(r|f).p.f.

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by citrusfriend (GardenOfTulips)

Summary

Two college students watch a movie.

Notes

Updates on Tuesdays and Fridays, until it's over. (Next update November 6, 2026.)

Originally on AO3 - will be mirrored there when it's back up.

Chapter 1: From TG&Y

Chapter Notes

> Just a word of warning that if you're coming into this expecting anything resembling traditional fanfiction, you're going to be sorely disappointed and frankly probably a little bit confused. This is not a story about cartoon characters in fantastical scenarios. This is not an alternate universe, and it is not about anyone you have ever seen or met before.
>
> This is a story about real people.
>
> You don't need knowledge of the YouTube show *The Amazing Digital Circus* to read this. It might help, though. This work will spoil major elements of that show.

> This is why people cry at the movies: because everybody's doomed. No one in a movie can help themselves in any way. Their fate has already staked its claim on them from the moment they appear onscreen.
> - **John Darnielle**, Wolf in White Van

At least the drive there was peaceful.

Carson liked staring out the window while people drove him around. He much preferred it to driving himself, because he wasn't really the type of person he'd trust behind the wheel of a motor vehicle. That thing could kill somebody, and that'd be on his conscience for the rest of his life. No thank you. Much better to have other people act as a chauffeur. That wouldn't be an option for much longer, he thought to himself.

This time, there were two cars. One of them was his dad's, who was trailing behind them on I-35 North in a 2010 Honda Fit. That was the car that Carson learned to drive in, and he had some nostalgia for it. The car *he* was in, however, was a fairly new Chevy Malibu in clean, pristine white. The previous owner basically had no miles on it, and he was pretty satisfied with it. His mom was driving at the moment, and would take the car back with his dad after they were done unpacking.

Carson was 22 years old and grew up in Des Moines, Iowa. Des Moines was one of those places that kind of postures as a real city, but it's not, not if you took a closer look at its pathetic skyline and its endless sprawl. You *needed* a car to get around, which was bad for Carson's situation, but there was no real way around it. The bus stops there were more of a suggestion than any indicator of some form of transit. There simply was nothing to do. It was the type of place where someone at a bar would see an out-of-state driver's license when they ID'd someone, and they'd say "well, what're you doing *here*?"

As Carson continued to stare out the window, he thought about why he kept doing this rather than striking up a conversation with his mom. There was nothing to talk about, he figured. The situation at hand is simple: he was starting college, he was going to have a tearful goodbye with his mother, and then that would be that. He wondered how much of the tears that he was set to cry would be forced.

It was the moment that the car began to get off the highway onto Exit 111A-B, set for Nevada (pronounced *ne-VEY-duh*, not like the state *ne-VAH-duh*, which was why nobody born in Iowa can pronounce the name of the state right) and Ames, that Carson realized the worst part of living in Iowa. It wasn't having no friends, it wasn't having no activities, it wasn't the people, it wasn't the car dependency, it wasn't the total lack of culture, whatever that meant. No, the thing that was the real issue had been staring him in the face the entire time.

It was the fucking *corn*.

He could never stand the sight of it, and so much of Iowa's culture was based around pride about, of all things, *corn.* Even thinking about thinking about it made his skin crawl, as all the little holes in the corn-cob would kind of psychically touch him. He would imagine the texture of it going across him like a steamroller. It was hell, and he hadn't even bothered to think about it until now. But getting off the highway, away from these endless stretches of cornfields, caused him to feel genuine relief.

Every state in the Midwest said they had the best corn. If Carson was the type of person to feel any pride about his home, he would probably say something about how Iowa has the *real* best corn. But he *wasn't* that type of person, and he couldn't imagine ever *being* that type of person. The fact that he was wearing a Cyclones hoodie was more out of necessity than anything, because he figured that school pride was the emotion he *should* feel in this situation.

There wasn't anything worth noting about the actual experience of moving, other than two things. First off, when his dad walked out, leaving the new Chevrolet and the keys in his hands, the last thing he said was "...and cut your hair, ya fuckin' hippie", and then Carson cried a little bit before he could actually get started unloading the boxes. He was confused, more than anything. It was like he could never live up to his dad's standards. He felt like a disappointment just because of some hair he hadn't cut in a while.

Second off, while Carson unpacked his belongings into his single dorm, he listened to Car Seat Headrest's song *portrait of the artist as a young fag* off of the album *3* on repeat, which was a fairly strange song to listen to at a major transition point in your life. It's a bit too somber, and Carson would never actually consider himself to be a furry, which is what Will was singing about. But he liked the melody, and it was a good earworm.

When I was a kid going into elementary school
Right before I went into elementary school
I was afraid of everything

Carson was a computer science major, so he already started a bit socially stifled. Strangely enough, he wound up getting along really well with one of the undergraduate TAs for COMS

1270, Intro to Programming. He was already fairly gifted at programming, so he would overachieve on purpose on his assignments to try and win the favor of professors. It worked for him in high school, at least, so it might as well work now.

The person that stood out to him the most was someone named Leah. She was fairly short, had dirty blonde hair, and had a kind of nasally voice that really filled up the room. The two of them talked really consistently in lab; Leah was a year ahead of Carson at the time.

These lab conversations were not really worth noting, much like the facts about Carson's move. It's a bit difficult to come up with all the details when you're looking at it all from this lens. The thing they ended up talking the most about, though, was *The Amazing Digital Circus*, a YouTube show that Leah liked. The most interesting part about those conversations was that Carson didn't actually care about the show at all, and thought it was kind of middling at best. It's just that he really liked the way that Leah talked about it, with this intense passion and care. He kind of wished that he could make himself care that much about anything in the world.

Leah was the type of person to describe herself as "kind of like Pomni, but a little bit more chill", whatever that meant. Carson couldn't parse it out, and the sentence itself sounded really stupid to him. He wasn't really the type to compare himself to cartoon characters.

Leah had a friend named Doug, who was an English major, which was weird because Iowa State isn't particularly known for its English program. Doug was kind of a trenchant guy, despite being really good with words. He seemed like he was destined for some kind of office job doing fuck-all, which he basically admitted to, because he wasn't under the delusion that his degree was employable or worthwhile. He just knew that he was having a good time doing it. He liked cracking stupid jokes and was overwhelmingly cheery, and had a kind of scruffy beard that made it look like he didn't take himself too seriously. He was definitely gay, but he didn't want to think about that yet.

The three of them got close fairly quickly. Leah had a Discord server where she collected friends of hers; it was called the *EXTRA VIRGIN GAMER SERVER* or something like that. Carson got invited fairly quickly, even while he was still technically Leah's student.

There were plenty of other people there, of course. It's just that only three of them ended up mattering.

Leah and Carson ended up moving in together as a matter of convenience once Carson became a sophomore, since they both wanted to leave the formal dorm environment. They ended up heading to University Village Apartments, which was technically still university-owned but easy enough to get around from. You didn't need a car to get to class or something stupid like that, since it was "on-campus", kind of.

It was a lot of banal conversation from there. Usual roommate talk. "Can you do the dishes", "Hey check out this cool rock I found", "Hey wait fuck I forgot to pay rent". Leah was a habitual weed smoker, which Carson wasn't a huge fan of, since he had asthma, but he was willing to put up with a lot of things to have a roommate who he didn't hate. After all, his last roommates were really awful to him.

Carson walked into his apartment, and Leah was sitting on the couch watching some Twitch streamer that Carson wasn't able to identify. "Hey, loser", Leah said to Carson, as if it was the most normal greeting in the world.

"Hey, moron", Carson replied.

"How was class? I figure 311 is kicking your ass still?"

"It's really not great! Like, fuck, I don't know if I'm even gonna stay in this major at this rate?"

"Yeah, yeah, but the circumstances, or whatever. I know the story."

"Nah, they're fine. It's just me."

"Uh huh. You wanna go to this?", Leah said. She pulled up a flier from an Instagram post on her phone. It was a pretty shit image, but it at least wasn't AI-generated like a lot of the others she'd pulled up in the past. *IOWA STATE YEAR END RAVE 2026. We're throwing one of the biggest parties to end the year and you don't want to miss it! Date, time, and location dropping soon. Spots will be limited. RSVP now to get on the waitlist and be the first to know when it drops.*

"I don't know, that's usually more your scene? I just work here", Carson replied.

"You know, since we started living together, I don't think you've ever gone to something I suggested?"

"I go to the Cinemark with you! I like movies and stuff! But fucking-", Carson said, as he cut himself off to do a gesture where he threw his hands in a circle. "-it just seems like a LOT." His facial expression was uncomfortably panicked.

"What, did your parents tell you that college parties are for losers and that you should focus?"

Carson thought back, and remembered that they did, in fact, say that. "No."

"Well, at least this one's actually in Ames. I don't have to drive out to Des Moines to go to this one. God, this place is so lame."

"Yeah, I bet raves are suuuuper popular with a bunch of stuffy engineering students."

"I didn't want to go here, you know? I had another offer lined up out of here, it just- didn't work. Money and all. So now I'm stuck going to Des Moines for all the things I care about, and Des Moines isn't even a real city-"

"Hey."

"You know it's not. And my BEST FRIEND doesn't even want to go to these things with me."

“Hey, it’s not like that.”

Leah made a *harumph* and crossed her arms. The Twitch stream on the TV looked like it was getting a decent Balatro run going.

“I’m just anxious, is all”, Carson said. “Cut me some slack.”

“It’ll be fine. It might be a little loud, but it’s a *college* event, so it’s going to be at least a little lame. Just for you.”

“Aw, for me? Ugh, y’know what, fine.”

Leah emitted a half-hearted *yaaaaaay.* “Doug should be there too, so you won’t be alone in your little loser squadron.”

“Right, just lemme know when it is. Oh yeah, right. I’m not leaving for the summer.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah, no, I just figured it would be a good idea to stay out here. Figure out how to do things on my own.”

“You know I’m not leaving either, right?”

“Oh. Yeah.”

“Neither is he.”

“Ah.”

“*Juuuust the three of us…*”

“Shut up?”

That night, after committing to something he clearly didn’t want to do, Carson had a dream.

He was going down a glass elevator. There was some video-game HUD in the upper left corner of his vision that he couldn’t make out. The air was so humid that it could be cut with a knife.

The elevator landed on a room, after a bit. It had various broken walls, but it was a solid yellow room with a unified light source. There was no ceiling. Behind the walls was an endless, suffocating blue void, cubes and lights flashing on and off.

In the room, there was a rabbit, and there was a frog.

The two of them were sawing a piece of wood in tandem, along a table that didn’t make sense. The wood reasonably shouldn’t have balanced on it, as it was just kind of a log, but

that wasn't important, because Carson was dreaming. They didn't seem to be making any headway on actually getting the plank cut.

The two of them looked at Carson with wide eyes. The rabbit did "the eye thing", whatever that meant, and the frog looked at him with an empty expression. Their faces signaled to Carson that he was seeing something that he shouldn't be seeing. But then they shrugged and returned to working on sawing the wood in half, to no avail.

It wasn't wood, really. It was more an imitation of wood, like what you'd think wood was if you forgot what things in the real world looked like, like if you'd been outside it for a little bit too long.

The elevator continued descending, as if it was going to hit another room.

It was then that Carson realized that he *was* the rabbit, or at least he was now. He was sawing the wood in half. It was always him, and he'd always been here, in this room, sawing the wood, looking at the frog, at her. Looking at her. He was looking at her.

She looked at him with those open eyes, as if she'd seen a ghost, and he fell to my knees. He couldn't bear the reality of it anymore, and he stared at his hands, those stupid giant yellow hands of his. He curled into a ball and started sobbing as the frog offered him her hand, or whatever frog hands are called.

Then he woke up, and started inconsolably weeping.

Annoyingly, the rave actually *was* in Des Moines. Because of course it was. It was impossible to have anything interesting in a place like Ames. The rave ended up being explicitly university-sponsored, but the club that ran it didn't have the ability to get something like that vetted on campus. So they ended up at PLATFORM, a venue in Des Moines that was dedicated to an "immersive house music experience".

Before heading out, Carson tried out a kind of slutty outfit in the mirror, with leather pants and stuff that he had lying around. He stared at himself, and just went "yeah, no" about immediately. It looked like he was withering away, like he could turn to dust with the slightest breeze. Something was horribly off about him, like the mirror itself wasn't working.

He turned around and remembered to smile. Stay in character, Carson. Stay in character.

...Where had he heard that one before?

The rave in question was really early for rave standards, at about 6 PM, but thankfully it was on a weekend, so Carson, Leah, and Doug didn't have to bother skipping classes to attend. Usually, events like this had some kind of entry fee or cover, but this was a benefit rave; you just had to bring some clothes to give away, or food, or something.

Reasonably, that should have set off a red flag in Leah's mind when signing up, as well as the fact that she had to RSVP. Likely not a very cool thing to attend. But it was Iowa, so you kind of took what you could get.

For ages, she'd been thinking about how she'd get out of here, making up intricate and complex plans for how to escape it all. But that wasn't important yet.

The venue itself was attached to an apartment building, and the main stage had a giant disco ball hovering over the whole place. Thankfully, it had a metal chain anchoring it to the ceiling instead of some kind of thin wire, so Carson wasn't afraid of the obvious potential catastrophe where it came crashing down to the floor. He thought about sudden catastrophes like that a lot.

There was a DJ on the stage who clearly did not know how to handle a vibe like this, and nobody actually knew how to dance. Carson ended up doing something that vaguely resembled the Greg Heffley shuffle, where he just shifted left, and shifted right. To riddim, in a Des Moines nightclub, that was being rented by the university as an 18+ event because of course it had to be 18+ and not 21+, even though it was mostly for seniors, but that wasn't important because the ISU AfterDark club couldn't actually secure alcohol, because it was a club, because it was being rented by the university, because it was *lame*.

Half of the event was built to posture around the idea of it being a rave at all. There was a table for making kandi bracelets, and Leah decided to make a few because there really wasn't anything better to do. Doug just kind of sat in the corner until Leah dipped from the dancing to make bracelets.

The two of them sat quietly, not really talking to each other, as Doug repeatedly kept having the beads fall off. He just made some designs without any letters. One was purple-green, one was red-yellow-white, and one was a few different shades of blue, all in a cycle. Leah ended up making both a bracelet that said "I <3 MY GF", which was interesting because Carson thought she was straight, and also because she didn't have a girlfriend. She also made one that said "RAGATHA", for whatever that's worth, and Carson just kind of wondered why she cared so much about that kind of thing.

Really, the whole event struck Carson as kind of cringe. He figured that raves would be at least kind of cool or interesting, but this just felt like a bunch of sad losers dancing around while he dissociated, though he didn't actually have the self-awareness at this point to know that he was dissociating at all. Hopefully, he would later.

But just this once, he decided to just let his body move the way he thought it would, because he figured that he wanted to posture as a cool guy. He wanted to be funny, likable, the type of person people would look at and think that he had his life together. He wanted, more than anything, to *stay in character*. So he headbanged and mimicked moshing while the worst visuals anyone had ever seen played in the background to generic house and riddim music.

For a brief moment, he actually had fun. Then he noticed Leah and Doug walking out, and he got concerned, so he left with them.

Leah tied her hair back with one of the ties she always kept on her arm, and then pulled a pipe out of the bag she hid outside, since the venue wasn't the type of place that would allow smoking indoors. She walked around to the corner, past the edge of the apartment building, and lit it up while Doug breathed in.

Ah, nevermind. No reason to worry, he just-

“Hey, do you wanna take a hit?”, Leah asked.

“What? No. I have asthma”, Carson replied.

“It’s the pretty light stuff, I don’t think it’d mess with you too much.”

“I don’t-”

Doug told Leah not to pressure Carson if he wasn’t ready.

“Not *ready*? Not *READY?*”

“No, genuinely, I don’t want to like- force you to do anything”, Leah said.

“Gimme that”, Carson said. Stay in character. He took a giant hit off the pipe, lighting the dog-shit THC-A (or whatever it was) flower, because it was the kind that was somehow still way easier to get your hands on. Of course, Leah could always just go across the border to Illinois, given that she had a car. But this was the thing she was smoking at the moment. Maybe actually decent weed would have solved some of her problems, but probably not.

Anyway, Carson took a hit, and then immediately started hacking up a lung. “Oh shit-”, Leah replied, as she quickly grabbed a water bottle from her backpack and offered it to Carson. That wasn’t what he actually needed help with, though, and instead he grabbed the inhaler from his pocket and used it with a ferocity never before seen in a place like this before his cough cleared up.

One of the event organizers walked up to the three of them, and said something like “Hey, you can’t- this is a residential building, you can’t smoke that here. We’re gonna get banned-”, or something like that. Leah responded by taking another hit just to blow smoke in his face.

From that point on, Carson started developing a habit of smoking the worst weed possible.

A few weeks passed like that.

“So I really think that GLITCH just kind of completely messed up the release strategy here, and like, I’d never blame Goose for anything like that, because she already has enough to deal with, but I just feel like it ends up feeling like a cash grab. Like, you’re opening yourself up for spoilers, and the entire thing was *already* leaked on the internet, so it’s kind of a moot point, but it wouldn’t have *been* leaked if not for the theaters! And a shitty Cinemark like this would be JUST the place to do it, so maybe it was even this one. Who knows. But I can’t be the one who gets spoiled, so…”, Leah said as she walked into the movie theater by the T.J. Maxx on Buckeye Ave. Her car was pulled out front, since she drove Carson here because of the aforementioned distaste for driving.

It was June 4, 2026, and Leah and Carson were coming out to watch *The Amazing Digital Circus: The Last Act* in theaters. Carson was still kind of middling on the whole thing, and Doug never bothered to watch the show, so he wasn’t there. So it was just the two of them,

walking into the theater. Carson didn’t bother to say anything, because he much preferred to listen to Leah talk rather than actually push back on anything, since he didn’t have much to say about the whole show in general.

That changed after the screening.

When Carson walked out of the theater, he looked shocked to his core, like he was suppressing anything even resembling an emotion. His face contorted like he was in physical pain, and his fist was curled into a ball. His nails were running into his own skin, as he tried to use the pain from the clenching to distract himself. Thankfully, the fist was in a jacket pocket, so that Leah wouldn’t notice. Stay in character.

Leah, on the other hand, looked particularly nonplussed. It was like she already knew everything that was going to happen from now on.

The two of them walked over to Leah’s car, and Carson got into the car kind of weirdly. He put his head in first, rather than stepping in from the side. It was one of those weird quirks that Carson just kind of had. It made him very creature-like.

Leah stared at her reflection in the car window, and took a good look at herself. She looked like the type of woman who was deeply insecure about her own identity, maybe. The facial expression could be filled in from there.

“Wow, that sucked-”, she started, before Carson slammed his head into the dashboard. “Woah, are you okay?”, she said.

“...he’s just like me…”, Carson said, as the tears started to flow down his face. They coalesced into a small puddle by his feet. His fist scrunched up further, leaving noticeable marks where fingernail met flesh.

Leah looked at Carson with a blank expression. Not one of lack of sympathy, but one of genuine intense confusion. “...I really fucking hope not.”

Chapter 2: Cage Girl/Camgirl

The two of them took Duff Ave up onto 13th Street, dodging most of campus on the way back home. Something told Leah that Carson didn't really feel like thinking about classes, and so the usual route of University Boulevard wasn't really sparking joy at the moment.

The car was eerily silent and Carson didn't like it. He desperately tried to clear the air, going "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry" on repeat, but it fell on stiff ears. Leah wasn't able to actually figure out how to console him, not while he was sobbing in the passenger seat as she was driving him home. So she just kind of sat there, alone and afraid with another person.

As the two of them pulled into UV, Carson stopped crying for a moment to walk inside. He slammed the door after Leah walked in, and just sat there, curled into a ball, his lanky frame shaking while Leah got him a glass of water.

"I'm really having a realistic depiction of a panic attack, huh?", Carson asked.

Leah gave a bit of a chuckle, before remembering who she had to be right now. "Shut up, not the time."

"I just don't- I don't know. I don't know."

"Yeah, I- I didn't like it either."

"No, not- I mean it's not that I didn't- I don't know. I don't know if it worked, but fuck. *Fuck*", Carson replied as he tried to lift himself up off the floor, only to end up in the same position. He looked down at himself and he swore he could see through his hands, like he would fade away if Leah stopped looking at him. But she wouldn't, because she is good. "I- fuck. I need to- I need to talk to you about something but I don't know if I can."

It was at this moment that Leah finally realized that Carson wasn't having a regular old panic attack, realistic depiction or otherwise. He was having a flashback to something, or at least she conjectured that much. Really, she had no idea what was happening in his head, but she knew that she wanted to help at all costs. That's just the type of person that she was.

Carson and Leah walked up the stairs, past the LED strips that Leah had painstakingly attached to the ceiling gutters, and they sat down in her bedroom. Carson had never been in here before except to help her unpack. She'd done a lot with the place. There was a plushie net lined above the bed, full of various merchandise from shows that Carson considered to be "a little bit too Tumblr", and a few Hollow Knight figures. There was a rug, but he couldn't really parse out the texture. Red sheets. A bowling ball, for some reason. Pictures.

On the dresser towards the side of the room, there was a cheap rotating star projector. It was the kind that was just an outer dome moving along a track, with a constant internal light source. Leah turned it on, and it started filling the room with an idyllic, cartoonish imitation of a night sky. Carson wondered why people built things like that. They seemed stupid to him.

The two of them sat on the edge of her bed, next to each other. Carson realized that he'd never been this close to a girl's bed before. Maybe he should have panic attacks more often.

"So, what's up?", Leah asked.

"...I was forced to drink lead paint when I was 2", Carson replied.

"No, but, really. You initiated this, I'm not going to let you duck out of it like that."

"I don't- I don't think I'm ready. I don't. Know."

"Carson, ever since we've met, you've just been staring at me like you're an uninvited guest. You know I started talking to you for a reason, right?"

"...What?"

"I like talking to you. I wouldn't be talking to you if I didn't like doing it, or if I didn't care", Leah said. She leaned back a bit to look at the stars projected onto the ceiling. She found them comforting.

"Yeah."

"You know, my parents weren't great either."

Carson was taken aback. "How did you…"

"I can see the way you look at them, you know. When you were moving, you talked to them like you wanted them out as soon as possible. I'm just perceptive like that, I guess. Kind of makes me want to be a therapist."

"You'd be a good one", Carson lied. He curled back into a ball, putting his feet on the bed.

"My parents are rich assholes. They moved out here from Long Island a while back because… actually, I don't know, I think it was the education system or something. Something about having a kid made them want to go out here. I don't know what it was. When I realized I was lesbian, I figured they'd never want to talk to me again, and I was right", Leah said in a somber, collected tone. "Despite that, I still wish I could see them again. But… I'm stuck here."

"Is- Is this your way of trying to get me to open up?"

"It's my way of letting you know I trust you."

Carson sighed. "I already told you I was homeless. What else do you need to know?"

Leah looked at him with the same expression she'd always given him when this type of conversation happened. It was the type of expression you gave someone who went a little too far. "No, you weren't. You made that up, remember?"

"I figured it would get you off my case. I didn't tell it to anybody else. That would be cruel."

“It won’t. Carson, I care about you. I mean it.”

“Yeah, but- it’s just- i-it’s kind of a lot.”

“You’re kind of a lot. But I still like you. ‘A lot’ is fine.”

Carson exhaled deeply, and looked up at the ceiling, sobbing. “I- fuck. I just- I don’t know. Seeing Jax on that screen, it’s- I don’t want to end up like that. I don’t. But he reminds me a bit too much of myself.”

“...Why?”

“I- fuck it”, Carson said, as he rolled up his raggedy grey hoodie. His arm was covered in marks, faint now, but still visible, where his skin was notably lighter. There were bumps right by where his wrist met his hand, still very obvious, like chunks had been taken out of him and healed over. “I… back in high school, I did this to myself. All the time.”

“Fuck.”

“I would bring an X-Acto knife to school, and I would rip myself open in the bathroom, then Band-Aid over it like it was nothing. Nobody ever noticed, ‘cause I wore hoodies constantly. I think they just thought I was a school shooter or something, but I was *way* too much of a nerd to fit that kinda archetype”, Carson said. He stopped crying, and looked at himself. “Started with a pair of flush cutters, though, the ones that I used to build model planes and stuff. I got them out from my toolbox and I took out chunks of my wrist. I liked- I still like the way blood flows down skin. It’s comforting.”

“I had no idea-”

“I guess the problem is I did it every time I thought about being a girl”, Carson said, quickly. His voice got more ragged as the sentence progressed, like it would kill him if he held it in for any longer.

Leah paused and stared at Carson’s arm, then shifted her gaze to look at him. She gave a warm smile. “...You know, I kind of figured it was something like that.”

“You did?”

Leah exhaled deeply. “When I was in high school, I tried a bunch of stuff. I went by he/him, I went by they/them, I joined the GSA, I left the GSA. It was called *Spectrum* or whatever. Really original name. But… I don’t know. I just- know the signs now, and you’re hitting all of them. Baggy hoodie, uncut hair, vague need to ‘not be like other guys’…”

“Hey, I’ll have you know that looking like some gangly asshole is the pinnacle of masculinity.”

“Yeah, yeah. But. You know.”

“I figured I was making it up”, Carson said, as he remembered to stay in character.

“...You can be a girl, Carson. If that’s what you want to be called. Just because it didn’t work for me doesn’t mean it won’t work for you.”

“I don’t even know how I’d choose a thing like that. I’ve never done it before.”

“First time for everything, right?”

“I just… I don’t want to end up like *he* did”, as Carson gestured with his hands, doing the circle thing that he always did. He did it to signal a vague outsider that shouldn’t be named. He did it because he was ashamed.

“I don’t know if he’s- I don’t know if Jax is *good* trans representation? But I know you can’t really pick that kind of thing… I guess I’m excited that you care this much about something I care about.”

“I think I always did. I just. Don’t think I noticed ‘till now. I like hearing you talk about it, I like the way your face lights up, I like how enthusiastic you are, I like how you’re willing to rant about what works and what doesn’t. I like… I like the sound of your voice a lot”, Carson said, as his voice cracked on every *like*.

Leah was taken aback. She didn’t really think about her own voice too often, not since she stopped thinking about that kind of thing. “...thanks.”

“Sorry, was that weird? I don’t want you to think that I wanna be you, or something.”

“If you did, I wouldn’t blame you.”

“...Ooookay.”

“I mean, did you plan on telling Doug? Or Casey, or anyone else?”

“I don’t think I’m ready yet. I don’t even know if- I, actually, don’t even call me *she* yet. Just- preempting you. I’m. I need time.”

“You know none of them are going to judge you for that kind of thing, right? We’re in Ames. We’ll be okay. It’s not Colo, it’s not Nevada, it’s not any of those surrounding areas that are scary. We’re here.”

Carson looked at Leah with open eyes. “What, because of all the trans flags around Main Street?”, he said sarcastically.

“Yeah, because of all the trans flags around Main Street! I hear Studio 13’s gonna open around here soon.”

“The gay bar in Iowa City? Yeah, that makes me feel really included.”

“I don’t know why you’re so cagey about this. It’s you, Carson. It’s just you.”

“...You know, when I walk into the library, not the school library, the public one, there’s a quilt, right? It’s got trans flags on it, and you would think that it’s some expression of pride,

or something, just looking at the posters."

"Yeah, I've seen it. I never bothered to take a look."

"It's a list of names compiled by local high schoolers. Every square on the quilt is a dead tranny."

"...Oh."

"I don't want to end up on a quilt like that. Not after this was the *first* state to completely drop them as a protected category. I just- I just want to lay low 'til I get out of here. I just have to get out of here."

"...Okay." Leah paused. "...Your secret's safe with me."

"I know."

"You won't end up like he did. Not if I have anything to do with it."

"I know", Carson said as he started crying again. He didn't know why he couldn't cry for most of the conversation. Shock, probably.

Leah placed her hand on Carson's thigh, and he shivered a little bit, sobbing inconsolably. "...You know, I happen to think you'd be a pretty… cute… girl?", she said, hesitating.

"I- you-"

Leah thought about kissing him in that moment, but thankfully determined that it wasn't the time. Instead, she got up and rummaged through her drawers, down beneath all the vaguely futch outfits she put on. Her frame was very unlike Carson's, but she had some stuff from back when she was thinner. She kept those around because they felt to her like ritual objects for a summoning prayer to manifest a body she liked more, but she didn't want to think about that. "I did always wonder why I liked you that much, given how gay I am, but I guess that explained itself. Guess I preordered."

Carson felt like throwing up, but stomached it for her. He couldn't bear for her to say his name any other way. "I just… I just want you to be the only one who knows. At least for now."

"Well, if you want to give something a try…", Leah said as she pulled out some eyeliner and an old long-sleeved top. It was grey, with black stripes.

Help.

I bite down, and bite hard
Wake up at the crack of dawn
Don't notice, must've beat it over your head

Leah didn’t actually know the lyrics to anything on *Census Designated*. The vocals were far too shoegaze-y to parse them out, so she tended to use it as background music for various scenarios that definitely didn’t fit the context. She once gave road head to someone while *Video* played, but when *Contingency Song* came on, her hookup asked her to change the music as soon as it hit *Please don’t hurt me / Please don’t hurt me / Please don’t hurt me*. It was interesting how long it took to actually have the hookup recoil, at least it was to her.

She’d listened to this album too many times, anyway. She was used to it by now.

Carson was sitting in front of a body-length mirror, wearing real women’s clothes, not just femboy posturing clothes, for the first time in his life. He liked the texture of the top he was given, but didn’t like how scratchy the tag was. He hated that the first thing that he thought of was the texture, given how much time he dedicated to abnegating his autism.

At least his scars weren’t showing. He wondered if those would keep him from passing. He wondered about passing in general.

Leah shook the container of liquid liner, and placed the brush against the upper lash line on Carson’s face. His eye-bags from perpetual overuse of shitty fake weed were obvious, but Leah didn’t want to bother trying to conceal that at the moment. Carson felt how cold the makeup was on his skin, and wanted to shiver, but Leah told him to keep still, so he did it for her.

Chew me up, spit me out before you can swallow
I peel my eyes open, everyone knows, and nobody cares
I know it’s you ‘cause I know how it feels when your hand’s in my hair
I peel my eyes open, everyone knows, and nobody cares

Inner to middle now. Carson still didn’t move, because he had to stay in character. Leah retraced the line a few times before applying a set of wings with the brush. She used an old credit card of hers to keep the line straight on Carson’s face, and he wondered how much of this was going to feel overwhelmingly artificial. Fake. It was going to feel fake, wasn’t it.

I’m all dolled up for you, I’m not stupid
If I’m not the hawk, like you said
Say it again, just for me

The music started to swell from Leah’s cheap JBL Bluetooth speaker. Carson wanted to cry, but didn’t want to fuck up the look.

“...Do you want to…”, Leah asked Carson. He looked at her, goosebumps on his arms, and nodded. He knew what she was asking.

“...Y- yeah. Yes.”

And it always ends the same, I’m in your mouth again
I’ll ride your coattails if I can’t reach the rest of you

So the two of them kissed, and Carson wrapped his arms around Leah while still sitting down, Leah squatting a bit to make it all work. It was the first time he'd kissed anyone. No it wasn't, but it was the first time he ever believed it. Leah put her hands in Carson's hair, and he nudged his head up to try and get pet a little bit. Maybe he really was a creature, Leah thought.

I know it's you, 'cause I know how it feels when your hand's in my hair
I peel my eyes open, everyone knows, and nobody cares

It was beautiful, and it was horrible, and it was the only thing that mattered on this dogshit fucking Earth where he had been cursed with the miracle of life.

I'm starving in your house
Shoveling fake-deep lines from that guy you like
I hate him so much that I wanna kill him, but I let it slide this time

The two of them pulled away, and stared at each other. "You won't end up like him", Leah said. "That's a promise."

"...Okay", Carson sighed.

"I have to run to the bathroom. I'll be right back", Leah said. "Don't go anywhere!"

And all my life I've been waiting for my new limbs to come in
I open my mouth as wide as I can, hot in my face

Carson didn't reply as Leah left the room to go pee, or at least Carson figured it was pee. Who knows, really. She- he looked back into the mirror at himself. The mirror worked this time, but he still felt off. Something was horribly wrong about him, and he knew it.

He didn't bother trying to smile. Instead, he gave his head a subtle tilt to the left, and started crying, but just a little bit. Not enough to smudge the eyeliner. Not enough for anyone to notice. Stay in character.

"God, you look stupid."

The stars shined.

You're biting chunks out of my face, say it's the same
For two of us, there's never enough in the kettle

And I grew a hundred teeth to treat you like the food I eat
I break the plate, you won't stay ahead of me forever

[…]

Chapter 3: Island Garden Song

“...Abigail.”

“Ew, no.”

“Nora.”

“No.”

“Hazel?”

“Do I *look* like a grandma to you?”

“Alyssa.”

“...Gesundheit.”

“Riley.”

“I don’t want you to change my name for me-”

“[redacted].”

Carson blushed. Upon hearing that name, his body shuddered slightly. He asked himself why that felt so overwhelmingly *correct*, but he didn’t want to acknowledge that thought. He then realized that he was staring into the distance hard enough to have gone silent. “I- okay, m-maybe.”

“That’s [redacted], that’s my friend [redacted]. That’s my girlfriend [redacted]. She’s really cool”, Leah said, beaming.

“I- I don’t like it when you do the pronoun game like that! It feels so *fake*. And I don’t- know if I’m ready for you to call me your girlfriend yet.”

“Partner, then?”

“Sure.”

Doug lived between his near-campus apartment and the Hy-Vee, as well as the Starbucks that was under his building. He could smell the burnt beans from his room.

Despite the kind of place that Ames was, he didn’t have a car. He lived on Lincoln Way, though, so he could just take the 3 bus even though the summer schedule sucked. The whole city, if you could call it a city, felt way more empty when the students were away. Even the bus system was called the CyRide, because it was for the Cyclones. All the bus stops had the

university logo on them. But he'd been here forever, and so going here for college was just the obvious choice.

He liked hanging out with Cyrus, Ezra, and Casey in the Discord server. They did Jackbox sometimes, but most of the time people tended not to find his jokes funny, so he gradually started moving away from that type of thing. He was much more of an orchestrator than a participant. He tended to run weird one-shot tabletop games for the group, the kind of experimental stuff you'd find on itch.io with only a few downloads, because he liked the style of prose in it. It was very matter-of-fact. Systematic. Rule-abiding.

The worlds in them appealed to him. He could use them as a way to get out of here. He'd actually grown up in Ames, but his mom died about a year ago and his dad was absent, so he was on his own, using the inheritance money and the life insurance to pay the rest of the way through college. Given that, being in a "luxury student housing" building wasn't the best idea in the world, but he appreciated the amenities and how close it was to campus.

Usually, Carson and Leah were in the calls, at least the Jackbox ones. Carson wasn't really much for roleplay and always seemed to space out, so he skipped that stuff. Doug tried to teach him what derealizing meant once, but Carson just ended up making a joke about how the word was too long, and so therefore using it was ableist.

But the two of them hadn't joined for about a week, and he was getting a little bit concerned. They still texted, of course, but it was about nothing. Carson mostly just talked about movies he'd seen recently going through his gargantuan Letterboxd watchlist, but his infodumps were getting less elaborate. He watched the MonsterVerse movies recently for some reason and said it was like going through an abandoned theme park. But that's all he said.

He made another pack of Mi Goreng noodles that night, and fried an egg to put on it. Even though he had roommates, they weren't around in the summer, so it was just him, alone, in this apartment, in the middle of nowhere. Nowhere else to go.

The thing that confused Carson the most was what he had to ask for, and what he didn't have to ask for.

Leah said she was experienced, but not with dicks, and wanted to make sure Carson felt safe around her. However, every time she asked Carson what he actually wanted, he'd just reply with "...dealer's choice". So what she did was try things on him. The forcefem was obligatory, of course, because that was basically the only way that she could get Carson to actually try on clothes that he might like. For Carson, it just cemented the artifice of it all.

Leah recently read the Mira Bellweather zine *Fucking Trans Women* on the Internet Archive, and it gave her some good ideas, but since Carson wasn't on estrogen or anything a lot of the moves didn't work. This time, she was trying muffing, where you jam one of the testicles up inside… that place where they go for tucking. But the second that Carson had his balls touched, he just started sobbing uncontrollably. He said something… he said something about how it felt like she was just fingering a pussy he didn't have. The sensation felt almost like she was trying to rip something out of him, but he didn't know what it was.

While he cried, Leah talked about how she really wanted a dick, but couldn't really do anything about that since phalloplasty was useless. She proceeded to get a harness and a strap-on from out of a locked chest on the floor. Inexplicably, there was also a Jax plushie in the chest, which she threw to the wayside; it landed underneath the bed. At this point, she wasn't really thinking about that show anymore. The finale kind of killed it.

So she tried to do anal with a strap, but Carson's hole was too tight because she forgot the lube, and he started screaming about 2 seconds after she inserted. She had so little experience with anal that she forgot to tell Carson to douche and the rest of the details are too disgusting to put into prose.

The stars on the walls continued to shine bright. Carson sobbed and stared at the grody dildo.

The texts Leah exchanged with Doug were really sparse. She was always bad at responding to text messages, but this was something new. Doug figured that the three of them would be hanging out more over the summer, given that they were the only ones still here, but the texts gradually turned into "nah, I'm with Carson, I have to show him around", which didn't make much sense, because Carson had lived in Ames for 2 years at that point.

So he started to call her, and about half the time she would pick up the phone, but the voice would be all wrong. A little bit less nasal, a little croaky, a little panicked. Nothing too off, but he could definitely hear it. There wasn't too much to actually do in Ames at this point in time, anyway. Studio 13 was open now, but Leah said that going there would be a bad idea for some reason, so the three of them decided to meet at London Underground on Main Street. Carson didn't actually participate in the conversation. Leah communicated his schedule for him.

But a few hours before, Leah canceled, because Carson was "busy". What "busy" meant was dubious at best, but Doug figured that it was going to be okay, whatever it was.

It wasn't important to him, after all. He couldn't have known what was going on. Nobody told him. He was always a bit dense, wasn't he?

That night, Carson listened to an album a Discord friend had sent him, and he started sobbing through it.

My mouth is filled with his ovaries
I hold them: here, between my teeth
O! Get these bird's nests out of me
Dentist, get these bird's nests out of me

How do you fertilize what cannot be?
How do you fertilize what cannot be?

Dentist, get these bird's nests out of me

At the time, he didn’t really know why this spoke to him. He didn’t have ovaries, after all, if anything he wanted those, but maybe he didn’t, because he didn’t really want to think about his cock, or think about his parts, or think about his body, or think about any of that. What he knew was that being with Leah felt good, but Leah didn’t like thinking about her vagina either. Carson wished to himself, just for a split second, that the two of them could exchange bodies, that he could be asphyxiated until he turned green. Then, he felt the most guilty he’d ever felt in his entire life.

“...You good in there?”, Leah asked, knocking on the door.

“You can come in”, Carson answered, frantically clearing up his tears and pausing *Divorce Laywers I Shaved My Head*.

The door to his room opened up with some effort; due to moisture, the doorframe warped over the years, and the two of them didn’t bother contacting the university to try and get a maintenance guy in to come and fix it. It was just one of the quirks of the place that they’d learned to deal with. Carson wasn’t wearing a shirt. “I just- I just want to apologize about last night”, Leah said.

“What, about the balls thing? It’s fine. Didn’t really bother me, in the end”, Carson said. Stay in character.

“You started sobbing, Carson! You started sobbing in the middle of sex, and I take that seriously-”

“It’s not the end of the scene, y’know?”

“What”, Leah responded, with a completely dead tone.

“I didn’t call red. You were fine to keep going.”

“...What? You- you aren’t really the kind of person I took for being into that.”

“There’s a first for everything, right?”, Carson asked, as he laid back nonchalantly in bed. His room was covered in dirty clothes, and his hamper was full of clean laundry, because he hadn’t bothered to actually put everything away. It was just such a hassle to do at this point, since he was going to have to do his laundry soon anyway.

“I don’t- I don’t know if I’m comfortable doing that kind of thing with you yet. I’m sorry.”

“...Okay. I understand.”

“I still like you”, Leah said with immense concern.

“I don’t want to hurt you, you know? I don’t actually want to *hurt* you. I think I want to *get* hurt. I dunno.”

Leah, at this point, didn’t really want to question why Carson had a sudden interest in masochism. On some level, she probably knew, but she figured that would be a conversation for another day. “Okay. I can do that, if you’re- if you're into that.”

“I want to get better for you. I don’t want to make you uncomfortable.”

“You- you know I appreciate it, but I don’t want you to feel like you *have* to get better for me.”

“I want to try, at least.”

“Okay”, she said with half pity, half love.

It was at that point that Carson decided that he didn’t want to get better anymore. He decided to stay in character.

As Leah left the room, he turned the album back on.

Made myself a map of folds to fuck and feel and feign as meat
And all my bronze is breathing, blind painting, my body's a disease

---

During the summer, Doug liked to stand around on Welch Ave near campus. Usually, on Thursdays, he’d see this place get absolutely packed full of students, himself included, as classes winded to a close and people went out to get pizza or something. But right now, it served as a signifier of things that were around at a different time and place. He’d be lucky to see ten people here today.

He liked to stand around in liminal spaces like this because they served as good inspiration. He tended to set the stories he wrote in unassuming places, because it kept the reader on their toes. It meant that they were never sure exactly what to expect.

Anything can happen when you’re nowhere. Nothing is sacred.

It had been a month since he actually managed to meet up with Carson and Leah. He didn’t even see them at the grocery store, where one of their cars was sometimes pulled into the lot. He was getting kind of desperate.

He had nothing that he could say. He would take the 6 bus up to their apartment, wait next to the door, and then leave. He didn’t call, he didn’t text, he didn’t provide warning. He just wanted to see what was happening. Sometimes, through the window, he would see a litany of empty take-out boxes that needed to be thrown out.

“Can you come in here?”

“...Yeah.”

“I just… do you ever get the feeling that none of this is real? Like, like you aren’t-”

“All the time, but I try not to think about that. It’s kind of bad for me.”

“But you *do* get it, right?”

“The last time I talked about that, I was in the hospital for a week. They- had to inject me with sedatives, and I woke up in this weird swirl of colors, and laughing, and I just… don’t want to see that again. I don’t want to get like that again.”

“I just don’t know who else I can really talk to, I’m sorry.”

“...Then talk to me now.”

So he did. And he did, and he did, and he did. He never mentioned a single thing that actually happened, but he would always talk about how he felt, like he was supposed to, like the good bunny he was. He finally seemed like he was *hatching*.

Doug couldn’t get himself to do anything yet.

When Leah tried to touch Carson’s genitals again, always at his request, he started sobbing. This continued for weeks. Every time, Carson refused to acknowledge it, and Leah continued.

Carson liked movies because they were devices that he could use to travel in time. He could lock himself in a theater and see things that occurred years ago, see people on the stage being parrots to some screenwriter. He could see people who remembered who they were, who remembered who they had to be, in that moment, in that time. He could see their faces contort into shapes that the actor behind that character may never do. It was exaggerated. Cartoonish. Cringey, if you have to talk about it like that.

That night, he drove over to the Cinemark to go see *Backrooms*. Leah wasn’t there, and he thought about how it was the first time he’d actually been without Leah in over a month. He worried about her a lot, even though it hadn’t even been an hour since the two had separated paths.

After he walked out, he thought about the horror of non-places, about finding a place that felt like it was behind everything, dead malls, endless parking lots, comfortable nowheres with lighting that looked like it was designed to make you want to kill yourself. Thank fucking god he didn't live in a place like that, he thought as he walked out into the strip mall. Thank fucking god he had people who wouldn't let him die in a pit to a monster, who wouldn't let him turn into a mess of eyes, who wouldn't let him get experimented on by scientists. Thank fucking god he didn't live near any furniture stores. Thank fucking god he had her.

He wondered how much he would be apart from Leah if he drove more. He wished for a world where he would never have to drive again.

Doug finally knocked on Leah’s door while Carson was at the movies. Leah rolled off the couch, removing herself from watching pirated episodes of *The Wire.* She was still in her pajamas that she had been wearing for days, with a stain of pizza grease against her leg.

She opened the door, and saw him. “Hey, Kaufy.”

Doug said his usual generic greeting, and Leah invited him in. He sat down on the couch under the fairy lights, and Leah paused the TV. He cracked some dumb joke about how long it had been since they had seen each other in person.

“Yeah, I probably should get out more, but I’m kinda busy and all.”

Doug didn’t know about Leah and Carson’s relationship, so he questioned why the two of them were spending so much time together.

“He’s just… going through a lot. It’ll be okay. I don’t want to bother you with any of that stuff.”

But Doug continued to pry, and eventually Leah’s tongue slipped, and she referred to Carson with the wrong-right-wrong pronoun, and the gears finally turned in his thick, empty skull. Leah put her hands over her mouth almost immediately, and Doug realized that she had said something that she didn’t mean to say. He promised to forget it.

“No, that’s not- I don’t know. I wanted him to… I just, don’t think he can right now.”

Doug, being as fragile as he was, wondered to himself why Carson didn’t feel safe around him in that way, but he guessed that Carson and Leah were just especially close. He couldn’t have possibly guessed anything further than that with the information he had at this point in time. He would later feel like the chef in *The Shining*, the movie, not the novel, like he went all this way just to realize it was too late. But that hadn’t happened yet, so instead he mentioned that he just wished that Carson could trust him.

“Trust you? You’re barely present.”

He pushed back on that, because he had to. He’d been trying to reach out for weeks, he said. He’d invited them to bars on Main Street, he’d tried to get them to go out to the movies, which he knew Carson loved, and he’d tried to even just come over normally, announced. But he couldn’t get through to either of them, and half the time he wouldn’t even get a response.

“Look, sorry, but it’s just a lot, okay? It’s just a lot! I just need to deal with a lot right now, and then I’m going to be fine, and *we’re* going to be fine-”

It’s then that he said that Carson was corrupting her.

“Corrupting WHAT? Corrupting what. Do you think that- he needs this. I don’t know if you understand, if you can get it through your thick fing skull, but he needs this. He doesn’t have the kind of cash to go to therapy right now, and nobody in this fing town is EVER going to deal with some confused trans kid, because we live in hell, and we’re stuck here, and it’s- do not even START-”

He then tried to retract his statement and say that he just made a slip of the tongue, but he started sobbing. He looked at Leah like she was going to hit him.

“Fuck, I’m sorry, I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I definitely oversh-”

He said he was scared, and he ran away. Leah chased him out of the building in her PJs, and got a few blocks down before she realized that what she was doing was *not* a good look. Doug ended up making it to the bus stop, and Leah didn’t try and follow.

Instead, she walked back to her apartment calmly, and got out a trash bag, and started throwing away the take-out containers. One by one, she rounded them up, and tied off the bag, and brought it to the curb, just to make everything look normal.

She went up the stairs to look at the shelf on the wall, and stared at the photo of the three of them, together, sharing drinks at the Starbucks underneath Doug’s apartment.

To nobody at all, she said “fuck, this is bad, it’s- it’s really really bad, it’s bad, it’s-”, in a loop, over and over, like she was standing outside a house in flames.

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