

## **Subject to Change**

By Soundczech

Justin can't remember the last time he saw the stars. Just rows and rows of window- lights, streetlamps, car headlights, neon signs. Just gigantic TV screens and backlit billboards. Millions of fucking people consumed by the city. Faces smooth and featureless beneath the glare, like science fiction androids.

He snorts and draws deeper on his joint, pressing his forehead against the glass to look way down at the city street. He gets fucked up when he's high, lately. Gets fucked up, desperate thoughts, standing alone in his shitty apartment. Or worse, lying naked against some guy he's just fucked or sucked. Some guy whose face he won't remember in the morning.

He wants to remember a fucking guy's face in the morning.

Next apartment over, there's a woman that talks constantly, on the phone, to the TV, to her stupid, ugly cats. Her voice slides through Justin's porous walls. He wears headphones to block her out at night. He's only met her once. He passed her on the stair and recognized the voice that ground against her cell phone. Daily, he hopes she will be evicted. Replaced by some considerate mute.

There's a canvas in the corner. Empty chair, empty table, the shadows of concrete in the background. He thinks it's maudlin and trite, the kind of thing he'll never show his agent. Some dour, amused part of himself wants to paint in a sad clown and make the best of the cliché. He stares at it critically, and thinks: Good technique. Good use of color. The line of the table is a little heavy handed, and the balance of the piece is all off. New York lights reflect off the wet paint, and when it is dry, he shall put it in the little cemetery in his closet, where shitty paintings go to die.

He falls asleep on the couch three hours later, ashtray full of half-smoked cigarettes and burned out joints at his side. Sketches litter the space around him, faces and places he'll only half remember scratching out when he wakes.

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He's been going to the same club practically every night since he moved here. Three years of the same bar, the same floor, the same DJ every Thursday. Members only, so practically the same guys every time he comes. They move around him as a mass, and almost every night for the past three fucking years, he's had his pick, and now he's done. Nights like this, they remind him: he's such a fucking slut. Not one guy here that he wants but hasn't had. Not one guy he wants at all, now. Even though he can't remember their faces, he knows from the way they move, the way they talk, the way they look at him. He knows he's had them all before, or they've had him, or some combination of the two.

He has to find a new fucking club.

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The thing he's learned is that all clubs look the same when you've had enough E, but the guys just get hotter. He leans against the bar, freshly blown and shimmering from the dance floor, watching this new world of men stretching out before him. He's had ten, maybe twelve of these guys. Random encounters in bookstores and galleries, salons, Central Park, a local pet store. Maybe a couple in other clubs, other bars. One or two, probably, that found him online.

He's done ten or twelve, but there are a couple hundred others to choose from. All muscles moving in disarray before him. He feels the bass like hands sliding messy through his hair, grinding through his bones, shivering through his cock. He feels concrete trembling beneath his feet.

"Justin Taylor," a voice says, that voice so weirdly familiar. Smug and sweet, tumbling into the open air.

Justin glances to his left, and he's so not surprised. "Brian Fucking Kinney," he says. It feels somehow bizarre that they haven't run into one another before now, even in a city of millions.

Brian raises the long neck of his beer in greeting, tosses back a mouthful. Justin watches the line of his neck, the sharp relief of his jaw. Brian is, as expected, still the most beautiful motherfucker Justin has ever seen. Six years older – Christ, he must be thirty-six already – but still all tight skin and hooded eyes and that sultry, lazy smirk.

Justin looks back at the dance floor. Ten, maybe twelve of these guys. Thirteen, now, though he supposes he'd never really had Brian. Not the way he'd wanted to. He remembers him fondly, now, though with some bemusement. It's weird to remember being that young.

"Is it bizarre that I'm not surprised to see you?" Justin asks, leaning both elbows against the bar, feeling steel press into his back.

Brian snorts and lights a cigarette, offers the deck to Justin. "Why the fuck would you be?"

"This is a city of eleven million people," Justin comments. Out of the corner of his eye, he watches the graceful rise of wrist to mouth, the stretch of skin over Brian's perfect bones. He still draws him, sometimes.

"I'm one of them," Brian replies shortly. His eyes flicker over Justin's face, the clean lines of his body. "Look at you, all grown up. You're hot."

"I always was," Justin grins, smug. Brian grunts, and they turn back to watch the crowd. Justin remembers Babylon, smaller than this place, less elaborate. He still goes there whenever he's in Pittsburgh.

"Look at him," Justin says, nodding towards a guy in tight black jeans. "Great ass."

"Had him," Brian says, absently gesturing to the bartender for another round. "He talked dirty the whole time I fucked him." Brian hands Justin a beer, barely suppressing the grimace on his face. "Badly."

"Oh, baby, fuck my man pussy," Justin recites, already casting his eye elsewhere. There's a guy by the stairs that looks like a virgin. He's got moist pink lips and glittering skin. Could be interesting.

"I see the two of you have met," Brian observes dryly. "There was something about my engorged meathammer, did he pull that on you too?"

"I just know the type," Justin does. He knows most types, now. He knows gentle and rough and sly. He knows guys that will try to stay in the morning, guys that will take off right after. Guys that will try to see him again, guys that will say I love you, guys that won't say anything at all. He likes the last type best.

Lights overhead turn blue then white, and Justin thinks of Brian's loft, Brian's sheets, Brian's shower, Brian's door. He'd called that place home for a while. Called Brian's bed heaven, like some kind of retarded pre-teen girl. The Face of God, he remembers. Fuck.

He stands with Brian for twenty minutes, pointing out guys they've fucked, guys they want to fuck, guys they wouldn't fuck if somebody fucking paid them. Brian is different than Justin remembers, but he's not sure how, except that way back when Brian never would have taken time away from the hunt to hang out with him. He'd have fucked some guy first and come back later, and that is what Justin is used to, what Justin expects.

It's Justin that leaves first, this time. Spots a black guy covered in shining silver glitter and fucks him in the backroom. It's hot back there, and crowded. Men pressing in from every angle, hot and damp and buzzing with energy. Justin pounds his trick against the wall, tastes the glitter from his neck, and remembers little of it later.

Brian is gone when he gets back.

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Next night, same club. Same men stretching bronze and gold across the floor. Justin smokes a steady stream of cigarettes, watches a group of young guys dancing around their fag hag, and misses Daphne. He talked to her a couple days ago. She's got a new boyfriend again, but he thinks that really, she misses Dave and should just give it the fuck up.

Justin hasn't had a boyfriend in three years. Doesn't want one anymore, not like he did when he was seventeen and thought Brian was going to be the love of his fucking life. Actually, Brian probably is the love of Justin's fucking life, but that didn't mean it had to last. Justin doesn't think he can feel that way again. Justin thinks that Brian was right, whatever his fucking slogan was back then. Something about fucking instead of love, something Justin didn't buy for a very long time after.

He may as well have a t-shirt, now.

After Brian, there was one solid year of mourning, of hoping and wishing and making sad fucking eyes at couples in the diner. After Brian, he didn't sleep, didn't eat, didn't miss out on a single fucking cliché. He drew endless pictures and listened to stupid, schmoopy songs. The day Brian left, he stayed at home crying in his bed when he was supposed to take Daph to the Prom. Daph went with some friend from another school instead, and said it was boring as shit.

Brian emailed three days later. In New York, he said. Apartment fucking tiny. Go to class. Drink water when you take E. Don't fuck guys in leather, they'll bruise. Be a good boy. B.

That was the last Justin heard from him. Directly, anyway. He heard things through Lindsay or Deb, and from Michael after his grand return from Portland. Heard things and held on to them desperately for the first year or so, but then that got too pathetic and he tried to stop caring. Tapered off and moved on, and when Brian came to the Pitts for Christmas when Justin was twenty, he managed to barely care at all. Justin stayed by his boyfriend's side most of the night, ignoring the lazily interested stares Brian occasionally sent their way.

He only really spoke to Brian once, alone in the backyard. Justin remembers that they used to hang out in Deb's backyard a lot, smoking joints and avoiding the family. Justin remembers being seventeen, Brian giving him a blowjob against the side of the house, where nobody could see. The first time Brian had blown him publicly, if that could really count as public. The second time, Brian had been off his head on some little blue pill, and had fallen to his knees in the men's room at Woody's. Ted had walked in halfway through and mumbled an apology, but not before he'd extensively ogled Justin's semi-bare stomach and the muscles leading down to his cock. Justin had been seventeen and out of his mind in love. Brian had been twenty-nine and mostly just out of his mind.

At twenty, Justin was cautious and quiet, watching Brian from beneath long blonde bangs, drawing absently on his cigarette. Brian leaned against the railing, brazenly examining Justin's face, his body, the way he moved his hands.

"Linds says you're doing great at school," Brian said finally.

"I am," Justin said tightly. Mad. So fucking mad when he thought about it, because what fucking right did Brian have to stand here and talk to him about his education, as if he was some long forgotten fucking uncle, absentee father, random godparent that just wanted to appear to be keeping tabs on his young fucking ward? Justin would have been happier had Brian ignored him altogether. Probably. Or, at least, if Brian had picked something less lame to talk about than Justin's unsurprising academic achievements.

Brian must have sensed Justin's irritation, because next thing he was leaning on the railing close to Justin's body, passing him a burning joint and saying, "Please tell me you're fucking around with something a little hotter than that pretentious asshole you brought here tonight."

"Ethan is okay," Justin said. Ethan was great, actually, for reasons Justin was too intelligent to articulate to Brian. Ethan was sweet and romantic and loving, brought Justin chocolates and coffee in bed, wrote him love songs and read him the newspaper in the evenings. Ethan said 'I love you' every day.

"He's boring," Brian replied, watching Justin's lips tug at the paper of the immaculately rolled joint. Justin exhaled, and white-colored smoke filled the air between them.

"Don't insult my boyfriend," Justin said, coughing a little. When he smoked these days, it was bargain basement cut price shit, barely strong enough to make his head tingle. He'd forgotten that with Brian, it was always the best, the strongest, the most intense high.

Brian snorted and threw an arm over Justin's shoulder, squeezing him tightly with something that felt very close to affection. "I'm out of my mind with jealousy," he said dryly. "This is the only way I can communicate my pain."

Justin felt a wave of irritation buzz against his skin, but he was already getting high, and the feeling was too vague and shapeless to grab a hold of. He elbowed Brian in the side half-heartedly, felt the answering press of Brian's fingers through his thick winter coat.

They stood in silence for a few minutes, passing the joint back and forth. Brian was warm, and he smelled good, and for a little while, Justin allowed himself to miss what they used to be.

When Justin's skin was tingling so hard it was like he had a blanket case of pins and needles, Brian said quietly, "You looking after yourself?"

"Sure," Justin replied absently. Brian was quiet, and Justin, sensing the seriousness of Brian's enquiry, repeated himself. "Sure."

Brian nodded, as if there was nothing much at all behind the question. Slowly, he relinquished his arm from around Justin's shoulder, and Justin imagined the snow moving in between their bodies. Brian leaned over and pressed a kiss to Justin's cheek, the inner curve of his lip warm and melting against Justin's skin.

"Later," Brian said, and went inside.

"Later," Justin said, and sat on the stair. He watched the snow making patterns on Debbie's lawn, and didn't speak to Brian again until three years later, in a crowded, sweaty club in New York.

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The fourth night, Brian shows up again, and Justin notes the shimmering skin on his arms, the curl of his hair across his forehead. They lean together against the bar, watching the pretty boys. Brian is quiet and caustic as usual, and Justin feels an immense shifting of time, as if all those stupid little years he's spent being a grown up never really happened at all, and he's still seventeen and standing there and listening to Brian's amused assessment of this twink or that bear, this top, that bottom, this guy's awkward, fumbling blow job.

Justin has responses, now. When Brian says, "I fucked that guy at my gym three weeks ago," Justin can say, "I had him in the bathroom at McDonalds."

When Brian says, “That blonde one, he’s got a tongue ring. He gives the most amazing blowjob,” Justin can grab the guy by his shirtfront and drag him out back to be tested.

When Brian wanders off with a tall brunette around two in the morning, Justin can honestly say that he does not give a shit. Justin can say, “Hey, let me know if he’s worth it,” and not feel a tremor of nausea settling in his gut.

Justin isn’t seventeen anymore. He watches Brian, the angle of his jaw, the rhythm of his hips, and he doesn’t even want to be. He’s something else entirely, now. He supposes that means he’s nothing to Brian, and Brian is nothing to him.

He supposes that, but of course, he’s completely full of shit.

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For the past year or so, Justin has managed to live almost entirely off his art. He sells paintings in smug New York galleries that fetch him tidy sums upwards of a couple thousand dollars. He does commission pieces for fat grandmothers that want lasting mementos of their spoiled, sugar-junkie grandkids. He illustrates for some books and magazines, sells paintings under a pseudonym in a local artist’s market. He’s been approached about working on a comic book. He’s been approached about a lot of things. Mostly, he thinks of all this as luck. The people around him think of it as his talent, his drive. His genius.

The first show he’d featured in, Ethan had been really pissed off. Jealous and angry and saying stupid, hurtful things. Asking if Justin was going to get too big and famous for him. Asking if Justin really wanted to leave him behind. Not believing the answers Justin had given him.

Ethan had just lost the Heifitz. A month and a half later, he lost Justin too, to a New York gallery that wanted to feature him amongst a line of up and coming new artists. Lost him to the power of the life Justin should be living. One day, they broke up wild and angry on the phone, and Justin hasn’t spoken to him since. Hasn’t wanted to, barely thinks about him.

Justin is virtually indifferent to his separation with Ethan, and it is the first time he really thinks that love does not exist. If he should love anyone, it should be Ethan, who held him tightly, listened to his stories, asked him questions, gave him flowers and doodles, hugs, kisses. Ethan who tried so hard to love him, even though Justin never really loved him back.

Justin thought, still thinks, that if love really exists, then of all people, he should love Ethan.

He doesn't.

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The next time Justin sees Brian is in the middle of the day, outside a café on a busy city street. Brian is wearing his work clothes, long body rising triumphant in a charcoal suit that Justin knows is Gucci or Prada or something equally expensive, equally beautifully designed. Justin has forgotten that Brian looks equally beautiful under warm golden light as he does under disco blue, and his muscles pulse at the sight.

Justin falls into step beside Brian, narrowly avoiding collision with a Japanese woman that appears to be about four thousand years old.

"Where'd you come from?" Brian says, slowing his brisk pace a little. Justin can't see his eyes behind dark glasses.

"I just had lunch with my agent," Justin replies. "I'm eating this month."

"Some months you don't?" Brian offers Justin the bag of fat green grapes he's eating, as if there really is some fear that Justin will waste away to nothing.

"I am a starving artiste," Justin tells him grandly, shoving the paper bag away with the back of his hand. "Some months I just eat instant noodles. The kind with chicken flavoring."

"And here I thought you were the new It Girl." Brian tosses his grapes in the trash and digs through his pocket for a lighter. "The way Lindz made it sound, you're already on your way to your first million."

"I am," Justin says easily. "I'm sort of in limbo. Like, sometimes I could dine on caviar and champagne, others it seems like I'll barely make the rent. It depends on the market." He swerves to avoid a wayward child, a frantic mother. "Things have been pretty good the past eight months or so."



“Living like a king,” Brian comments, and reaches out a hand to steady Justin as he’s left wobbling in the mother’s wake.

“Not living like a parasite, at least.” They’ve stopped in front of some obscenely tall building, long cement slabs casting shadows on their faces. Justin cranes his neck to see a flash of blue sky. “This is you?”

“The office,” Brian grunts, and herds Justin closer to the doors, away from the steady stream of pedestrians. “I have a view of the park.”

“I see you’re on your way to your first million too.”

“No,” Brian says with a smirk. “I’m well past.”

Justin knows. He knows that the loft sold for close to that, just a little under, actually. He knows because he had attended the auction with Lindsay, standing with crossed arms and a tense jaw. Watching this place that could have been home get sold out from under him. Some fat old queen battled for the place, emerged triumphant. It still makes Justin a little sad to think of that guy fucking in Brian’s bedroom, Brian’s shower. Screwing flabby, pale-assed men in the House that Brian Kinney Built. It just doesn’t seem right, somehow.

Brian checks his watch. He never used to wear one. “I have a presentation,” he says. Brian used to love presentations, but Justin sees a boredom around his eyes that says he feels otherwise now. “Don’t bother with Market tonight, they’re running some shitty blackout gimmick. The guys that show are always desperate as fuck.”

Justin has been to blackout nights before, and the guys had been no less hot than usual. He remembers the way Brian gets these weird ideas in his head, though, so he just arches his eyebrow and says, “Did you have something else in mind?”

Brian stares at him blankly for a minute, as if surprised that Justin would ask. “No.”

”You’re just going to stay at home with a good book?” Justin laughs. “You loser.”

“Fuck you.” They’re standing a foot from each other, and a few years ago Justin would have closed the distance, felt Brian’s fingers settle in his belt loops. Brian sighs. “There’s an opening, some queer bar in Chelsea. We’re handling the PR. I’ll put your name on the list.”

“Is this a date?” Justin asks, unimpressed. Brian’s brows rise simultaneously, and the words ‘I don’t do dates’ hang unacknowledged in the air.

“I don’t even know if I’ll be there,” he says, his voice a tumbling bass line, rolling low and amused over the words. “If I am, it certainly won’t be with you.”

“Good,” Justin nods. “I’m not like I used to be.”

“I noticed.”

“I’m not some kid who wants to be your boyfriend.”

“Thank fucking god.”

“And I don’t want to fuck you.”

“What?” A double take, mouth falling open with a chuff of surprised laughter. “Why the fuck not?”

Justin shrugs and grins. “I’ve had you.”

Brian only let Justin top once. Sprawled out against blue sheets, guiding his every movement, shuddering and gasping with every thrust. Stretching muscles, murmuring, groaning in response to Justin’s every gasp. When it was over, he said Justin was amazing, and the next day he left for New York.

Justin suspects Brian has never been very good with goodbyes.

Brian remembers, Justin can tell. There’s a sudden focus in his eyes, like the way he used to look at Justin mid-fuck, and Justin wants to stumble back with the realization that maybe he does want to fuck Brian after all. Refuses to do it, though, because he’s not seventeen anymore but he’s sure he’s quite capable of behaving like a lovesick schoolgirl, and he’d just as well avoid the whole fucking mess.

“I might see you tonight,” Justin says, hitching his portfolio higher up on his shoulder.

Brian shrugs, the picture of non-committal indifference, but his eyes are still trained on Justin in that long forgotten way. “Yeah,” he says. “Later.”

Justin doesn’t go to the opening. He plans to, but a hot guy stops him by the door, and Justin ends up getting a fantastic blow job in the backseat of a speeding taxi, and an unbelievable fuck on the living room floor of a Park Avenue apartment. The guy – Joe – tries to give Justin his number, tries to see him again, but Justin has already lost interest.

He wonders if this is what it is like to be Brian Kinney.

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A few weeks pass, and the more Justin sees Brian, the more he remembers: this is what it is like to have friends. Brian apparently doesn’t have any friends either, because he seems quite happy to make his way over to wherever Justin is standing and drape himself there until the evening’s likely conquest makes his self known. They talk little over the unearthly buzz of the music, but every now and again Brian will nudge Justin with one gentle elbow, nod toward some guy, lean in close, and comment.

He smells the same as he used to.

One night, Brian is stumbling into the backroom as Justin is stumbling out. Justin flashes a gigantic, shit-eating grin, buzz-drunk and cock tingling from the aftermath. As he’s walking past, Brian’s shoulder collides with his.

Brian, eyes bright and smirk twisting that beautiful face. Brian says, “Hey. Stick around twenty minutes, I’m hungry.”

Justin lets a tall guy with an eyebrow piercing buy him a few shots of top shelf whiskey. Downs them and watches the lights bubble and spit against the mirrored columns, feels the guy’s hand sliding on his shoulder with little more than passing interest. Feels the sweat hanging humid in the air, until Brian comes out of the backroom. Brian slings an arm around his shoulder and drags him out of the club, the way he used to do to Michael, only Mikey rarely left some hot guy behind.

They go to a midnight diner with shitty coffee and worse food, but Brian seems to like the waitress.

“The sandwiches are good,” Brian says. “Never eat their bacon, I think it was processed in a bathhouse.”

His face is serious over his black t-shirt, as if he worries something horrible will befall Justin if he consumes their pork products. This is what Brian is like with his friends, Justin remembers. The ones he actually gives a shit about. He’ll guide them to an early grave, but never admit he cares.

Justin watches as Brian shakes out sugar in his coffee, three packets like a thirteen year old girl. He stirs his soda with a straw, feeling heavy and warm, his right arm tingling the way it sometimes does when he’s been dinking. His chest feels liquid, like the hangover is already setting in, and he rubs at it with the ball of his palm.

“Hey,” some guy says. Red hair, blue shirt. Blue eyes. Justin fucked him a few weeks ago in the backroom of a Chelsea gallery. The guy gave a shitty blowjob, but had a tight ass and beautiful eyes and an eagerness that Justin hasn’t possessed since his youth. Those eyes are twinkling at Justin hopefully. Eagerly. “You forgot to get my number.”

Justin hates this part. The guy is holding his business card between two outstretched fingers. Pretty smile beneath his freckles.

Justin glances at Brian. “Sorry,” he says. “I didn’t think my boyfriend would like it.”

While he’s been speaking, Brian’s eyebrow has been slowly inching further towards his hairline, and he turns his face towards the trick.

“Fuck off,” Brian says. Bored already, his face settles back into blankness. Justin wants to push his facial muscles around with the ball of his thumb.

Justin smiles tightly. “He gets so jealous, you know.”

The guy – Jeremy, Justin thinks, or something with a J – backs away with wide eyes. “Sorry,” he says. “I didn’t know.”

Justin waves as he walks through the door.

“I hate doing that,” Justin sighs. “I wish I was obviously an asshole. Like you.”

Brian half heartedly gives him the finger, but he’s smiling a little.

“I always figured you for the marrying kind,” he comments. A plate of fries has arrived, and Brian nudges it into the centre of the table.

Justin plucks a fry from the plate, considering. “It’s not like you.”

“What?” Brian’s fry hangs mid-air, suspended from between two long fingers.

“I’m not standing on my principles or anything,” Justin says dryly. “It’s not a rule. I’m just too much of a prick to be interested in anyone beyond the first fuck.”

“It is the same as me, then,” Brian grins.

“I’ve dated a couple guys since Ethan. No-one special.” Justin tries to remember them, the guys he fucked around with inexclusively for a month or so at a time, but comes up with a few names, a phone number, a half-remembered song from a club, and the taste of freshly squeezed grapefruit juice. “Not that memorable either, apparently.”

Brian snorts. “I can only name a handful of guys I’ve fucked that were memorable, but a thousand memorable fucks.” He’s lighting a cigarette, and Justin wonders if it is really okay to smoke in here. He takes Brian’s cigarette anyway, draws on it long and hard. Brian stares at him with a vaguely irritated expression before lighting up another.

“I don’t usually remember their faces in the morning,” Justin says. “Just ... parts.”

“Just his cock?” Brian smirks, that impossible little smirk Justin used to love so much. He could love it again, he thinks. Probably already does.

“Sometimes,” he says. Pulls back hard on his smoke, feeling the heat bloom within his lungs. He smokes too much, lately. Absently, he thinks he should quit. “Or sometimes they’ll have a piercing or something. Birthmark, tattoo. Scar. Great eyes. You know.”

“Perfect hands,” Brian says lazily. Drags his index finger around the rim of his mug. “Thighs of death.”

Justin laughs, “Right.” He watches Brian’s face across the table. There’s a softness there, now. An ease. It makes Justin wonder. “I suppose you’ve got yourself some timid housewife type at home,” he drawls. He doesn’t really know what Brian’s been doing all these years. “I bet he cooks and reads, and you have a dog. I bet you’ve got a ring in your pocket.”

Brian stares at him incredulously, and Justin laughs. “I didn’t think so.”

Justin’s cell phone is sitting on the table, and Brian picks it up and flips it open. Justin watches, fascinated, as Brian’s long fingers work the keys. Later, when he looks, there’ll be a new entry in his contacts.

BK, it’ll say. Home, mobile, office. Justin wonders when Brian got so easy.

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Justin is given a commission for a rush job on a portrait, and barely leaves the studio for weeks. The portrait is of an ugly, fat old banker who tells obnoxious jokes with a thick New York nose. He wants this, he wants that, and Justin is starting to remember why he hates this kind of job, even though the pay is fantastic. He spends close to two weeks pulling long hours at the studio, and then he gets an email from Michael.

Brian said he’d been seeing you around a bit, but then you totally disappeared, Michael says. Ma thinks you’re like dead or something, you’re not answering your calls! She’s driving us all crazy! Give someone a call, would you?

He doesn’t talk to Michael often, usually just relaying messages back and forth for Deb. Sometimes Justin will send him news of celebrity sightings, or illustration commissions he thinks he would be interested in. When he was commissioned to work on a one off comic for a respected crime novelist, Justin had a copy signed and sent to

Michael, express. Things are better between them, now. Without Brian as a constant presence, a constant territory to battle over. Things are almost easy.

He writes back, Sorry, Mom. Working on a portrait for some boring old breeder. Tell Deb to relax. I'm in the studio a lot, I haven't been checking my messages. I think the machine is broken. I'll be done in a couple days. I can't wait, and then he calls Brian.

"I'm not dead," he says when Brian picks up. "I don't know what you said to Michael."

"Hey, hold on," Brian says, and Justin hears him dismissing some guy named Steve from the office. "He just asked how you were, I said I didn't know. It's not my fucking fault Deb lost her shit."

Brian could have predicted Deb would lose her shit, Justin knows, and he wants to chastise him for knowing that and freaking her out anyway. Doesn't seem worth the effort, though, so he just dumps a load of bright-colored brushes by the sink and lights a smoke. "I've been in the studio, working on a commission."

"Fuck," Brian says. His voice pitches a high, quasi-sentimental falsetto. "It seems like only yesterday we were buying you that Crayola set."

Brian did buy Justin crayons once, though Justin doubts he remembers. Back in that brief period before Justin moved in with Debbie, when he spent every night for a month in Brian's bed. He'd come home from Daphne's one night and found a 36 pack of fat wax colors sitting on top of his school bag, and never figured out if it was the result of shopping under the influence of E, a touching gesture, or a barely veiled jab at his age and immaturity. He doesn't mention it to Brian, but he thinks he might still have a couple of the crayons amongst his kit.

He sometimes has these moments where he doesn't know what to say to Brian, with the memory of all he once meant to Justin. Some part of Justin still loves him, some huge part that worries and gnaws and reminds Justin of just how easy it would be to fall for him again. To be in love with him, instead of just loving him. To love him madly again. It's not something Justin really wants to happen. Not just because Brian would laugh and call him pathetic, though that's a lot of it. He's not sure what the other part is. Just something that makes him glad to be Brian's friend and no more.

When he thinks of how they used to be, he almost feels cowardly, and that's when he doesn't know what to say. Doesn't know what to say anyway, because how do you approach a friendship with someone you once called the Face of God? He wants it, wants it badly. He's got no friends here. No-one real, anyway, and he knows it's the same for Brian.

“Bring me dinner,” Justin says suddenly. He remembers what it is to be brave. He remembers being seventeen and crazy, being seventeen and sure that he and Brian had a love that would last forever. Being a total fucking nutcase, but never backing down. “I’ll email you directions.”

Brian is silent, and Justin can’t tell if he’s surprised or contemplative or anything. “Around seven,” Brian affirms finally. “Later.”

They eat, and it doesn’t feel like a date. It feels like Brian is bringing him Chinese food and they’re eating it on the shitty wooden table Justin keeps here in this studio. Brian is making fun of the portrait Justin is painting, asking if Justin has fucked the subject. Justin tells him that his rendering is kind, that the man is older and balder and fatter even than he appears in his portrait. Brian can scarcely believe it. He brings out a joint and tells Justin long stories about the dirty old men that tried to fuck him in his youth, the bored middle-aged housewife that tried to adopt Brian as her toy boy in his senior year of college. Justin laughs more than he has in forever, and finds new light and angles in the world outside his window, in the sleek lines of buildings beyond the glass.

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Seven weeks later, Brian drags Justin to the movies at two o’clock on a Wednesday afternoon. It’s some stupid science fiction film with a barely attractive male lead and a token female with gigantic breasts, but Brian doesn’t seem to be paying attention anyway. He slouches down in his seat, long legs and huge feet propped up on the chair in front. His eyes are trained on the screen, but he reacts to neither the screams of the heroine nor the long, gleaming phallus the director passes off as a spacecraft.

Brian has been quiet for a couple days, tired. Grumpy. Grumbling at Justin about the shitty coffee he keeps in his apartment, but drinking three cups of it anyway. Bitching about the lack of desirable male company, but fucking five guys in three days. Getting drunk and pushing Justin against the door like he maybe wants to kiss him, but then just leaving instead. Sitting here stone-faced and silent in this movie neither of them wanted to see anyway.

Justin lifts the armrest between them and slides closer to Brian, slings his arm around his shoulder. Brian’s cheek falls to rest against Justin’s arm, and Justin squeezes, just for a minute.

“What’s up?” Justin murmurs to him. Voice quiet next to Brian’s ear, words almost lost to the warble of the soundtrack. “You seem --” He doesn’t want to say sad. “Tired.”



Brian rubs his cheek against the rough fabric of Justin's sweater, rubs his hand once on Justin's knee. Justin can feel him breathing. Finally, he shrugs, but doesn't answer, just goes on staring at the cinema screen.

Two days later, Justin calls his office, and Brian's personal assistant Martin answers. "Sorry," Martin says, in that not-quite-lispy voice of his. "Brian had a check up today, he's out of the office. He'll probably call as soon as he gets in."

A check up. Justin wonders when Brian started looking after himself. "Okay, Martin. Thanks."

Brian doesn't call back, but shows up at Justin's door that night with a few tabs of E and a smile, and insists they go dancing at some club Justin's never heard of. They dance under colored lights, Brian laughing and sliding his hands occasionally over Justin's skin, pointing out guys that are checking Justin out, as if that is some rare and extraordinary occurrence.

When Brian finally picks his trick for the night, he gives Justin a friendly kiss goodbye, lips sliding warm and bourbon-sweet against Justin's own. Justin feels a comfortable tendril of warmth coiling in his stomach, drawing up tight against his lungs, and it explodes in a smile as Brian walks away.

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Justin's theory that Brian had no real friends in New York had been proven early in their re-acquaintance, when Brian seemed to call Justin out of boredom every other day or so. It had been further reinforced when they took to calling each other every day, sometimes a couple times a day, and Justin thinks his seventeen year old self might have died to be in this position.

Brian calls with updates on accounts, stories of conquests, to tell Justin that the female CEO of Barnaby Toys Inc. tried to jump his bones in the cloak room at some five hundred dollar a head benefit.

"She smelled like the perfume counter at the Big Q," Brian complains into Justin's answering machine. Justin is sketching and doesn't pick up, but that doesn't seem to bother Brian. Justin remembers the days when he would have begged for Brian to talk to him, and takes some satisfaction this new equality.

Justin etches a ballpoint pen against lined scrap paper, watches as the face of a thirty-third street busker blooms in blue behind his fingers. He had to give up his studio, this month. Sacrificed it to the finance gods because of rising rent and falling income, no decent commissions on the horizon. A slow month. Ramen noodles and a sandwich for

dinner, cheap wine. A postponed trip to Miami with Daphne. The return of last year's winter coat because he shouldn't dip into his savings for a new one.

He hasn't told Brian about the studio yet. Brian would probably try to help, he thinks, and although Brian can afford it, the thought makes Justin uneasy. Not so much the idea of Brian helping him – Brian helps him constantly, pays for things, even stupid little things like cover charge or tequila shots, and always has, since way back when Justin was seventeen and basically stalking him – but more the idea that if he lets Brian start helping now, he'll never know if he could have done it on his own.

When he's so broke he's in danger of becoming homeless and malnourished, like the street kids of modern independent cinema, then he'll let Brian get out his platinum card. As it is, he has some money in the bank, some form of income, a roof over his head, shitty food in his fridge. As it is, he's doing pretty fucking good, for a 23 year old artist, anyway. Pretty fucking good and next month will be even fucking better.

"I know you're there," Brian says, finally exhausted on the topic of Mimi Macahn and her cheap perfume. Justin wonders if Brian would have been less disgusted had the woman been more attractive. "I'm coming over."

Brian means to come over right away, Justin is sure, but he ends up stumbling through Justin's door just after four am, weaving and cursing his way to a graceful coma in Justin's bed. He smells like sex and cigarettes, men's cologne, a seedy fog settling heavy against Justin's sheets.

In the morning, over coffee, Justin finds out that Brian stopped at a nearby supermarket for cigarettes and ended up fucking the manager behind the dairy case; the guy had a tattoo on his ass and a tarnished gold wedding band, but no wife or kids in the apartment he eventually brought Brian back to, the apartment Brian refused to stay the night in.

"Why didn't you just go home?" Justin asks, amused.

Brian shrugs and sniffs at Justin's suspect milk. "Dunno."

Brian showers in Justin's shitty bathroom and goes to work in yesterday's clothes, though Justin knows he keeps a closet of fresh suits in his gigantic Madison Avenue office. Still, the idea of the partner of New York's most prestigious ad agency greeting the doorman in a crumpled Versace suit that smells like yesterday's ass makes Justin smirk as Brian walks out the door and into the dank-lit stairwell.

--

Justin has to have dinner with some other artists and a pretentious Parisian gallery owner. At eight o'clock on a Thursday evening, he showers, shaves, brushes his teeth. Styles his hair like Astro Boy, but flattens the bit at the back. Looks at himself in the mirror and thinks of all the ways he can not look like an idiot tonight.

Brian is stretched out on his elbows on Justin's bed, long legs sprawling gracelessly to the floor. Justin is absurdly reminded of being eight years old and watching his mother get ready for a party; putting on her earrings, applying her perfume. He watches Brian in the mirror.

"Your shirt is ugly," Brian says. He kicks his toes, making patterns in the worn carpet. Justin slides his hand down the fabric and considers changing, but he doesn't really care enough. He shrugs and pulls on a worn leather blazer. He learned a long time ago that image is everything, but it's not his clothes they're interested in.

He sprawls out on the bed beside Brian, staring up at his off-white ceiling. He wonders idly if Brian has any pot, thinks that maybe this whole thing will be a lot less boring if he gets a little buzzed first.

He can't remember the last time he hung out with someone who wasn't Brian.

"How come you have no friends?"

Brian grunts. "I guess I'm not a people person."

"You had friends in Pittsburgh."

A snort, and Justin watches as Brian rummages through his pockets in search of a light. "Mikey had friends in Pittsburgh."

"Right," Justin says. He hands Brian a book of matches from the bedside table. The name of a club is scrawled in silver on the back. "Seriously, though."

"I had to work pretty hard when I got here. Didn't have the time nor the inclination to make nice with new neighbors."

“Weren’t you lonely?”

“Were you?”

“Sometimes,” Justin says. He lights his own cigarette and counts the shadows on the ceiling. “I don’t think I realized it, though.”

Brian is silent.

“But I’m not a people person either, I guess.” Justin sits up to retrieve an ashtray. Rests it on Brian’s chest, sits cross legged at his side. “When I first moved here, I used to hang out with this guy Brad. I think he’ll be there tonight.”

Brian taps his cigarette against the side of the green ceramic ashtray. “Why’d you stop talking to him?”

If Justin still talked to Brad with any frequency, Brian would know about it, and Justin wonders when that happened.

“I think he was a little in love with me,” Justin says. “He used to look at me, you know. Buy me things, even though he barely had any fucking money himself. Never made a move, though. What a fuckin’ pussy.”

“He loved you so you stopped returning his calls?”

“I loved you so you moved to New York.”

“You loving me wasn’t the problem,” Brian says. Justin isn’t sure what he means by that. He’s thought for years that Brian left because of him, at least in part. Thought that Brian maybe noticed how close they’d been a little too late.

“If you’d stayed,” Justin says, “You probably would have loved me.”

Brian turns his head to stare at Justin, and for a minute, says nothing. Draws hard on his cigarette, stubs it out in the ashtray. Justin watches his hand twisting around the cigarette, and thinks he needs to learn to shut the fuck up.

Brian turns his gaze to the ceiling, and stares up at it, unblinking.

"I know," he says.

They go to Pittsburgh for Christmas. Justin's mother has recently remarried, moved to a sprawling house in an affluent suburb with three new stepkids and a Golden Retriever. A pool and a fireplace, air conditioning. Long hedges that look anal retentive to Justin's eyes. A husband with stubble and glasses, a therapist that charges a couple hundred dollars an hour. He's an okay guy. His mother seems happy.

It's no surprise that Justin ends up staying in Brian's hotel room. Brian has been suggesting it ever since Justin first realized that staying at his mother's would involve a twin bed in a provincial style guest room, three irrational teenage girls, and a certain amount of disapproval about Justin's three am bedtime.

Justin said "No," but never really meant it.

--

Justin remembers another time when he shared white sheets and minty pillows with Brian. A white toweling robe. Brian stinking like something that crawled out of somebody's jock strap. Justin being so fucking grateful. Some of the best sex Justin has ever had.

"Justin," his mother had said, when Justin told her of his plans to crash with Brian. "Are you sure that's a good idea, sweetheart?"

She doesn't know how things are, now. Justin ignores the crawling worry in her voice. He ignores the doubt that settles around her mouth when Justin tells her that he and Brian are just friends, that that's all either of them wants.

The first morning, Justin wakes with Brian's nose pressed against his hair, Brian's foot tangled up in Justin's sweats.

Sometimes Justin wonders what Brian really wants.

--

Predictably, their family thinks they are fucking.

"No," Justin tells Emmett. "No, we are not."

"Maybe we should be," Brian says lightly, slinging his arm around Justin's shoulder. "Friends with benefits."

To Justin, Brian is already a friend with benefits. The great lighting in his apartment, the way Brian will let Justin sit by the window and paint for hours because he had to give up his studio and that is the only kind of help he can justify. Phone calls at four in the morning that Brian will receive with a yawn and a grumpy hello, calls that Brian will never hang up on, because he knows Justin just has to talk about this painting or that trick or this new monstrosity his father has enacted upon the world. A nice warm bed in a five star hotel because Brian knows there's no way Justin can spend the night in the suburbs with Mom and still maintain his sanity.

Brian cancelled his flight and drove to Pittsburgh because Justin couldn't afford the airfare and didn't want to drive alone. Some people would ask why Brian didn't just pay the airfare for him, but those people clearly did not understand the way these things worked. When they stopped for gas on the way, Brian bought Justin a book of crosswords, a tube of Pringles and a Coke, and that means more to Justin than any first class flight on Liberty Air.

"We're just friends," Justin maintains patiently, and Emmett looks disappointed. Justin can feel Michael watching them, feel the weight of his insecurity pressing down on their shoulders. When Justin finally gets to greet him, though, Michael smiles widely, genuinely, and hugs him awkwardly, as if he's not sure that Justin will approve. Justin touches his shoulder briefly and moves on, leaving Michael to be engulfed in Brian's arms.

--

They go to Babylon, and it's nothing like it used to be. For one thing, Justin steps onto the floor and nobody seems to know who he is, though Emmett says his legend still filters through to the youngest of the twinkies making their Liberty Avenue debut. The boy who lived.

Justin drinks Brian's beer. They do tequila shots with Michael. Later, on the dancefloor, some trick tries to slide a tab of E between Justin's teeth. Justin has had so much to drink that he almost lets him, but in the end he spits the tab on the ground, watches it under ultra violet lights, dissolving beneath his boot.

Brian shoves the guy's arm and tells him to fuck off. He's come from the back room, Justin thinks. There's a flush of red rising up his neck.

"He was hot," Justin says. He's dancing close to Brian, can feel their cocks rubbing together, half hard. "I wanted to fuck him."

Brian smirks and spreads his hand out across the small of Justin's back. "So go after him."

Justin turns around. Grinds his ass back up against Brian, feels the answering bite of Brian's fingers into his hips. Brian's breath is hot against Justin's ear.

"Which one was he?" Justin asks. There is a row of five guys in black t-shirts. Justin looks at their faces, considers. "None of them are that hot."

"Not hot enough for you," Brian murmurs. Justin feels soft, hot lips dragging against the skin below his ear. He wants to arch his neck up against those lips, but that would be crossing some boundary they pretend doesn't even exist. Breaking the rules they don't talk about.

Justin turns in Brian's arms, presses up against Brian's chest. He throws his arms around Brian's neck and they're dancing and hugging at the same time, teetering precariously from side to side. Justin feels giddy and warm, like maybe he absorbed some of that E the trick tried to push on him. And happy. So fucking happy, back here where it started, dancing stupidly and hearing his friend laughing beneath the music. His friend. His best fucking friend.

"I love you," he tells Brian, trying to yell it over the music, over the bass heavy remix of some song that was probably made before Justin was born. He's not sure that Brian has even heard him, except a few seconds later, Brian's hand finds his own. Their fingers twist together and Brian kisses him affectionately on the cheek.

This is, apparently, Brian's way of saying 'You too.'

--

Brian is passed out on the other side of the bed, and that should be much less familiar than it is. Justin rubs his hand over his mouth, feels the stickiness of drool around his lips. He was sleeping gracelessly, it seems, the way he does when he's painfully, painfully drunk.

Apparently, he got around to fucking a trick last night, because he's got a crusty dick and a hickey on his wrist. He remembers the rippling of brown skin beneath his pale hand, the dirty lights in the backroom, looking up and seeing Brian's eyes. Brian getting blown by a pair of glittering twink.

Brian wakes when Justin shifts his leg out from beneath Brian's ankle. He stares at Justin with bleary eyes, blinking, confused.

"I dreamed I was pregnant," Justin says, fumbling for a morning cigarette. "You owe me child support. Deadbeat."

Brian blinks again. "You smoke too much."

"All smokers smoke too much."

"You'll make our baby retarded," Brian chides, closing his eyes. He looks like he's going to drift off to sleep again.

Justin shoves at his shoulder. "Wake up," he commands. "We have plans."

Brian doesn't open his eyes, but he groans and rolls over on to his back. "It's lunch at the diner. It's not like we have reservations."

"They all think we're fucking," Justin says darkly. He doesn't know why it bothers him, but it does. Maybe it's because they think that's all he can be to Brian, a good fuck, but he doesn't think so. They don't even seem to think that way. They seem to think Brian is in love with him, or something. They all stared at Justin all through dinner the night before. The way Brian poured his wine. The way Brian managed to sit next to Justin, even though he had to move his chair.

It is mostly the staring that bothers him.



“So?”

“I don’t know,” Justin says. Brian takes the cigarette away without opening his eyes. Justin bites down on his own thumbnail, glowering up at the hotel ceiling. The cooling vent needs cleaning. “It bugs me.”

“Tell them to mind their own business,” Brian advises practically. “Tell them to fuck off.”

“Like that’ll work.”

“Why do you care what they think?”

“I don’t know. Doesn’t it seem... wrong, somehow?” Justin thinks about lighting another cigarette. He remembers a time when he used to go weeks without a smoke.

Brian shrugs. Justin’s eyes slide over the silhouette of Brian’s chest in the dim light. “It doesn’t bother me.”

“It makes me self conscious about you and me and how we act. I hate it.”

“Fuck them,” Brian sighs. “Fuck it.”

“I don’t want you to think that I’ve got unrequited love issues, or some bullshit like that.”

Brian looks like Justin might be crazy. “Huh? I don’t.”

Brian’s face in near darkness. Justin feels something pounding behind his eyes.

“I have to take a shower,” he says. Turns the lights on. It all looks different under a fluorescent glow.

“Kay,” Brian says lazily, still looking as if something odd has sprouted from Justin’s forehead. “Don’t use all the hot water.”

Justin’s face looks different in the mirror, behind layers and layers of steam.

--

Christmas Day, Justin has lunch with his mother and her family. His stepsisters complaining about make up and boys, Molly sitting quietly next to Justin, shoving her food around the plate. She doesn’t like the other kids, he thinks. Or else she’s just moody like he was when he was fifteen. He feels sorry for his mother.

Brian picks him up at 4:30. He comes inside and speaks politely to Jennifer and her new husband. Justin feels like a sixteen year old about to go on his first date. He wonders if Brian expects him to put out.

At Deb’s, Justin sits on the floor and plays trains with Gus. Brian is in the kitchen talking quietly with Michael, waiting for everyone else to show up. Justin watches Michael’s boyfriend Ben thumb through his paper, glasses perched on his nose. He was around long before Justin left for New York, but somehow, they don’t know each other. Justin knows next to nothing about Ben, except that Brian fucked him. Tied him up in a hotel room at the White Party, made him scream. Made him bleed.

He also knows Ben is positive. The thought kind of terrifies him.

He leaves Gus crashing his steam engine into a plastic brick wall, and moves towards the kitchen to get a beer. He pauses out of sight when he hears the impatient blade to Brian’s voice.

“There’s nothing more to tell, Mikey.” Justin hears the hiss of a twisting bottle cap beneath Brian’s voice. “You guys should quit it with that shit, you’re pissing him off.”

“If you weren’t so obvious about it —“

“Obvious about what?” Brian huffs.

“You’re transparent, Brian, don’t even try it.”

“I have nothing to hide.”

“Right, except that you’re in –“

Justin doesn’t stick around to hear the rest. He escapes to the front porch and sits on the front step smoking cigarette after cigarette for half an hour, when Brian comes to find him.

--

Justin avoids Brian for three weeks. He begs off dinner invitations, skips the clubs, gets laid via the backlog of business cards and cocktail napkins with hastily scrawled phone numbers on the back. He emails or calls Brian occasionally just to check in, but for the most part, he tries to disappear altogether. Busy, busy, he writes.

At the beginning of the fourth week a truck containing a collection of Justin’s paintings is totaled at an intersection downtown. They’d been on their way to a major gallery, a major show, a major milestone in Justin’s career. Thousands of hours of work is damaged beyond repair. Pieces he was really proud of. Pieces he had loved.

He lets himself into Brian’s loft at 2 o’clock on Wednesday afternoon. He curls up on Brian’s couch and waits for him to get home from work. After that, he can’t find the energy to avoid Brian at all.

--

“Brian?” Justin asks one day, stretched out shirtless on Brian’s stone floor. He took a tab of E a few hours ago, and it feels like the light is burning patches on his skin. The creases in the tile dig canals along his back. “Do you want to fuck me?”

Brian moves to stand over Justin, his bare feet settling either side of Justin’s knees. “Now?” Brian asks, amused. He’s so fucking tall. Justin follows the line of his body up over dark denim legs and his black cotton chest, the long marble column of his neck.

“In general,” Justin clarifies.

Brian stares at him for a long time, and Justin can tell he wants to from the slow movement of his fingers against his stomach. Finally, Brian gently nudges Justin’s thigh with the ball of his foot, and says, “I don’t fuck my friends. You know that.”

“I know.” He slides his hand up and around Brian’s ankle. “I was just wondering if you ever wanted to.”

Brian’s calves tense as Justin’s fingers slide under the hem of denim jeans. “You’re fucking wasted,” he laughs.

“Yeah,” Justin agrees lazily, scratching his nails around the rise of Brian’s ankle bone.

“You need some water,” Brian says, and then he’s moving away. Justin watches with idle curiosity as long legs recede. The sound of the fridge door opening and closing bounces viciously against his skull, and Justin closes his eyes to chase the sudden sound of a four piece jazz band into darkness.

They don’t mention it the next day.

--

Sometimes Justin wants to talk about how he felt when Brian first left him for New York, but he has no way to express his pain that isn’t a cliché. People talk about being so hurt they want to die all the time. Most of them don’t mean it. Some of them mean it too much.

Justin prefers to be annihilated.

He has never told Brian that.

--

“What’s the most terrified you’ve ever been in your life?”

They’re at Brian’s again, Justin lying on his stomach on the couch, Brian for some reason cross legged on the floor in front of him. Brian didn’t sleep much last night, apparently. Justin’s arrival was greeted with bleary eyed confusion and a one armed hug, a pathetic plea for coffee. They’ve been sitting here motionless for close to three hours, overflowing an ashtray, running out of matches. Justin is drinking a bottle of Sprite he found in the dark recesses of Brian’s refrigerator, beneath the peanut butter, behind the three month old Thai.

“You first,” Brian says. He leans his cheek against the leather of the sofa, lets Justin slowly trace roadmaps on his skull.

Justin has thought about this before. Once he would have said it was the night he met Brian, but he’d been too horny to really feel the fear.

“When I was twenty this guy I went to high school with held a knife to my throat at a party. Chris Hobbs.”

Brian stares at him. “What?”

“Homophobic piece of shit.”

Justin remembers the stench of cheap beer and shitty pot, the clumps of frat boys singing stupid football songs. Daphne making out with some guy in the corner. Darren, Justin thinks. She’d dated him for a while. He remembers the kitchen, the crease of the laminex benchtop pressing into his back. Bruising.

He tells Brian, “He used a fucking bread knife. With a serrated edge.”

The knife pressed against his skin and drew blood, Justin remembers. A row of tiny little shaving cuts. “I thought he was going to kill me.”

Brian is very still all of a sudden, like he isn’t even breathing. Justin smooths his entire hand through Brian’s thick hair, and says, “But he didn’t.”

“Obviously,” Brian draws, but he reaches up and pulls Justin’s hand onto his shoulder, holding it there. He twists their fingers together, and Justin wants him to kiss them. He feels the skin on his knuckles crawl in anticipation. “I guess for me it was when they found the cancer in my ball.”

Justin prefers to be annihilated.

It feels like he doesn’t have a brain, or a body, or lips or teeth or a tongue. Just the beating of his heart in empty air. “What?”

Brian tugs a little on his hand. “I’m okay now.”

Justin sits up, his knees either side of Brian’s shoulders, calves pressing against Brian’s long arms. Brian lets go of his hand and twines his arm around Justin’s ankle, untying the worn laces of his sneakers. “A couple years ago, now. It’s all gone. They cut it out, then nuked me for a couple months. I just have to go for check ups now and then.”

Just check ups every now and then, just doctors, just cancer, just cancer. “How is it possible that I never heard about this?”

“Never told anyone,” Brian grunts. “I guess that makes you my first.”

In Justin’s head, Brian sits alone in a waiting room, alone in a doctor’s office. He wonders where he was the exact moment they were slicing Brian open. He feels his fingers flexing against Brian’s shoulders, kneading paths of worry in his flesh.

“Stop it,” Brian says. “Don’t make me regret telling you.”

“Asshole,” Justin murmurs. If he said I love you right now, Brian would never forgive him. He leans down further, twists his arms around Brian’s neck. He’s not sure if he’s trying to hug him or strangle him, but he leaves a warm, open-mouthed kiss against the side of Brian’s face.

This is the something he occasionally sees in Brian’s eyes.

--

Brian is in London on business for three weeks, and Justin has never been so bored in his life. He vaguely remembers that he used to hang out on his own all the time. Now he receives Brian's tinny voicemail messages that crackle with static, and it's the best part of his day.

--

Brian gets held up in London and doesn't get back to New York until the day Michael arrives on holiday. Justin wants desperately to go over there right away, but he restrains himself. Brian and Michael see each other so rarely. It'd be nice for them to have some time to themselves. He thinks they probably need to do all those things they used to do, though he only has the vaguest idea of what those things are.

Brian won't have any of it.

"Where the fuck have you been?" Brian says as he settles onto Justin's bed very early the second morning.

Justin cracks his eyes open. He almost wishes he'd never given Brian a key, but it's so good to see him that he ends up grinning and rolling over to settle his face against Brian's thigh.

"Hey," he says, rumbling sleepily into the warm denim of Brian's jeans. "Why aren't you home with Michael?"

Then, though, Justin registers the faint buzz of the radio in the next room. Michael must be out there. Justin tries to remember if the apartment is in an at least moderately presentable state, but decides it doesn't fucking matter. Michael won't notice or care.

"We're going to breakfast," Brian says. "Get up."

Justin's hand finds Brian's knee and squeezes. "How was London?"

"People there are as stupid as they are in America, I don't care what the rest of the world says."

“It seems to be a universal problem.” He leans up and kisses the warm inside of Brian’s elbow. “I’m glad you’re back.”

“Christ, me too. I haven’t had a decent blow job in weeks. At least here I can work from your recommendations.” Brian shoves at Justin’s shoulder. “Get up. Michael will start whining for food.”

Justin slides out from under the blankets and wanders naked to the bathroom. He knows there are marks on his upper thighs from last night’s particularly exuberant rim job.

He wonders if Brian is watching him as he washes his face and pulls on his clothes. He thinks he probably is. There’s a telltale silence in the air, this thing that pulses and breathes between them.

In the spaces between their words, something has been growing.

--

Michael and Justin seem to be competing for the title of biggest third wheel. They trade off awkward silence with fits of laughter, and alternate positions as the centre of Brian’s attention. In the old days it was so rarely just the three of them that Justin doesn’t really know how to do it.

Michael is friendly, though, and listens with interest when the focus is on Justin, when their inside jokes spill out over the conversation. Michael chuckles in all the right places, and Brian’s willful obliviousness powers them all on until things are more comfortable.

Justin wonders if Brian has ever had to juggle two best friends before. He’s not sure Lindsay counts, but probably she does. He imagines them, Lindsay, Brian and Michael sitting silently around some shitty first apartment. It makes him smile.

Between them, they have seven coffees, five eggs, nine pieces of toast and about a thousand pounds of bacon. Brian is skinnier than usual, Justin can tell. Sometimes when he’s working hard he won’t eat anything but green apples for days at a time, and by the end he’ll drop so much weight that Justin will be allowed to feed him anything he wants until he’s back to normal.



It's always astounded Justin that someone who is so unhealthy can have such an amazing body.

After breakfast they spend the morning at the movie theater Brian likes, watching Rock Hudson pretend to be straight in some romantic comedy from the fifties. Justin doesn't know why he insists on coming here; Brian invariably hates the films. He thinks the popcorn is shitty, the chairs are uncomfortable - yet once a month or so on Sundays Justin will wake up to a message on his machine, ordering him to meet Brian at the theatre at two. The one time he had refused, Brian had spent the next few days in a snit, and Justin had gone out of his way to be accommodating ever since.

Justin falls asleep with his head on Brian's shoulder twenty minutes after the opening credits. He'll never find out how it ends.

--

On Tuesday when Brian is working, Justin takes Michael to a gallery that is showcasing the artwork from comic books. They're staring at a picture of Superman bursting out of his suit and tie when Michael says it.

"He's in love with you, you know."

Justin's breath hits a trigger in his throat, but he doesn't look at Michael.

Calmly, he says, "We're not going to talk about this."

Justin does know.

--

For some reason, Justin decides to start dating. The reason is probably that a really hot gallery manager offered to feed him and fuck him, and business has been slow this month. Brian sits on Justin's kitchen bench and watches as Justin fumbles with the knot in his tie. Justin knows he doesn't imagine the sour look on Brian's face.

He wonders for the fiftieth time, why am I doing this?

Before Justin walks out the door, Brian kisses him softly on the lips, slips him a little tongue. "Have a good time," he says.

Justin leaves Brian sitting on the kitchen bench. When he comes home, his entire apartment will be clean.

--

It's not a good date, and it just makes Justin more aware of his problem. This disease that has crept inside of him, that makes his heart pound and his dick hard. He remembers feeling like this when he was seventeen. He remembers what it felt like, after. When Brian was gone.

He can't help but call Brian and tell him all about it, though.

"I'm never going on a date again," he says flatly. "That was the most tedious experience of my life."

"I got blown by blond twins from Texas," Brian says smugly. "Cowboys."

"I didn't get blown at all," Justin says. "I came home without getting laid."

"No wonder you're so cranky."

That isn't why. Justin sighs and strips off his shirt. "I don't even know why I went."

"Either do I." Justin wonders what Brian is doing on the other end. He imagines Brian naked in bed. Touching himself, maybe. He imagines the dirty things Brian could do to him.

"I have to go," Justin says abruptly. "Good night."

--

Things are tense between them, probably as a result of Justin's date. He doesn't expect that to change soon, almost nurtures it. If things are bad enough between them, then maybe these feelings they have will go away, and Justin won't ever have to deal with them. It's the only plan he has.

Brian, as usual, refuses to cooperate. After a few days of tension between them, he seems to let it go completely, and he's back to hugging and nuzzling and groping at Justin every chance he gets. He's laughing at Justin's jokes and stopping by with coffee in the morning. Justin wonders why Brian Kinney insists on acting like the perfect fucking boyfriend. He wonders if that is what Brian wants now, impossible as it seems.

Justin is offered a permanent job in Berlin. He turns it down quietly, and never tells Brian.

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The first time they have sex after nearly seven years, there is another man in bed with them. It's his house. His sheets. He probably expected a little more attention than he ends up getting.

His name is Robert and he approached them on the dancefloor. Wound his way around their bodies, pressed them together so tightly. Justin isn't sure how it happened, but somehow they stumbled through his door at one am, and right up into his bed.

"Why not?" Brian had said on the dancefloor, pressed up close to Justin's ear.

It starts out evenly. Robert kissing Brian. Justin kissing Robert. The minute Brian kisses Justin, though, Robert may as well not be in the room. Later, Justin won't remember a single thing about the guy. All he'll remember is Brian.

He groans the first time Brian slips inside him again. They're not being gentle, but it feels tender, feels sweet even as Brian is tearing him open. Robert sucks Justin off while Brian fucks him, but Justin wishes he'd stop so he and Brian could be face to face, like the first time.

Poor Robert. He probably could have picked a better couple to fuck.

Justin goes home in the early morning with teeth marks on his chest and no fucking clue what he's doing.

--

That fucking woman that won't shut up in the next apartment over moves out, and suddenly everything is very quiet. Justin almost misses her. He's lonely, and too afraid to call Brian.

It's been two days, and they haven't spoken directly since it happened. Voicemail back and forth. Text messages. Emails. They're both pretending not to pretend it didn't happen. Justin goes through each day as usual; he draws, he paints. He watches tv.

Brian shows up in his bed at three am. They fuck until dawn, and things between them shift.

Just what they've shifted into, Justin doesn't examine too closely. There is an implicit agreement between them not to label what they mean to one another. Brian fucks him every night, and Justin just knows it's different to how it used to be. Way back when.

--

Justin has the sense that time is passing too quickly, as if the world might rotate beyond him. He has the sense that they're both waiting for something that will come too fast.

And then it does.

"I love you, you know," Brian says one day, when they're lying together smoking a joint on Justin's kitchen floor. It's hot out. The tile is the only place where it's cool.

It surprises them both that Brian is the first one to say it in this new context, Justin thinks. It really should have been Justin or never at all.

Justin feels it, he really does, but for some reason he can't say so. This must be what it's like for Brian, when he's not stoned and pliant on Justin's floor. This paralysis.

He opens his mouth, and he means to say something sweet, something comforting and kind.

Instead, he says, “Brian, quit hogging the fucking weed.”

Brian probably won’t say it again for a long time.

--

They spend hours making out on Brian’s sofa, on Justin’s floor. Hours and hours of swollen lips and tongues, of Brian’s hands twisting in his clothes.

Justin waits impatiently for everything to make sense.

--

The major gallery that had been set to host Justin’s first fateful show decides it is time to give it another shot. Justin has had time to create and compile some new material, and he’s had almost more inspiration than he can handle. It’ll be his first major show, and hopefully a truck won’t drive through this one.

Brian has been itching to consult with the gallery’s publicity company, Justin knows, but seems to have instead settled for personally alerting everyone he has ever met to “the most important show of the year”. If Justin’s career were a movie, the poster would be covered in little quotes from Brian, promoting the shit out of him. For a week, Justin imagines everything Brian says in quotation marks.

When they arrive at nine pm, Justin counts at least fifteen people he knows to be business associates of Brian’s, and about forty that Brian has fucked in the last six months.

The gallery owner, Amy, welcomes Justin with a beaming smile. They’d been marketing the shit out of the event, Justin knows, pushing the accident with the last show for the human interest angle. They’d set up interviews with nearly every art and design publication in the city. Justin doesn’t think he’s ever talked about himself so much in his life.

His work looks fucking amazing.

Brian slings an arm around his shoulder as they gaze around the room at all the people and Justin's pieces on every surface. They grin at one another.

"Not bad," Brian says, but even he can't keep up the façade for long, and he cracks into, "You're fucking brilliant, Justin."

Of all the people in the world, there is no-one that Justin would prefer to make proud. Not his mother, not his father. Not Debbie or Daphne, his grandmother, Molly, Mrs. Steinbeck his first grade art teacher, Michael, Emmett, Ethan... nobody.

He thinks that making Brian proud is maybe the most rewarding experience of his life.

--

Brian has flown Debbie out for the opening, and she arrives at ten in a beautiful burgundy dress and a face full of tears.

"Sunshine!" she says, as she gazes openmouthed at a large painting of Brian, laughing with thick rough lines and vivid colors. It's a crazy piece that Justin painted just days after they started fucking again, and it makes his heart throb every time.

There's a little red sticker on the tag. Justin knows that Brian bought this painting as surely as he knows that Brian bought Debbie's beautiful dress.

When Debbie walked in, she hugged Justin so hard he could feel the indentation of her necklace through his shirt.

His mother came in twenty minutes later, and she hugged him harder.

--

They go out clubbing afterward, and both forget that Debbie is staying in Brian's guest room. Justin doesn't remember until he gets up the next morning to make a cup of coffee, and Debbie is sitting at the kitchen bench. Justin has never felt so thoroughly busted in his life. He has the absurd impulse to creep back into Brian's room and climb down the fire escape.

Debbie has seen him already. "Morning, Sunshine," she says with a snap of her gum. She looks amused. Again, Justin wants to run away. "So how long has this been going on, then?"

Justin shrugs and pours two cups of coffee. "Two and a half months."

"And what exactly is it?"

Justin shrugs again. He adds three spoons of sugar to one of the cups and sets it aside for Brian.

"Well, shit," she says.

"Please don't say anything to the others," Justin says. "We don't know what the fuck we're doing."

Debbie stares at him for a long time, with a familiar look on her face.

"Okay," Justin says. "It's me. I don't know what I'm doing."

"He's very proud of you, you know." Debbie looks out of place drinking from Brian's sleek stainless steel coffee cups. Justin wishes they were back in her awful, fantastic kitchen in Pittsburgh, drinking from mugs that have pictures of clowns and elephants on them.

"I know," Justin says.

"Michael says it's always Justin, Justin, Justin. In that fucking Brian Kinney bullshit way. He didn't mention this, though."

“It’s our business,” Justin says. He would have said the same thing when he was seventeen, but she wouldn’t have listened then. He doesn’t know if she will now.

Brian gets out of bed then, and stumbles into the kitchen in a pair of sweatpants. He scratches at his chest and grabs the cup Justin left for him. He stares at them both, and Justin knows he sees the tension in his posture.

“Leave him alone, Deb,” Brian says, all sighs and longsuffering affection. He’s serious, though, and he sits down next to Justin. A united front.

“But you boys-”

“It’s our business, Deb.” Brian smiles pleasantly, but there’s a deadliness in his eyes. “And that means it’s not yours.”

--

The threat of everybody finding out makes getting their shit together seem more urgent, somehow. The threat of them shitting all over his business gives Justin some resolve.

They’re together constantly. It’s not hard to find the time to talk it out.

When Justin was eighteen, his first love left him without looking back. He’d thought he’d never love again.

He almost wishes he’d been right.

--

When he brings it up, Brian says, “I told you how I feel.”



Justin crunches his thumbnail between his teeth. They're lying in bed, and Justin feels warm with his head tucked tight against Brian's chest.

"I don't know what you want," Justin replies. "It killed me when you left last time."

"Is that why you've been-" Brian cuts himself off, closes his mouth and stares up at the ceiling. Justin can feel Brian's heart booming in his chest.

"What?" Justin prompts.

"Making me wait," Brian says finally.

Justin sits up, facing away. He stares at the big painting on the wall, Brian's laughing face hunched over in vivid colors and rough lines. "I guess," he agrees. "I think I just needed to know that you could stay in the one place for more than twenty fucking seconds."

He turns and straddles Brian's body. He pins Brian's wrists to the bed. "Brian," he says. "If we do this and you leave me, I swear to motherfucking god I'm coming after you."

"I think I'd want you to," Brian says. He's not fighting the bruises Justin is leaving on his wrists. "We're not who we used to be."

Justin thinks of the Brian that left him alone in Pittsburgh. Brian had better be fucking right.

--

It's not like much changes. They're not monogamous and Justin has another four months on his lease, so they're not living together. They're not married and Justin will never do Brian's fucking laundry. They're just the same as always, but now there's a sense that they're doing something, that they've got their shit sorted, and that's enough of a change for now.

end.