pockets, pinching and rolling a piece of lint my fingertips find.

"I shut down after my mother died. She used to keep me going, even though publishers kept turning me down." He stares at the ground as we walk.

“I’m sorry.”

“I know it was a decade ago now. I still jot down new ideas, I just haven’t drafted anything since before her funeral.”

“What happened to her?” I ask, then quickly add. “You don’t have to talk about it, of course.” I backstep my overreach.

“Cancer,” he answers

“Oh. Yeah . . . Nanny Grace too. I never got to see her, after she started to get sick, and couldn’t work for my parents anymore.”

“Oh, man. I’m really sorry.”

Danny’s arm drops to his side and sparks against my elbow.

I shoot my shot, pulling my hand from the pocket and grabbing hold of his wrist, slipping my palm around his thumb.

His eyes widen and drop, staring at my fingers weaving with his.

He squeezes my hand and the side of his mouth curves. There’s that dimple again.

I dreamily exhale the air from my chest and grin.

“You said you left a party tonight?” Danny asks.

I can feel him relaxing, his hand settling into mine as we walk together. Our shoulders brush and I get a whiff of his scent. Mmm . . . cinnamon .

“My friends never miss a chance to host a gathering.”

“And they forgot it’s your birthday?” he grimaces.

”Grace would have remembered. She always reminded everyone.”

”I think you may need better friends?”

“I think I’ve found one.” The words just fall out of my mouth.

Danny’s middle finger strokes my palm. His tongue slips a glistening trail across his lip and scoops away the dab of dried tomato sauce in the crease of his mouth’s edge.

My eyes are fixed on the sight and I hope I didn’t just whimper aloud.

He smiles and my eyes flick back up to his.

I think I did just whimper out loud.

His finger tickles my palm again, tripping the furnace on, in my belly. Heat rises through my neck and into my cheeks in seconds.

14

Danny

3:33 am

Well, this is new. Why is Si so different? A sudden sadness twists my insides. Why am I just meeting you now?

His whimsical energy whirls up my arm, lifting every hair along the way and wraps me with his brilliance. His sweet face glows, even under the harsh streetlights.

“Someone has been doing some serious baking.” I breathe in peanut butter cookie air. “The city smells so nice right now.” Not the usual spoiled fishy scent that flows with the tainted river.

“I noticed that earlier. I figured it was something in the water?” Si shrugs .

I chuckle. “Definitely not.”

His grip tightens and electricity flits up my skin again. His eyes trigger a deep familiarity.

“My mother used to make amazing peanut butter cookies. The kind you press a fork into and make that crosshatched pattern.” I demonstrate the technique with my free hand. “She used to let me do that part. They were my favorite.” I fill my lungs and savor the air.

“I used to love hanging out in the kitchen with Grace.” Si shares in response. “She’d dance with me while dinner cooked on the stove.”

“That must be where you get those moves?” Heat rushes my face after the words fall from my mouth. Who am I right now?

Si slows to a halt, tugging my arm at the end of his reach. I turn back to find his head tilted and his gaze piercing me.

“Will you kiss me?” he asks, practically pouting..

My jaw hangs while my brain processes the request. I don’t think . . .

His face bows toward the ground. “Sorry. I know that was weird.”

I can’t resist and lean in, pressing my mouth to his, before I miss my chance. His lips are every bit as pillowy as I imagined, and he tastes even sweeter. The hairs all over my body are lit with static and dancing in the autumn air.

Our sticky mouths peel apart as I step away, dumbfounded and intoxicated..

“Happy Birthday,” I say with a smile .

He wraps his arms around my neck and dives back in. Smashing our faces together.

He pulls me forward, stumbling with him, as he backs against the brick facade of an old factory, turned art gallery.

Neither of us want to break the kiss. I trip over my own foot but catch myself with my hand on the wall over his shoulder and push my belly against him.

Si whimpers into my mouth and his tongue meets mine. He's dessert and I'm still fucking hungry.

His fingers tangle in the thick fringe of hair on the back of my neck, sending shockwaves down my spine that reverberate out to all of my limbs.

My fingers wrap his hip, and climb up his back, beneath his shirts. His skin is like velvet to touch.

Hot breaths flare from our nostrils, warming my frozen face and the goosebumps that cover my skin are no longer caused by the late autumn air. My cock is ravenous against the denim constraints holding it back and his swells against my thigh.

Fuck !

He pauses the kiss, but doesn't move away, both of us exchanging breaths. "Is your place close by?" he whispers between our lips.

"Around the corner." I breathe into the side of his mouth.

"Take me there." His hands bracket my face as he pushes away and stares into my eyes with golden flames lit in his.

I swallow the thickness catching in my throat and grab his hand, leading him toward my building.

My lips tingle from his tantalizing magic .

We round the bend and hop up the stoop, through the door, into the dim entry. Peanut butter cookie air follows us, whirling through the brown and beige art deco foyer, and climbing up the stairwell that twists and folds through the three-story climb.

I keep my eyes ahead, fearing if I look back he'll have vanished on me, and keep hold of his static until we reach the landing outside my apartment door.

When I finally do look back, he's still there, and I smile.

I know he doesn't know, and I can't read why he's so special.

It's not for me to tell . . . He'll figure it out.

I'll let this new thing unfold as it will.

I turn the key, and wriggle the old knob, until it releases, then push the door open. It bounces against the wall, cracking the old plaster, but I'll worry about that later.

15

Si

3:44 am

I stand in the doorframe, folding my upper body inside, scoping out his little crow's nest at the peak of this building.

“It's warm up here.” Or is it that makeout session lingering on my lips, or the steep climb up three flights, that has me on fire and gasping for air? I unzip the hoodie and hang it on a hook, next to the entrance.

Danny switches a lamp on, next to the bed, that's just three or so steps away from the kitchenette along the far wall. The eclectic but organized space fills with a soft glow, enhancing the moonlight spilling in from two windows—or are they skylights?—on a slanted wall that huddles over the cozy attic .

I slip inside and close the door.

His body crashes into me, pushing my back against the entry. His mouth covers mine and I grasp at his shirt with my fists, dragging it up his back and peeling it over his head, interrupting our kiss for a split-second, before I wrench him back in.

His big arms knot around my waist and crush the breath from my lungs. My gasp floods his mouth and I catch his lip between my teeth.

His soft growl runs straight through me.

My hands grip his head and I can't pull him in close enough. I crave him like a treat at the end of my meal. He tastes like buttery toast and his apartment smells like cinnamon.

My dick is raging to escape my jeans, rubbing against his belly. His cock is thick and solid, poking my thigh. I reach down and wrap my fingers under his bulge. It fills my palm and pulses against my wrist. My other hand explores the curves of his torso, teasing his nipple with my thumb on the way to scoop his jaw. He's heating up like a bonfire and I'm a gooey marshmallow on a stick.

His hips roll and his hot breath blankets my chin.

I peck his cheek and slide my tongue up the salty sheen on the side of his face, absolutely feral with the need to taste every bit of him.

My fingers find the button of his pants, popping it free from its slit, I don't hesitate to reach inside. He's already slick as I stroke him .

His dense heat rises up my arm. I'm a red-hot ember, primed to pop.

His teeth are on my neck and his tongue traces my carotid from my clavicle to my ear. His lips pinch my lobe and his hum vibrates my flesh. A gentle seismic quake rattles my spine and floats out the top of my head..

The hair on his nape is soft and damp between my fingers, bracing the back of his head, begging him to lap me again.

Wish granted .

His silky tongue slides up my neck, again. And again.

He tears my shirt wide open, sending a button soaring to clink against a glass fish tank across the room. His face burrows in my chest and his scruff scratches my neck as his mouth climbs back toward my jaw with soft pinching pecks, taking a slow meandering path.

I raise my palm to my tongue and coat it generously with my spit, sampling the nutty glaze of him covering my skin, before reaching back into his pants and slathering his cock. It swells in my fingers and he breathily gasps in my ear.

“Does that feel good?” I whisper into his.

“Yes,” he heaves.

He fucks my hand with slow thrusts and cups my face in his, enveloping my mouth with his lips. I can feel rhythmic beats in his chest, thudding against me.

My free arm curls around his shoulders and his hands scale the sides of my torso, scooping under my ass and lifting my thighs, wrapping my legs around him. He carries me away from the door and lays me back on his bed .

I rise on my elbows and scoot closer to the center of the mattress, gazing up, to watch him lower his pants to the floor, kick away his shoes and step out of the puddled mass at his feet.

The warm lamp-glow paints the side of him amber, while the cool blue moonlight from the window behind me spotlights his rugged beauty.

I rush my shoes off with fumbling toes and let them fall to the floor.

His chest is two gorgeous mounds with brown peaks and a garden of dark hair clinging to his dampening skin, and trailing down his soft belly to his hard cock, aimed right at me, begging to be serviced.

I roll up on my knees and fold forward, taking him into my mouth, gripping his ass in both hands, hauling him in deep, opening my throat to accommodate his thickness. Every part of him is perfectly proportioned and fits me like a glove.

Danny's fingers weave into my curls and his pads stroke my scalp as my tongue glides against his shaft. I roll my neck and shoulders, rocking back and forth on him.

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:53 am

16

Danny

3:59 am

“Fuck, Si. You’re amazing,” I rasp.

He looks up at me, through warm honey lashes, with his lips around my cock. Damn, he’s beautiful .

He curls his tongue, pulls back, and drags it up the underside of my shaft, kissing my cock’s tip with his pillowy lips, and repeating long slow laps while staring into my eyes.

“Good?” he asks with a devilish grin, squeezing my cock in his fist and holding it against his lip.

“So good.” I groan, hooking his chin with my index finger and lifting him upright, on his knees. I bend forward and kiss his beautiful sticky lips .

His salty wet tongue enters my mouth and shares the nutty flavor of my own body with me.

I climb onto the mattress, knees to knees, and wrap around him, pressing my chest and belly to his. Metaphysical static tingles my skin from the tip of my nose to my outstretched toes.

“You're delicious.” He says, into my cheek, gaping his mouth and fogging my skin with heaving breaths.

I nuzzle into his neck and squeeze him tight against me.

Si slips the billowing purple shirt off his shoulders and tosses it to the floor.

I guide him back, laying him out like a buffet I'm about to devour, covering his mouth with mine while I undo the button fly of his jeans and pull them away.

His dick stands straight up, like a pretty pink rocket, ready to blast off.

I wet my lips with the slip of my tongue and dive down on him.

His body squirms and his throat catches, as fists grip my hair.

I roll my tongue and bob up and down. I knew he'd taste sweet all over.

“Danny, slow down,” he pleads. “Make it last.”

“Mmm . . .” I hum, widening my mouth and reaching my tongue out to lap long, slippery strokes from his balls to his tip.

His belly caves, expelling air from his diaphragm and he tugs my ear .

“Come kiss me,” he whispers.

I wrap my fingers around the base of his dick and squeeze it taut, stroking him with my thumb. Trailing kisses to his belly and painting the rest of the way toward his neck with my tongue. I savor the taste of him as he pants above me. I nibble his skin at the base of his throat, crawling the last few steps, and cover his mouth with mine.

His tongue greets me, and he pulls my body on top of him.

I spread his thighs with my knees and settle in. His wet dick presses into my belly, rolling against him.

“That’s good,” he rasps, folding his long legs around me, crossing his ankles, and locking me in.

His slick wetness tacks my belly hairs to my skin.

Groans rise through my chest and into his mouth.

He echoes them back.

“Do you have a condom?” he asks.

Do we need one? “Yes.” I stretch for the side table drawer and reach two fingers inside, pinching a familiar foil wrapper and bringing it to my teeth.

His nose grazes mine as he bites the corner of the packet and tears it open with grit teeth, staring into me with dreamy crystalline eyes.

He spits the sliver of wrapper from the side of his mouth. “Fuck me,” he whispers as his fingers pull the rubber ring from the foil and he pokes the center of the disc with his tongue before reaching down to cover my cock.

I breathe out deeply, once . . . twice, while his fingers slip the tight rubber over my desperate pulsing dick .

He brings his palm to his mouth and Laps generous coatings of spit all over his fingers.

I'm primed and need to be inside him.

He slathers his hole with the wetness and repeats the task.

I reach back into the drawer for the small bottle of lube, but he shakes his head. "It's okay." He rolls his hips, pressing his hole against my tip. "Go ahead . . . I'm ready."

His mouth meets mine and his tongue enters me as I push inside him.

"Yes," he groans. "Just like that."

He tightens around me until I push past his barriers and feel him relax.

Quick breaths pant from his chest and his arms knot around my shoulders. I dig my palms and knees into the mattress, pushing deeper inside him.

His head throws back into the pillows and his mouth gapes.

I bury my face into the crook of his neck and slip my cock back and forth inside him.

His body squirms under me. "That's so good Danny," he whimpers, with both arms wrenching my neck. "You're fucking me so good." His hot breath sweeps my ear.

My back curves over him and my hips push deeper. The thrusts take hold of my body. I need to please this beautiful man underneath me.

I reach between my belly and his, until I find his dick with my fingers and wrap my palm around it. He's soaked with sweat and pre-come and I stroke him in rhythm with the undulating waves of my body grinding into him .

His breath turns to panting and his knotted legs tighten around mine.

My thrusts and strokes pick up to meet the intense rise and fall of his chest and belly. Si's a beautiful mess beneath me, whimpering and panting as I drive into him.

His whimpers turn breathy as his throat thickens and he reaches overhead to grip the rails of my steel-post bed frame.

"Keep going, just like that." His head digs back and a groan rises from his belly, past his throat and out his mouth,

His dick swells in my hand and spills over my fingers into the tight space between our bodies. His grip on me squeezes the breath from my chest and I fill the condom inside him.

Our bodies hold tense and then collapse as the rush passes.

Panting slows in sync, until we're dazedly breathing normally again. I haven't taken my sticky hand away from his softening dick, but I pull myself out of him and climb my face down his neck, then chest and scoop his wet belly with my tongue. Tasting every bit of the liquid flooding his skin and my fingers. He IS sweet like candy, all over.

I peer up at him, watching me devour his sweet syrup, and smiling. He grips my face and pulls me back to his lips. Tracing my mouth with his tongue, cleaning his remnants off of me. He hugs his arms and legs around me again and holds me against his body.

I could stay right here, forever.

Page 17

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:53 am

17

Si

4:32 am

Danny's weight is crushing in the most satisfying way. Our naked bodies meld together like puzzle pieces, and I don't want to let go.

He tries to roll away, but I tighten my grip with all four limbs.

"Stay right there." I plead.

"I don't want to hurt you."

"You're not." I kiss his cheek, nose, and mouth.

His body relaxes.

"I'm really heavy," he says into my lips.

"You're perfect." I weave my fingers in his dark waves .

His arms wrap me in a cocoon of his spiced body heat. Every inch of me is lit up, white hot, by his presence.

We lay in blissful stillness, until . . .

“I need to pee,” he whispers in my ear.

I laugh. “Me too,” and I release my grip.

He kisses my lips, twice, and peels himself off me.

I drink in the sight of his juicy ass and broad back scurrying to the bathroom, sitting up, I fold my legs into a knot as my eyes trace the room. If I were to stand up and spread all four limbs, I might be able to touch every surface.

There are crystals scattered about, catching lamp light, glamouring back at me.

The moon stares in the slanted window, its shadowy face gives me a wink, and I smile back. Did you enjoy that show? I sure did.

The bathroom door opens, and Danny strolls out, in a gloriously naked display, but bends down to collect his clothes.

“Don’t...” I protest.

He looks at me, through his lashes, with rosy cheeks.

“Don’t.” I grin, twitching the edge of my brow.

I hop off the bed and step up to him, unfolding upright, I kiss his mouth and gently swat his ass cheek.

“I’ll be right back. —I’m not finished with you yet.”

He snickers, watching my backside sway into the bathroom. I give him a little shimmy before closing the door.

There's just enough room to stand in the center and aim for the toilet with my hip nearly brushing against the vanity. A corner shower stall, behind the door, fills the space with the most headroom, across from the slanting wall I lay my forehead against, until I'm relieved.

There's a washcloth folded neatly on the edge of the sink, that feels like it was left out for me, to clean up with.

After I'm fresh and my curls are in place, I stroll back out into the studio.

Danny stands off the edge of the bed—still naked—holding a small plate with a lit birthday candle poking up from a chocolate snack cake with white icing swirls. I might burst.

“Happy birthday,” he beams.

“Where'd this come from?” I smirk.

“I slipped it in my bag, before we left the store,” he grins slyly.

I blow out the candle and kiss his lips. My throat feels thick and my eyes pinch back a well. I take the plate from his hand and set it on the kitchenette counter, before throwing my arms around his neck and covering his face with kisses.

His arms squeeze my waist.

“Thank you.” I gaze into his warm eyes.

“Eat your cake,” he blushes.

I gather the plate and hop up on the bed next to him. Folding one leg behind his back

and dangling the other off the edge.

His hand falls onto my thigh, shooting a flitter of sparks to my belly. I pick up the cake with two fingers and bite a quarter chunk out of it. Smiling ear-to-ear as I chew, gazing starry-eyed at his beautifully scruffy face.

He smirks and that one dimple pokes me right in the chest.

I swallow, holding the chocolaty sponge to his lips .

He shakes his head “no,” but I insist, curling my lip and chomping my teeth, to show him how it’s done.

His tongue reaches out to welcome the cake in, and without breaking our gaze; he bites down. Where has this been all my life?

I take another bite and feed him the last, tossing the plate onto the mattress and wrapping myself around his shoulders. Our crumbly lips join together, and I roll back, pulling him on top of my body.

He lays his head on my chest and curls into me.

I wrap my legs around him again and electricity buzzes the air.

The television, in the corner of the room, blips on.

“We must be laying on the remote,” he chuckles, fanning his hand over the blankets, searching for the hidden device.

A newscaster with a pearly white smile drops their facade for a serious matter, and my face appears on the screen. Pale gray skin and sunken smoky eyes, closed in

peaceful slumber, the captured image taken from an overhead view.

“Wait,” I bolt upright.

Danny turns to the TV, and then back to me with a gaunt expression.

“Volume?” I flail.

He finds the remote on the nightstand and hurries to appease my request.

“We come to you with sad news this morning,” the statuesque man announces.” A body has been collected from the scene of an accident near Tukey’s Bridge. It appears to have been a hit and run. The victim, John Doe, was pronounced dead on the scene, at arrival. Police are asking anyone who knows this individual to please call...”

Danny touches my knee, igniting a current, and the TV blips off.

“What?” My jaw hangs.

“Si...” The charge from his touch singes my skin.

I can’t find words and I hope he can find them for me.

“You’re okay,” he soothes.

“Danny, what was that?”

“I should have told you.”

“What?” I don’t understand any of this.

“Do you remember the scene at the bridge?”

“The SUV didn’t hit me.” Right? “I rolled out of the way.”

“You did . . . but your body stayed behind.”

“What?” That doesn’t make sense. I look down at my body, in the flesh.

“The soul separates from the body when a traumatic death happens.”

“I’m not dead, I’m sitting right here.” I grab his forearm and static shocks both of us. It’s nearly visible, trailing my skin.

“You’re not in your body anymore.”

“Are you dead too?”

“I’m a medium. —I’ve seen spirits all my life. I didn’t realize you didn’t know, at first.” His eyes drop to the floor. “I’m sorry I didn’t say anything.”

I search the ceiling for clarity as my mind twists in a tornado of confused emotion .

“You’re the first to ever be . . .” Danny pauses, his forehead wrinkling, “this present? I’m not sure how to explain it.”

“Danny, I don’t . . .”

“I know.”

His touch tingles my skin again. “How?” I wave my hands over his, lying on my thigh.

“I figured banging my head has jarred something? I don’t know?”

“You’re alive?” My heart sinks. “But I’m a ghost?”

Danny nods with sadness in his eyes.

“Do I just exist like this now?”

Page 18

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:53 am

18

Danny

5:38 am

I shrug, unsure what to tell him. I can't explain what's happening myself. Spirits wander into my life all the time. I'm a lightning rod to their energy, but it's never been like this. I've seen and spoken to them since I was a toddler. My mom did, and so did hers. Banging my head, has to have something to do with this broadened new clarity?

He's as tactile as I am. I've never touched a spirit before, I assumed I couldn't, but maybe it's been part of my gift all along? They don't all appear this vivid, but he's definitely the most vivid ever .

Si rises off the bed and stands in the center of the floor, holding his head in both hands. The moonlight shimmers off his naked back but there's no shadow cast on the wall behind him. Have I just been imagining his physical tangibility?

The sky is turning slate blue over the horizon, I'll need to report back to work before shift change.

Fuck, that damn TV.

I knew he would realize sooner than later . . . I should have been the one to tell him. I've dropped that bomb on lingering souls dozens of times, but he felt different. He's

familiar in this beautifully mystical way.

“Si?” I approach with caution.

He turns back with watery eyes.

I wrap myself around him. His voltage surges through me and I can feel every ounce of his despair in my cells. The world is spinning and I don’t know how to stop it.

He melts into my arms. “Why am I only meeting you now?”

I wondered the same thing.

“What a shitty way to die.” He snorts, “John Doe?”

I peel back and swipe his glossy cheeks with my thumbs.

He stares into me with his bright apatite eyes and his pensive smile turns down.

“What happens to me now?”

“I don’t know.”

The spirits usually just leave and I never see them again. He can’t leave.

“Stay with me, okay?” I don’t even know if he can.

He nods and lays his head on my shoulders .

“Let’s go for a walk. —First shift is going to arrive at the store soon.”

He nods.

“We have time to figure this out. Just stay with me.” I won’t let him out of my sight.

We slip into our clothes, make our way down the stairs and out to the street. His hand is in mine, where it belongs, and I won’t let go.

19

Si

6:42 am

Death doesn't feel any different than life. The city still smells, a bit sweeter than normal, and Danny's hand squeezes mine tangibly with more static shock than is usual, but aren't spirits supposed to be spectral. I feel as solid as I ever have, —I think? My clothes fit the same, and the fabric is soft on my skin, or is this all some sort of illusion that I'm bound to? There's no stairway to the sky and no one has come to welcome me, home ? Isn't that what all the spiritualist gurus and near-death claimants say happens?

Am I just going to keep existing on this planet, like I've done for thirty years? Some poor soul no one remembers .

Danny keeps looking at me, like he's scared I'll disappear. His fingers are locked tightly in mine.

"I'm still here."

"I know," he says softly and smiles.

The streets are quiet and the early sun casts a golden hue over the world. Pigeons are flitting about the sidewalk.

Right on cue, a figure steps out from around the corner of a building about two blocks ahead. She has wavy dark hair and a big smile. Her long skirt floats on wind, even though the air is still, and she raises an arm to wave.

Danny pauses and his jaw hangs open.

“Do we know her?”

He doesn’t speak, but halts like his feet are glued to the ground, staring forward.

“Danny?”

He nods and his eyes glaze over. “Mom?”

“But?” Oh yeah, he sees spirits.

He steps forward again, tugging me along with him, gripping my hand tight. I follow his lead.

She stands on the corner, like Lady Liberty, beaming and waving until we’re just a few yards away, before she steps back around the corner.

The sidewalk is empty when we reach the end of the street.

“Danny?”

He’s not speaking, just staring with swimmy eyes, searching for his mother.

“She’s never visited me before. Not once,” he whimpers .

His pain climbs through my arm and knots in my chest like a ribbon tied around my

heart. I see a heartbroken boy in his maple eyes.

My family won't even notice I'm gone. Will they notice when I don't show up for the performative holiday dinners?

"Maybe she's up ahead?" We're still a block away from the bend around the street the convenience store is on.

Danny trots on and I match his stride, squeezing his hand back tighter. I'm not going to lose him.

There are voices past the corner, they're muffled, but they're there.

Police cars, an ambulance, and the coroner's wagon.

We both halt in our tracks.

20

Danny

7:10 am

Oh. —It makes sense now.

Delila is shaking her head, pacing in a circle, and pulling her fingers through her curls, talking to two police officers and two EMTs while a pair of men in slacks and matching ties cart a black plastic body bag out of the storefront, loading it into the coroner's vehicle.

“Danny . . .”

Si understands too. He leans against my shoulder and his fingers adjust their grip.

”It looks like we both had a transitional night. ”

I pull Si with me, across the street, to a bench in front of a hair salon, and we sit to watch the close of my final season.

Poor Delila is stressed, and suddenly a crowd collects, huddling around the scene.

Morning commuters spill onto the street from behind the buildings and side streets. Cars start to roll by, slowing down to nosey, before driving past, and the city starts buzzing with its normal chaos.

“I’m glad they got me loaded into the meat wagon before everyone showed up.”

Si leans against my shoulder.

“It’s good to see you.” A tender voice says, from behind us.

Si whips around and his face lights up. “There you are! Danny, this is Nanny Grace,” he releases my hand and hops up to greet the silver-haired woman with brown skin and kind eyes. I know her from somewhere.

She pulls him into her arms, squeezing him joyously, as a wide smile squinches her face.

“I’ve missed you so much,” Si cheers.

“I’ve been right here.”

“I know that now,” he giggles.

“Hi, Danny,” Grace smiles at me. “I’m so happy you found each other again.”

“Again?” Si queries.

Grace winks. “I should get going, you two have lots to do.”

“We do?” Si’s brows wrinkle.

“You’ll see.” She turns to walk away. “I’ll catch you again soon. ”

Where’s mom?

I look both ways, up and down the street, but she's nowhere.

The coroner and his assistant pull away from the scene with my empty body in the back and, a short while after, the police cruiser and ambulance disperse as well.

Delila gets straight to workday, mopping the floor, to prepare for another workday. Hopefully she'll remember to put that damn sign out from now on.

I wonder if I've left a horrific mess. She doesn't deserve that.

"Let's go to the park." Si squeezes my shoulder.

21

Si

Beyond time . . .

The river rushes under the concrete bridge, slamming against its piles with brute force that shifts and sways the superstructure under our footsteps, as we crossover to my side of the city, and head for the park.

The birds sing for the sunshine and squirrels scurry about the ground, foraging for bounty, preparing for the coming winter. They pay no attention to us ghosts. The world is just moving on.

The gravel path still pops and crunches as we walk on the crushed stone. The air is nutty and sweet, I can almost taste it.

“This is weird, right?” I ask .

“Very.” Danny says, and sighs.

The static between our hands is still there, but it’s subtle and just feels natural. My eyes float around the park, to all of the people carrying on with their lives. A pack of children with backpacks, walking to school together, the businessman with his briefcase taking long strides and huffing grumpily on his way to work, then the old woman sitting on a bench feeding birds with scattered fistfuls of seeds she’s pulling from a burlap bag.

“How can you tell who’s dead and who’s alive?”

“Spirits usually have a faint sheen.”

I look at all the strangers again and now I see it. The old woman shimmers like the sun is reflecting off her skin. I’m surprised I could never see that before. Or maybe I could but never thought twice about it. I can’t recall a time though.

All of the world around us starts to blur, ever so slightly, like watercolor paint joining a wet canvas. Colors bleed into one another, creating new hues, and then pull back into focus.

“What was that?” I ask.

Danny shrugs and his fingers tighten around mine.

“Stay with me.” He seems nervous.

“I’m not going anywhere.” I assure him.

“Good,” he smiles.

Danny pulls me toward a park bench, facing a fountain, with stone cherubs aiming bows and arrows that spout water, at its center.

He sits and welcomes me to join him, wrenching me into his arm, holding me tight against his chest .

I shimmy down and nuzzle into his warmth, laying my head back onto his shoulder.

“What do we do now?” I ask.

“I’m not sure, I never asked anyone what this would be like.” Danny’s chest heaves under my head.

I twist my neck to look up at him and he’s changed. Not a lot. He’s still beautiful Danny, but subtle lines that were around his eyes are gone, his hair is shinier and neatly arranged.

“You look different.” I kiss his cheek.

“I do?”

“A little bit.” I hop up, off the bench, and float over to the fountain, kneeling on its edge and peering down at my reflection, babbling under the cherub’s stream. “I look the same.” Except my curls are glazed and tidy.

“You were already perfect.” Danny charms.

I trot back and kiss his sweet mouth.

“My place is a few blocks that way,” I point. “Do you want to go see it? Before whatever is supposed to happen, —happens?”

“Yes.” Danny beams.

I tug him up off the bench and wrap an arm around his shoulders, leading the way toward Park Row.

22

Danny

Soulmates . . .

Si's neighborhood is the polar opposite of my little ghetto. The sidewalks here are pristine and sprout a uniform row of manicured trees that stand the exact same height as far as the blocks stretch. I'd bet if I counted, each one has the same amount of leaves and branches too. There's no graffiti on the granite or sandstone block buildings and every street level windowsill holds a planter box that likely blooms in perfect unison during the summer months.

A cleanup crew of city workers is already collecting carved pumpkins from stoops and the "Happy Halloween" banners draped from cast iron street lamps on opposite sides of the street .

Decorations will stay up in my neighborhood until the wind and rain strip them away.

I haven't ventured to this side of the river since I was little, though I've lived in this city all my life. I'm the riff-raff these people look down their noses at.

My mother used to read tarot and do mediumship house-calls here, she used her gift to convey messages from deceased loved ones and predict outcomes of her client's future endeavors.

She coordinated a seance at a party one time, when I was around seven. The adults

shoved me into a playroom with children who wanted nothing to do with me, so I entertained a baby that giggled and hopped in his hanging bouncy chair, as I made googly faces.

The face of their nanny comes back to mind, with her silver hair and brown skin. It was Grace.

That baby had the same apatite eyes, blonde ringlets and big goofy smile as this beautiful man clinging to my side right now. Pieces of that mysterious puzzle that's plagued me all night, click into place.

I lean over and kiss his cheek as we round a corner, into an alley between two buildings.

He beams back at me, “Here we are.” He waves his arm toward a fire escape.

“Welcome home my sweet boys.” The voice I’ve been waiting to hear for a decade chimes behind me.

I spin on my heel, my throat closes and my eyes well over.

“Hi, Mom. ”

“Hi, love.” She spreads her arms and invites me to embrace her.

I step in, drawing her signature vanilla-sage scent into my nostrils, and she wraps me tight.

“It’s good to see you,” she says, then wipes my cheeks.

“Mom, this is Si.” I reach for his hand.

Si hooks my index finger with his.

“I know Si well.” She smiles, looking between the two of us. “It’s about time you boys found each other again.”

“Everyone keeps saying that.” Si chuckles.

“You’ll know soon.” Mom’s eyes twinkle. “I love you both.” She twirls her fingers through the hair at my nape, like she always used to do. “Go ahead up. Rest for a bit.” She nods toward the fire escape ladder. “I’ll see you again, soon.”

“Where are you going?” I ask.

“Nowhere. I’ll be right here. —head up.”

Si tugs on my sleeve.

Mom steps back and disappears around the corner of the building as swiftly as she appeared.

The world blurs for a moment, and then pulls back into focus.

I follow behind Si, and we climb the clinking iron ladder to the second floor window. He slips inside and invites me to follow.

“Welcome.”

He kisses my lips, once I’ve stepped through the frame, and shuts the window behind me.

“This is it,” Si wings his arms out and slowly spins .

“My entire apartment fits in your bedroom.” I comment with a chuckle.

“I love your studio!” Si bounces into my arms and pecks my lips. “Come here, I’ll show you, my place is so bland.”

He grabs my hand and leads me up a hallway.

“There’s the bathroom,” he points. “This is a storage closet, that’s the spare bedroom, and this is the living space.” He turns back, smiling.

I take in the bright white walls, sparsely decorated with a few massive paintings like an art gallery, and trimmed with elaborate crown molding. High ceilings, hardwood floors, and sparse furniture make the place feel like a grand showroom. A gourmet kitchen is tucked into the corner with stainless steel appliances, and matching pendant lights, aimed down onto marble countertops.

“You lived here by yourself?”

“Yup.” His lips narrow and shrug to the side of his face. His shoulders curl and cheeks flush.

I get a flash of his life in my mind. He’s been so lonely for so long. This grand apartment makes the tall lanky man look like a lost boy. My chest cracks in two and I sweep his cheek with the back of my fingers.

His eyes spark and he nuzzles into my touch.

“Are you hungry?” He twists to spin toward the kitchen but pauses and turns back.

“Do we get hungry?” he asks and giggles?

I shrug. “I do feel really sleepy.”

“Nothing feels different . . . Shouldn’t we feel different? ”

“Maybe not?” I chuckle.

I always wondered how the spirits didn’t know they were dead. It makes sense now. Everything feels the same, just a bit lighter, for lack of a better term. I don’t feel such dread and sadness anymore. My mind is gaining clarity the longer we step away from this plane of existence. Si’s familiarity to me goes back further than that bouncing baby in the swing. It goes back lifetimes. He and I have always been connected.

“Can we go lie down?” I yawn.

“Mm-hmm.” His eyes droop too.

He takes my hand and walks me back to his bedroom. He climbs onto the bed and kneels, waiting for me to join him.

I roll onto the mattress and lay my head on his pillows. They smell like him, heaven.

Si curls into my arms and his warmth is all I need...

We both drift off.

23

Si

Eternity . . .

“Danny?” I call into the blinding white void. I can feel him nearby but can’t visualize him . . .

Until he answers.

“I’m here. —look at me.”

His smiling maple eyes are first to appear, before his face is right in front of me, and then all of him materializes and I feel whole again.

We’re both wearing airy white garments from head to bare toes. The bright void whisks away, like bright color being blended into a can of paint to create a new hue, on a swirl that transforms the space into a grand dome of starry galactic infinity .

The floor is mirror-polished marble with pale rainbow veins, reflecting back the midnight blue and glittering specks from overhead.

A pedestal stands at the center of the hall, no. An endless row of pedestals, lined up as far as the eye can see, and each one holds a stone tablet.

I don’t have to ask, I know—somehow—that each one represents a lived life. A

recorded history of my, our, everyone's experiences through all of time.

Danny's fingers are woven with mine.

"I'm here—I won't let go." he says.

Shimmering silver threads wrap our hands and climb our arms, securing our connection.

We step up to the nearest tablet and gaze at the blank slate until a tiny blue pin-light begins to dance over the stone. It sweeps and traces unfamiliar shapes that still happen to make sense, jotting down every moment we've just experienced. Every lesson we took on and conquered. Every joyful and pained piece of that little life.

The strange neon hieroglyphs forming on the tablet seep into the stone like fluid on a dry sponge. They disappear to the naked eye but carry away every ounce of earthly emotion tied to our memories, contributing to the vast collective knowledge for the universe.

We're all just part of a single web of energy, linked across space and time, existing all at once and cosplaying various scenarios and lifetimes to gather perspective that helps the consciousness to grow and expand through all of eternity .

Ethereal cogs in an ancient machine.

I lean against Danny's shoulder, and he loops me into his arm.

"We should plan the next trip."

"Let's just rest and enjoy each other for a while? I've missed you." I kiss his cheek.

"That's what I was hoping you'd say."

He is everything I need.