

There was a girl in Walla Walla, Washington when Sam was fifteen named Sandra LaCoe. For reasons Sam didn't understand until much, much later, everyone, even the teachers, called her Candy. As far as Sam could ever tell Sandra never asked anyone to call her Candy; she never asked anyone to stop calling her Candy either, he supposed. He just never liked the way she winced when people shouted 'Hey, Candy!' in the hall or 'Candy, can you help me with this?', 'Did you hear about Josh Falco, Candy?' like it was her real name.

The only time that she ever outright glared at someone for calling her 'Candy' was when someone slipped and called her 'Candy Sandy'. Her upper lip would curl, painted bright red with lipstick, and her bright green eyes would narrow, framed by thick smudges of eyeshadow, and she would spit out a well-timed and beautifully delivered, "Fuck you," before sweeping away in a swirl of dark, baggy clothes and curly hair such a deep dark red in some lights it looked nearly purple and in others her skull looked like it was aflame.

Candy Sandy.

Sam didn't understand. This was a tight community. The high school held two thousand students who had known each other since they were in diapers and Sam was just an intruder. An outsider, some foreign object inserted into the student body like a parasite that the masses attempted to accept, but he was just too alien to ever be able to understand why it was customary to write your name upside down on the brick wall outside of school if you were a senior or order a chocolate milkshake as a 'brown cow' at the local diner.

He never did get to find those things out. It ate at him that he'd never be a part of a community in that way. He did get to find out why they called Sandra 'Candy', though.

Afterwards he wished he hadn't, and maybe that's ironic.

Maybe he should have just ignored the sound of retching from the back stall. Maybe he shouldn't have called out a tentative, "Hello?" while stalking back into the dirty boys' bathroom on the second floor, abandoned in the middle of fourth period. Maybe he shouldn't have done a lot of things that he did do, but there wasn't any taking it back now.

Black sneakers and black jeans were visible kneeling on the small square tiles of the grubby floor, knees splayed open to wedge the toilet as deep into the 'v' of thighs as it would go. Another loud, coughing gag echoed out from the stall and Sam watched the toes of those black sneaker dig into the grout and Sam could imagine a spine arching and shoulders heaving under the force of those vicious dry sobs.

"Are you okay?" Sam asked into the open air outside of the bland blue bathroom door. "Should I go get anyone?"

The retching tapered off into coughing and Sam shifted on his feet awkwardly, not sure whether he was obligated to see it through or if he should walk away, leave the kid to his own devices.

A harsh sniff and a few more flighty hacks came before the sneakers straightened out, knees popping and back cracking as Bathroom Hacker straightened out, took a few moments before flushing the toilet and scratching at the lock on the stall door before fumbling it open.

The door swung outwards quickly and Sam had to duck a shoulder to avoid it before he looked up right into the big glossy green eyes and pale, sweaty face of Sandra LaCoe.

"Hey, Sam," Sandra smiled and wiped her mouth.

"I-," Sam's eyebrows scrunched together, mouth pulling down at the corners. He had a lot of questions, like if she was okay or why she was throwing up or if she needed help with anything but the first stupid thing that came out of his mouth was, "This is the boy's bathroom."

"I know," she smiled, a little stiff around the edges where her lipstick was pale and smudged, as she breezed past him and towards the sinks. She rolled up the sleeves of her thick woolen sweater up once, twice, three times before her hands were fully exposed and Sam realized for the first time that Sandra was small. Scary small. Hands-like-little-pale-spiders-they're-so-thin small. "There was somebody in the girls' bathroom," she excused, and Sam watched the bones in her hand work and glide mechanically under thin, pale skin as she turned a faucet, prompting a rattle and rasp of cold, slightly murky water to burst forth too strong and then, after a few moments of initial blast, too weak.

"Okay," Sam said, because he didn't know how else to respond. Sandra watched him in the mirror over her shoulder as she cupped water in her hands and rinsed out her mouth. "Can I get you anything?" He swallowed reflexively, uncomfortable being tracked in the mirror. "The nurse?"

"No," she answered simply, then tossed her fiery red hair over her shoulder and started to dig into the pocket of her jeans, which hung loose around her hips.

"Okay," Sam mumbled again, leaning back into the wall on his shoulders.

"You gonna watch me put on my make-up?" she asked, a smirk playing at the corners of her mouth as she turned out a silver tube of lipstick from her pocket.

Sam flushed slightly.

"Hm," she hummed, making a face in the mirror with her lips pulled tight over her teeth as she uncapped the tube, rolled out the lipstick and smeared it on thick. The bright red was a neon sign, distracting from the sharp lines of her cheekbones and the defined hinge of her jaw. She popped her lips in the mirror, eyes skipping back to Sam. "You can just ask, you know."

"Ask what?" Sam scuffed the bottom of his ratty old Chucks against the floor; ground his toe into the dirty grout.

"What you're dying to ask." Sandra ran the pad of her ring finger around her lips, scraping up the wayward red. "Did I make myself hack?" She turned on him, eyes in full force.

Sam gnawed on his lower lip. He didn't know anything about this. It had come up in a few Health classes across the nation, sure, but Sam had never known anyone that it would actually apply to. Eating disorders were a vague concept to Sam, something that happened to Other People and he wasn't equipped in any way to deal with it outside of some stupid base need to help buried deep within him. He wanted to chase the monsters away, he wanted to understand. So he asked, "Did you?"

Sandra's smile was slick and smooth as it coiled across her painted lips, something smug in her demeanor as she leaned back against the sink on her palms and kicked one foot up to cross her legs at the ankle. "Yep."

"Oh." Sam rubbed the back of his neck uncomfortably. "...Why?"

She inhaled a short, sharp breath. Instead of answering she just said, "You never call me Candy."

Sam blinked. "It's not your name."

"No." Her spindly fingers played at the hem of her sweater. "No it's not." For a moment, a flash second in time, there was a lightning strike of vulnerability in her eyes. "I was a chubby kid, Sam. I had these cheeks," she leaned up off her hands to pantomime a fat face, blowing out her cheeks to help Sam visualize, "It was awful. But, y'know, I just loved candy. I had a bag of it everywhere I went, because that's what fat kids do. I was maybe seven when people stopped calling me Candy as a joke and it just sorta became my name. Which was okay, I didn't mind. It was funny, it was cute. Candy. How... *me*." She snorted, a self-disgusted sound that Sam felt in his bones. "It wasn't until I was ten that they started to get mean. Candy Sandy, Candy Sandy. God, I was just... disgusting. There wasn't a single good thing about me, okay? Nothing was ever good until I started losing weight. I'm still Candy, I'm always Candy, because it doesn't go away, but..." she groped for something, lips twitching as she hunted for a word. "I'm better, but I'm not good. I'm not perfect. God, I'm so close to being Sandy -I'm so close!" She jerked up her sweater suddenly over her stomach and Sam had to close his eyes.

Sandra pleaded with her body, taking a step forward towards him, sweater still held up to expose the pale lines of her stomach, the knobby protrusions of her hips, the grooves of her ribs and Sam stepped back into the wall in retreat, eyes going wide. He didn't understand. He didn't understand at all. "You see Sandy, right, Sam?"

He couldn't fathom how anyone could do that to their own body.

He'd told Sandra that it wasn't healthy, that she should see someone, that she was beautiful.

That was two towns, six months, seven nights Dean told him not to wait up as he slipped out to a bar, and four screaming matches with his father ago and Sam can't stop thinking about it.

Standing shirtless in front of the full length mirror on the back of the bathroom door, Sam can't stop thinking about how tiny and pale and knobby Sandra had been. It's possessing him, he thinks as he twists and turns in the mirror, watches the play of muscle under his skin and the layer of fat in between. She was so small and Sam can't stop imagining the canyon between her ribs.

"Sam!" Dean shouts and the mirror rattles when he pounds against the door.

Sam jumps and scrambles to cover himself, despite the fact that the door is locked and bolted. "Yeah?" he asks airily as he jerks his hand-me-down AC/DC t-shirt over his head. "What?"

"Do you want to hurry the hell up?" Dean snaps. "I've gotta piss like a racehorse! What are you even doing?"

Sam catches his own eye in the mirror. "Nothing. I'll be right out."

"Yeah, okay, whatever." Sam can almost hear him roll his eyes. "Dad's bringing home dinner."

Sam frowns. "I'm not hungry."

"Yeah, okay, whatever!" Dean repeats, a note of urgency infringing on his tone. "Get out of the damn bathroom, Sam! You can jerk it later!"

Sam scrambles out of the bathroom, vehemently denying doing anything of the sort as Dean shouts "Yeah, yeah, yeah," and slams the bathroom door shut behind him.

He stands alone in the hall of the two room apartment his father had scrounged up for them in Norfolk, Virginia Sam feels like the entire world has taken one huge step to the left and forgot to tell him to step with it. It smells damp, like there had been a leak at some point that had been fixed but never truly mended, moisture still seated deep in the wood under the grey paint of the walls, rotting slowly from the inside out.

Sam thinks that he should go clear the table for dinner or unpack his and Dean's things or clean a gun or sharpen a knife or something, but he realizes something. He doesn't want to.

He doesn't want to go down the hall and clean up, he doesn't want to go lie down, he doesn't want to keep standing there in the middle of the hallway, he doesn't want to eat.

He scratches at his palms irritably, twitchy with images of pale skeletons dancing through his head.

He's still there, shifting on his feet and thinking about the weight of his skin hanging on to his body when Dean shoulders his way out of the bathroom, toilet running and sink dripping behind him.

The thing about Dean is, he's Dean. Sam's been painfully aware of that since Dean hit sixteen and every half-attractive thing in a skirt along the way, leaving Sam behind at twelve years old with a face too round and fists too chubby to even compete with all those lithe, pretty girls for his brother's attention.

"What's up, kiddo?" Dean threads his fingers into Sam's hair and scrambles it up on his way past.

Sam trails after him because he doesn't know what else to do. "Hey, Dean?"

"Hm?" Dean hums as he shuffles the only three plates they have to the Winchester name, and that's only because Dean dug through some boxes he found in the closet and thought it would be pretty neat if they could eat off of some real plates every once in a while.

"Do you ever feel..." Sam starts to ask before he realizes what a stupid question he's about to blurt out.

Of course Dean's never felt like... this. Whatever 'this' is.

Dean's strong and smart and sure. Dean can take whatever life or school or their father dishes out. Dean can hit the wall and bounce back, elastic, ready to grab and growl. Dean looks at himself in the mirror, shoots himself a wink and walks out the door. He doesn't linger. He doesn't inspect or scrutinize.

Dean doesn't wake up every morning feeling like he's falling down a dark tunnel and there's nothing to grab on to arrest the descent, nothing to scrabble to for purchase, nothing to support.

"Sam?" Dean asks, and Sam must have some stupid look on his face if Dean's already pulling out the 'concerned about Sammy' eyebrows.

"Nothing, it's nothing," Sam mutters. "Never mind."

Dean stares at him for a few moments longer, arm half out, extended to put down a plate at the far end of the table but never really getting to unclasping his fingers. Sam thinks for one crazy second he's suspended Dean in the moment, but he shakes his head because that's dumb. The only people who suspend Dean in anything are about half a foot shorter than Sam, fifty pounds lighter, and have breasts.

"I'm gonna go for a jog," Sam mumbles finally.

Dean lets the plate go and it thuds to the wood table resolutely. "Okay..." he drawls. "Be back before dinner."

Sam pretends he didn't hear him as he slips down the hall and pulls on his running shoes.

His feet pound against the earth, eating up pavement with the rhythmic slapping of the rubbery soles of his sneakers against the wet road. The air is thick with humidity, but Sam keeps sucking it down and pushing himself deeper into the world. Sweat plasters his hair to the back of his neck, his shirt to his torso.

He runs until his eyes go bleary with exhaustion and he's more pawing at the air for momentum to keep going forward than anything else. His mind trips and fumbles around vague concepts and half-formed ideas and images of Dean and Dean with Layla Braun in Kentucky and Dean smiling and Dean-

Sam coughs up stomach acid on the side of the road, doubling over and gagging as it stings his throat, up in his sinuses. He tries to breathe through it, pull down adequate gulps of air in between coughing fits while swiping at the salty sweat stinging his eyes, but he ends up only redirecting the burn into his already straining lungs.

He goes to his knees, coughing and gagging into the dirt, skinning his shins on gravel.

It's not the first time he's run himself past exhaustion and into purging.

It is the first time that, after the fits settle and the tremors smooth, after he sits up and wipes the tears from his eyes and gasps for air like he's just broke water that he doesn't feel worse than when he started.

In fact, as he takes a deep breath down his raw, savaged throat, and he kneads at a cramp in his side, he feels pretty good about life. He bares his teeth around deep, ugly gasp of air that burns all the way down in a way that might constitute as a smile under the proper circumstances. He puffs out an airy little laugh that sounds like rusty metal because this is, for once, the proper circumstances.

He blinks through the sweat and looks around the muggy side-road with the tall grass sweeping waves in the wind, listens to some bird off in the distance that *chickadee-dee-dees* and the most amazing thing about this shitty road with the washed-out potholes in the middle of nowhere is that Sam put himself there.

He doesn't know where he is but he brought himself here, under his own control. No car, no Dad, no monster looming in the fringes of shadows ready to tear everything Sam loves away from him.

He coughs again into the dirt, rocks rolling and cutting up his knees.

Places like this exist.

Sam licks at his lips and wonders how long, exactly, he could get away with staying here. How long until Dean comes looking for him?

He doesn't risk more than enough time to catch his breath before he's limping back to the apartment around the knot in his side. He slips through the parking lot, past the Impala that's long past idled, and tries to sneak into the apartment unnoticed.

Which just figures that Dean's basically looming over the door, waiting for him.

"Hey, Sam." He pounces and Sam jumps, though, really, he should have figured Dean would have been waiting for him. "I kept you some pizza."

"It's okay," Sam presses himself back against the wall and edges past Dean through the narrow hall, so close he can smell Dean's aftershave and see a shiny smear of pizza grease down his chin. "I told you, I'm not hungry." He curls his upper lip under his teeth like it'll mask the smell on his breath.

Dean stares him up and down and all around, eyeing the sweaty hair plastered to his forehead and the damp t-shirt clinging to his neck, under his arms. Sam doesn't know what Dean's looking for or what Dean sees when he looks at him. Hell, Sam doesn't even know what Sam sees when he looks at himself.

Dean opens his mouth like he's going to say something, tongue poised and lips formed in the beginnings of a question, but he cuts himself off, clears his throat, jerks his chin in the direction of the bathroom in

a silent order for Sam to take a shower, and then walks away with his heavy boots pounding the uneven hardwood flooring.

Sam lets out a breath.

The shower isn't as relaxing as Sam wants it to be. His muscles are cramping and his stomach, newly emptied and currently settled, is demanding food.

Sam presses his hand against the cold tile until his knuckles cramp.

Shut up, he thinks at his stomach. Who asked you?

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Their father had taken them to a river baptism once, when Sam was younger. He had been looking for someone standing in the line down the river bank and had thought that it wasn't too dangerous or too long of a stop to justify not bringing them along.

Sam remembers sitting in the back seat, leaning out of the open window with Dean crushing down on him to see the preacher man standing in the shallow waters with his arms held out wide like absolution.

John leaned against the car door next to them, reached out to squeeze a broad, warm hand on the back of Sam's neck before peeling away to prowl the crowds.

A woman in a white dress had waded into the water, long hair that reached down to her waist hitting the surface and swirling around her as she moved through the water with intent and grace into the preacher man's arms.

He'd spoken, words only for her. She nodded, frantic, trusting. His hand curled around her shoulder and she leaned back into his arm.

He supported her backwards, submerged her completely and Sam leaned so far out of the window Dean had to grab his collar to keep him from falling out.

She looked like an angel, separated from reality by a thin, moving veil of clear, clean water.

She came up gasping and Sam understood with an acute clarity that this breath was her first.

The river washed her clean.

He always thinks about that when he drinks.

Water bottles are Sam's new best friend. They fill up the empty spots inside of him with cool and clean and Sam refills the one heavy-duty aluminum bottle his father got him -no need to be buying plastic ones and if you refill the same one too many times it starts to grow bacteria and you'll get sick, son- four or five times a day.

It's a game. It's all a big game, and it's the greatest game Sam's ever played. He'd drink the whole river if he could.

He can't stomach juices or sodas anymore. They're too thick, too sugary, make him feel like his insides are gummed up. Dean even tried to slip him a beer a couple weeks back and Sam thinks that if he were still twelve or thirteen or fourteen, he would have pounced on that beer and tried to match Dean drag for drag just to prove he could keep up with his big brother.

He'd taken a sip, but it was too bitter and too thin and it wasn't water.

Dean had given him a strong side-eye for the next week. Sam had been sure to eat a whole three quarters of a sandwich in front of him, before his stomach started cramping and he felt nauseated, begging out on a run and jogging until his bones trembled and the sandwich made an encore appearance.

He controls what goes into his body. In his whole life of endless highways and people he never got to know, Sam has five bottles of water, a granola bar, and two apples a day. He knows that.

Food and water are the only things that he's sure about.

He thought it'd be harder to hide on the road when they skip town from Norfolk to Little Rock, to a string of motels, down to Arizona, with his father and his brother right on top of him at all time, but it really isn't. In restaurants Dad's got his nose buried in his journal and Dean's sitting next to Sam eating half of his food and chatting up their waitresses when he can.

Sam works out a system. A strategy.

He feels giddy with it every time he slips back into the car with three bites in him and no one's noticed. Giddy and horrifically empty.

It's a game. It's all a big game.

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There's a girl. For Dean there's always a girl, but this one's name is Grace and she's just that. She used to be one of the captains of the dance team in high school and can still do high kicks and drop into a split at a moment's notice because she keeps herself in shape. She and Dean aren't 'dating', per say, because Dean doesn't date. If he did, they would be.

Sam gets it, he really does.

She's got this long, elegant neck that Dean likes to mark up and when she moves she looks like she's dancing. Her fingers are long and they look longer when she's got them carding through Dean's hair to tug him into a sweet goodbye kiss before she walks out the door, passing Sam with his backpack digging into his shoulders on her way out.



Sam thinks she might smile at him when she passes him by, but he's always staring at how her thighs work in parallel lines and don't touch.

Her hips sway to some symphony Sam can't hear when she slips out of the bedroom that he and Dean share, and her thighs just don't even touch.

"Bye, Sammy," she breezes past him out the door.

Sam is pretty sure that they've never exchanged more than three sentences and knows that Dean's infected her with the name rather than her earning the right independently to call him Sammy.

If he could ever bring himself to look her in the face he thinks he'd tell her off for it.

"Heyya, Sam." Dean ambles out after Grace, all loose limbs and easy angles.

Sam jerks his chin in a nod and doesn't meet his brother's eyes as he slides into the living room to start his homework on the coffee table. He honestly doesn't expect Dean to trail after him, hounding his steps.

"What's up?" Sam finally relents as he sloughs his backpack off and collapses back into the shot springs of the purple corduroy couch that was probably a lot cuter in the sixties.

Dean rubs at the back of his neck and leans one shoulder into the entrance to the living room, letting the wall take his weight. "So, I was gonna take Gracie to dinner tonight? Do you think you could handle food yourself?"

The laughter bubbles up Sam's throat and he drowns it with a big gulp of water from the titanium bottle that he can feel cold all the way down his throat and into his empty stomach. "Yeah, no problem. You and Grace have fun."

Dean watches him silently as he opens his backpack and wrestles his Algebra textbook out.

"I mean," Dean starts again and Sam glances up to catch the tail end of Dean's desperate expression.

"Are you sure? I can always cancel and we can hang out here. Watch some movies and eat some popcorn with M&Ms and shit in it, like you like it? We haven't done that in a while."

For a moment Sam tries to imagine his fingers dripping with artificial butter, wrapped around a fistful of popped kernels smeared in melted chocolate and smudged reds and blues of candy coat, tries to imagine putting that on his tongue or in his body and his throat constricts rhythmically in stifled gags. "No way, man. Don't worry about it. I'll run down to the diner and grab a salad or something; I'm not even that hungry."

Dean chews at the inside of his lip and looks like he wants to say something more, but he peels away from the wall and retreats back into the bedroom to open the windows and air out the smell.

Sam crouches over the coffee table and sets up his notebook and his text book in front of him; his water bottle sits on the corner of the table arranged the game. Every five equations he takes a drink and every

time he turns a page he's allowed three of the oats from the granola bar he crushed up inside of the wrapper. He chews contentedly as he works. He doesn't really notice Dean watching him until there's a knocking at the back door that startles both of them.

Dean lurches up from his seat in the kitchen on reflex, chair positioned so that he has a clear view of the couch and Sam, in some reaction to a person being at the door or Dean getting up, jerks standing upright.

Everything empties out of his head, leaving a hollow pumpkin skull. It feels like all of the blood in his body decided to stay sitting, world swirling, vision blurring. He can feel the bottom of his feet, his weight on them shifting as he sways, and he can feel his knees, throbbing and buckling, but everything else is a vague outline of himself.

Suddenly he's a stick figure in the middle of the room, sweating and gasping for air with the exertion of standing upright.

"Sam?"

Firm hands find his shoulders and Sam's shaking his head already, pushing him away because everything's fine, he just stood up too quickly is all.

"Sorry," Sam mutters, lips smearing into something and as his blood pressure and circulation adjusts he realizes he's on the floor, on his knees, held up by Dean's hands under his arm and at the small of his back, face pressed into his brother's shoulder. "Head rush," he slurs.

"Yeah, yeah, okay," Dean chants with a tremor running through his chest, not letting go. They're sitting closer than any two brothers should be.

Sam rolls his head on his brother's shoulder, still lolling and loose from the close brush with blacking out and plowing face first into the coffee table and he sees Grace standing in the doorway, long fingers drawn up to her mouth as her lovely face contorts in concern.

She's beautiful, Sam realizes as he pants wetly into his brother's neck. She's got these high cheekbones and this thin face and Sam stares at the gap between her thighs and thinks that Dean deserves someone like her.

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It's not a problem until it's a problem.

The track is clay dirt that's baked orange in the intense Arizona sun and Sam's school gym uniform is clinging to his sweaty chest, the insides of his thighs.

His head hurts like he's floating down into an underwater trench and all of that black and all of that pressure is pressing in on him, compacting. It throbs with a drum beat and Sam has to stumble to the

side of the track on jerky legs, muscles that keep jumping and bunching when he's not telling them to, to sit down in the grass.

He squints in the intense sunshine and can't remember where he is, who the people running in circles in the hazy heat waves are.

"Hey?" Sam turns, sluggish and vision blurring with pain, towards a girl with a high ponytail and a concerned look on her face. "Are you alright?"

Sam opens his mouth to respond but the only thing that comes out is bile before he collapses back into the grass, unconscious.

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The world comes back as noise first.

Muttered voices like, "No, our dad's not in town right now. I called him but he isn't going to be back soon enough for Sam. Can't you just give him to me?"

"I'm afraid our policy is--"

"I don't give a shit about your policy. Let me take him home so I can take care of him. Get some fluids in him, let him rest up."

"Mr. Winchester, Sam's situation is a bit more complicated than that."

"What do you mean?"

"Dean, what's your home life like?"

"Excuse me?"

"The situation at home. What's it like?"

"Fine, thanks. Dad travels a lot on business, but Sam and I do fine."

"Are you aware that Sam weighs a hundred and twelve pounds?"

Sam's first thought is what an ugly number one hundred twelve is.

"T-The kid just went through a growth spurt. He passed out because he's dehydrated and those assclowns had him running outside when it was ninety-eight outside!"

Ninety-eight is a nice number.

"I don't give a damn what you have to say; as soon as my brother wakes up I'm taking him home. I'd like to see you try and stop me."

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Dean herds Sam into the rental with a firm hand on his shoulder, fingers digging in like he thinks that if he doesn't sink in then Sam is going to drift away.

Sam's not sure he wouldn't.

His head still hurts, but he feels less like he's going to split open down the center of his forehead. He feels fluffy on the inside, like he's full of cotton candy and the thought makes him want to claw himself open and tear it all out.

He stumbles at the entrance to the bedroom, has to lean back into Dean just to keep upright and Dean wraps an arm around his waist, whispering, "You're okay, you're okay," behind his ear until he can jamble the rest of the way to the bed.

Dean's forearm makes it from hip to hip with room to spare and when Sam collapses onto the shoddy mattress he doesn't let go.

Sam's not one of those waitresses with hips that rock like the ocean when they walk, or one of the women who work in or loiter around those bars Dean frequents who know exactly what they've got and exactly how to use it.

Sam's not the shape he should be to be allowed to be tucked into Dean's chest for the night, but he's just too tired to put distance between them right now.

With his head pillowed on Dean's bicep and hair falling across his eyes Sam starts to drift off.

He feels phantom fingertips tracing his ribs as he slips away from consciousness, hears Dean's voice choked and muffled, whispering, "Sammy, why won't you tell me what's going on?"

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The library is only a little bit out of the way from the apartment. Everything in Arizona is flat and packed close together, so even though it's halfway across town it would have been a ten minute walk if Sam hadn't had to keep stopping to cool down in the shade every time his head started to throb.

Dean had left for work bussing tables early after Sam had assured him several times over that a little more cash never hurt anyone, he was planning on sleeping all day anyway, and no, he didn't need someone to come watch him while Dean was working.

Dean had shuffled out the door slowly, probably waiting for Sam to change his mind and demand Dean stay in bed with him all day like he used to back when he believed that if he was feeling something then Dean, as an extension of himself, must be feeling it too.

He'd waited ten whole minutes to get up and pull on some jeans after Dean shut the door behind a, "I'll check up on you on my break," in case Dean changed his mind and doubled back, punching a new hole in the leather of his belt to keep them up around his hips. The collar of his shirt hung low on his collarbones in a way he doesn't remember it doing for Dean when it used to belong to him.

He slings his backpack over his shoulder and hauls out to the library.

Sam's not stupid. He knows that there's something not right about him or how he's dropped enough weight in the past few months to make his blood pressure a joke.

He gets to the library, slips the plump elderly woman sitting behind the desk a smile before making a bee-line towards the row of clunky PCs lining the back wall.

He's not actually sure what to search first, so just types in 'dizziness blacking out vomiting' and gets back articles about low blood pressure and arrhythmia.

Sam huffs a sigh and tries to narrow it down.

Dizziness, blacking out, vomiting, water.

Results include tips on not throwing up while exercising and Sam scoffs and rolls his eyes. Lower down on the page is an article about aneurisms that scares him petrified for three straight minutes until he figures that he's not old enough, not alcoholic enough, and doesn't smoke enough cigarettes for an aneurism to be at the top of his list.

Dizziness, blacking out, vomiting, excessive water, diet.

He hesitates over the word 'diet', not liking the shape of the word, but hits the blocky search button anyway.

He scrolls through pages unsatisfied for a quarter of an hour, mood growing darker with each page he sorts through until he stumbles across 'water intoxication.'

Sam rips through the article and then the article's online sources so quickly his head spins, which makes sense because he's reading about electrolyte imbalances due to too much water and too little everything else.

The words 'potentially fatal' stick out and Sam sits back and laughs because what if he's been poisoning himself with water? The laugh turns bitter and the woman at the front desk shoots him a concerned look.

Of fucking course he would poison himself with water, why not? He over-hydrated. Who does that? What kind of fucking idiot drinks too much water? So much water that they fuck up their brain. He could have killed himself, without even knowing. He could have had a seizure, passed out and fallen, broken his neck. He could have done it in front of Dean.

He reaches for his water bottle for comfort but jerks himself away, careening closer to hysteria with every labored breath he pulls in, making himself dizzy. He needs... he needs something, he doesn't know.

Sam stands up swiftly, only stumbling slightly, and staggers to the vending machine he passed on his way in. He sits back down with a package of Skittles that he doesn't really want and the urge to reach for his water bottle that he heroically resists.

He tears open the package and Skittles go sprawling everywhere, clattering against the desk and bouncing against the ground and Sam picks them up and adds them back into the pile. Like he cares; he's not going to eat them.

He sorts them out by color first and then by perfection of the printed 's' in the center, by shape determined by denting caused by the machinery, where the dents are in relation to that 's', and then lines them up in rainbow order down the desk. The idea that they're there, under his hands and smearing dyes all over his fingers as he handles them is intoxicating. He could lick the flavor off, pop one in his mouth and crunch down on it to feel the tangy sweet explode across his tongue, but he doesn't, and the fact that he resists makes him feel even better than eating one could have.

By the time he's finished his hands have stopped shaking. He reminds himself that he's not a doctor. He reminds himself that he's overreacting.

Breathing for a moment, Sam turns back to the computer.

He gets to 'eati' before he deletes it all and has to start over, and then gets all the way to 'eating dis' before backspacing and re-arranging the Skittles in a line of alternating colors.

Eating disorders.

He closes his eyes and hits search.

The first site is too bright with too many advertisements crowding the sidebar and Sam backs up quickly, put off. The second is too bland, why would he want to read a bland article?

By the sixth website he deems unworthy he acknowledges that he's procrastinating.

The seventh website has everything.

Sam reads through with a sense of detachment, leaning his full weight against the back of the chair and absorbing the definitions and conditions like he's doing research for a hunt.

He's not concerned with his body weight that much, he doesn't restrict his eating. He's just not hungry. He doesn't revolve around his body image.

"Christ, this is stupid," he mutters under his breath and clicks to the next page just to really assure himself that this isn't his problem so that he can go home and crawl in bed with the lights off and wait for Dean to come home to see if he can coerce him into making him soup that's mostly broth.

Only there's a picture on the next page and Sam's heart stops dead in his chest.

She's thin.

Of course she's thin; she's being used as an example of a body affected by anorexia.

But she's so *thin*.

Her stomach is concave, dipping up underneath her ribs. A flimsy white bra hangs loosely over her chest. Her collar bones stand out like they're being pushed through her skin. The other side of the figure is her from the back and her backbone looks like someone could play the xylophone on it.

Sam's eyes track all over her body so quickly he feels dizzy again, like there's not enough air in his body because this picture's taking up so much room inside of him.

He sees Sandra in that picture.

He sees himself.

He knocks over the chair, scattering Skittles all over the floor when he sprints out of the library.

-

The burger glistens with juices that seep down into the thin bun and make it soggy. The pickles are peeking over the side to say hi, ridges coated in smears and swirls of ketchup and mustard that's smudged all over the inside of the wrapper. The onions flop over the edge of the meat, either too large or too slippery to stay smashed between the bread and the patty. The French fries smell like salt and hot oil still. The outside of the cup is sticky from where Sam's trembling hands had fumbled the soda when he first ordered 'to go'.

The entire meal is laid out in front of him like sacrifice on the kitchen table and the smell alone makes him want to go take a shower and wash himself clean.

Afternoon sunlight slants right through the venetian blinds and Sam peels the bun off the burger and nudges the onions back into place, puts the pickles in formation again and resets it. He dumps the fries out onto the wrapper and figures since they're already out he could lay them flat so he could see them all, maybe arrange them in order of height. The condensation on the outside of the paper cup clings to his fingers when he sets the cup at the diagonal corner of the wrapper and smoothes out the outer edges of the wrapper so that it lays flat.

He puts his hands in his lap and stares.

The McDonalds had been on his way back from the library, golden arches rising high above the other buildings on the street like a gateway and he'd slunk in, determined.

He does not have an eating disorder.

And he's going to fucking prove it.

He fists the burger and warm ketchup and slick burger grease seeping between his fingers. Sam's eyes burn so he forces them shut tight. He takes a deep breath but all he can smell is grease and salt, thick and viscous like he's swimming through it.

It feels like he's wrenching his jaw open but it doesn't matter because he's going to eat it because he doesn't have a problem.

The first tears slip down his cheeks when he gets the burger on his tongue and can taste savory meat like he hasn't in months and his stomach clenches. He clamps his teeth, traps the food behind his lips and he tries, he tries so hard, not to spit it out again.

Chewing is like tearing out his fingernails. He salivates too much and works his jaws too hard, breathing heavily through his nose in hitching breaths.

The flavor sours on his tongue as he lets it sit in his mouth.

Swallow, he thinks actively as tears drip down his chin. Just fucking swallow and everything can be over.

He shakes his head like he's telling himself no even as he forces his throat to work. The food slides down his esophagus, mucking up his throat along the way, and hits his stomach like a lead brick and he already feels like his blood's thick with everything he just put inside of himself, heavy sludge coursing through his veins and he wants water, he needs to scrub his insides clean. It's in his skin like he's sweating oil.

"Fuck!" he screams, swiping the entire assortment off the table. The cup bounces off the floor, lid popping and sticky sweet soda spilling a flood across the cracked yellow linoleum, the burger splats, the fries scatter, and Sam fists his hands in his hair and retches out sobs because he's so fucking weak.

He's still there, hysterical, when Dean unlocks the front door and steps in.

"Sam?" Dean calls and Sam tries to suck down enough air to calm himself but he's too far gone to save any face by the time Dean rushes into the kitchen.

"Sorry," Sam stammers preemptively, knowing he should be apologizing for something. "Sorry, sorry, I'm so sorry."

"What the hell did—you went to McDonalds?" Dean demands, staring around the mess of the kitchen and looking overwhelmed. "You told me you were staying in bed all day, Sam!"

"I know," Sam hiccups. "I'm sorry, I was just so hungry."

Calloused fingers tremble as they find his face, wiping at his tears as Dean whispers, "Just... calm down, okay? Deep breaths."

-

Dean leads Sam into the bedroom and lays him out on top of the covers, puts a damp towel over his face and orders him to calm down before stealing away to clean up Sam's messes.



Sam stares up into the fibers of the towel until the sunlight dies, until the cloth is dry and stiff, and then for a few hours more.

Dean doesn't come back and Sam doesn't take the towel off so he has no way to judge the time when the bedsprings creak and dip next to him and the whiskey, old leather, regret smell of his father swamps the air.

"Hey, kiddo," John speaks in rumbles and baritones and the wide warmth of his palm settles on Sam's skinny knee. "How're you holding up?"

Sam tries to place him somewhere in the country if Dean called two days ago when Sam first passed out and he's just arriving now.

"Sam?"

"Hm." Sam hums, realizing that his father isn't going to leave.

"I asked you how you were holding up."

Holding up. Like he's one of those old houses with the corpses that won't leave Dad drags them to during the day so he can teach them what to look for in a haunting, with the support beams rotting out and the shingles sliding off the roof and into the mud. Like he's in shambles, but still together. He's holding up.

"M fine," Sam mumbles.

"Yeah?" John asks and resettles on the bed for the long haul, and Sam can't even imagine what Dean must have said or done to get their father to take this so seriously. "Wanna tell me what's going on?"

That sounds like the last thing Sam wants to do.

"I'm just tired," he says, and it's not even a lie. He's tired in his bones, in his fingertips, in his throat, and in his stomach.

"Okay." That broad, warm palm soothes down his hair like he's five again and it makes him feel so much smaller than he is. "I'll let you get some sleep. If you're not feeling better in a couple of days we'll see about getting you to a hospital, alright?"

Sam's pretty sure that's an empty promise, but his father's surprised him before and he's just too exhausted to call him on it now so he just rolls over instead and listens to heavy foot falls all the way out the door.

-

It takes three days for Sam to come to terms with himself and evaluate a few facts of life, lying in bed alone in the quiet because Dean won't speak to him, can barely stand to look at him.

One, he can't tell anyone. Because he's a Winchester, because he's a boy, because they don't have the money for the types of therapy every website and book Sam's poured himself all over tell him that he's going to need to get over himself. Because he should be better than this.

Two, he wants to be normal. He wants to be able to eat and live and love outside of a big black car.

Three, if he doesn't find some stability he's going to die.

He starts to enroll in AP courses and surreptitiously check out colleges.

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The application prompt for Stanford is 'Write a note to your future roommate that reveals something about you or that will help your roommate—and us—know you better.'

Sam spends the entire essay apologizing to someone that doesn't exist about how he doesn't know how to inhabit a single space for an extended period of time, how he doesn't know how to live with someone who isn't his brother, how he's not good with forming relationships with strangers and how he's worse at maintaining them.

He doesn't mention eating once, but when he's finished he feels like it's all over the paper anyway.

-

When Sam gets his acceptance letter to Stanford he's six feet and three inches tall and weighs one hundred forty pounds and he eats a whole half a carton of yogurt. When he and his father scream it out in front of his brother Sam is six feet and three inches and weighs one hundred thirty three pounds and he doesn't eat for two days. When Sam arrives at Stanford he's six feet and three inches tall and weighs one hundred thirty pounds and he's scared so shitless he tears open a bag of sunflower seeds and eats in escalating single digit prime numbers every half hour and then loops back until the bag is gone almost a week and a half later.

-

He thought the structure of college life would help, and in some ways it does. He has a dorm to live in and it's his until classes end. He has a job where he gets to organize books and doesn't have to look at or think about food for hours. He has a set schedule and there are no roads or motels or changing scenery to distract him.

In some ways it doesn't, though.

Sam is the only person who came to Stanford looking for the escape to structure, not the escape from. He's paranoid that his roommate knows what he is, what he does. Every time Brady tries to urge him to go get food Sam nearly has a panic attack. There are people everywhere, out in the California sun with

their California bodies. They take their shirts off and cut the legs of their jeans out and it makes Sam uncomfortable to the roots of his hair. He can feel their eyes on him so he wraps up tighter in sweatshirts and baggy jeans that give him funny tan lines and make him sweat on the walks around campus.

He walks by the counselors' offices Thursdays and Fridays and every time he does he walks a little bit slower. He never stops, though.

-

Dean visits him twice the first year and each time he's bleeding and leaves right after Sam patches him up, tells him that California's been good to him on his way out the door without ever actually looking at him.

-

Brady puts up with Sam's shit longer than Sam would have actually thought until finally Brady storms into their room, points at Sam and shouts, "You!"

Sam jumps, textbook fumbling out of his lap. "What?"

"I have had it up to here," he holds his hand high above his head, "with you and your loner bullshit, Sam!" Sam opens his mouth, brow already furrowed and jaw tensed for a fight for validation, that hair trigger defense mechanism his father accidentally programmed into him flaring up hard and fast but Brady cuts him off with, "We're going out! No, don't look at me like that. You're going outside, you're meeting some people, and you're going to realize that they're just that- people. They're nothing to be afraid of."

The announcement rings heavy in the air and twenty minutes later Sam's letting himself be steered into a house full of sweating, drunk bodies grinding together in a mass.

"I don't think-" Sam starts to protest with a voice raised high above the crowd, but Brady's already gone.

Sam wanders around the party, turning down drinks and drugs at every corner for almost an hour, marveling at how people who aren't afraid of themselves move and act. They're not afraid of touching and they're not afraid of eating and if Sam thinks hard enough maybe he can remember being like that, splitting huge bags of chips in the back seat and fighting over the largest piece of pie with Dean.

"Hey!" A hand wraps around Sam's wrist and Sam's jerks and breaks the grip before he can even think twice.

"Ow, shit!" Brady hisses, cradling his own hand.

"Sorry!" Sam blurts.

"Yeah, whatever." His roommate waves him off with a sour look. "C'mere, I got someone I want you to meet."

He trails after Brady through the crowd, squirming uncomfortably in the crush of bodies until Brady comes up short and Sam almost crashes into his back.

"Sam," Brady grins over his shoulder. "This is Jessica Moore. Jess, this is my roommate I was telling you about. Go easy on him, tiger."

With that, Sam is promptly deposited in front of a short girl with tumbling blond curls, full lips, green eyes, and a perfect waist.

"Hi, Sam." She smiles bright and white and too good for Sam.

"Hi." He shuffles on his feet and she laughs and sticks out her hand, straightforward.

"It's nice to meet you." Her cheeks are pink and round and there's a beauty mark on her forehead that Sam thinks is absolutely the cutest thing he's ever seen. When he takes her hand she shakes it, firm and sure. She cocks her head to the side, smile curling deeper and eyes narrowing suspiciously at him. When she turns his hand back over she doesn't really let go.

Sam spends the rest of the night with her. She gets him a drink and lures him out back to lean against the linoleum siding of the house. They talk about the party and then the party turns into underage drinking which turns into law which turns into classes which turns into their mutual teacher of American Literature, which turns into philosophy which, somehow, turns into home.

"I just," she sighs wistfully in a break in conversation, staring out into the night and Sam watches her in profile. "I love it here, don't get me wrong. I guess I never expected to miss home so much."

In the most obscure way Sam understands what she means. When he opens his mouth he means to say something generic like, yeah, I understand, but instead what comes out is, "What's home to you?"

He feels like a simpleton as soon as the words leave his mouth because that's one of those 'gateway questions' his father always warned him about, the ones that burned inside Sam, fueling his hunger for other people's definition of home. In this world there are children who go to sleep in the same bed every night and the pillows smell like them, they're surrounded by comforting things that belong to them in every sense and they are clothed in security. Sam was never one of those children, but he was jealous of them to his core.

"Oh, you know," Jessica smiles and snorts, probably thinking that he's turning the conversation back into philosophy when really he just wants to know. "People who love an accept me for who I am and support my crazy decision to go to a top ten school in California even though I'm six states away from them and I'll probably be paying off student loans for the rest of my natural life." She laughs, but stops when she notices that Sam isn't. "What's home to you, Sam?"

There's a black 1967 Chevrolet Impala somewhere between here and the east coast and everything inside of it is Sam's home.

Her home sounds better.

He licks his lips, feels something that feels like a craving rise up in his stomach and on the back of his tongue and deftly avoids the question.

Shortly after a stumbling girl comes calling, slurring Jessica's name and whining for a ride.

"Sorry," Jessica frowns, pink mouth turning down adorably. "I've got to go, but I'd really like to see you again, Sam."

Sam picks at the torn cuticle of his thumb nail and ducks to hide a pleased smile. "Yeah, me too."

She beams, grin bright and devastating in the darkness. "It's a date." She winks and disappears.

Sam has a stupid smile on his face until he thinks about taking Jess out to dinner, out to coffee, to the beach wearing swim trunks, down to the boardwalk to buy her cotton candy and not eating anything. What is he going to do if she asks about his family, his parents, his father, his mother, anything about his life before this?

His hands start shaking so badly that he spills some of the beer he hasn't touched down the front of his sweatshirt.

-

He tries to avoid her, but Jessica Lee Moore is a force of nature and is not about to let him get away from her that easy. She sees things, thinks 'I want that,' and then she goes and gets them.

She ambushes him outside of one of his classes, gives him one of those bigger than life smiles, and tells him to buy her a cup of coffee.

And, well, Sam's a sucker for big green eyes.

-

"Tell me something about yourself, Sam," Jessica prods, resting her chin on the heel of her hand, elbow propped on the grate table outside of the coffee shop.

"Not much to tell." Sam shrugs and takes another small sip from his cup, holding it against his lips for a one-two-three count so it looks like he's swallowing more.

"I don't believe you." She sits back and looks him over with that same mixture of amusement and suspicion he'd seen when they first met. "I think there's more to you than meets the eye, Sam Winchester."

Sam thinks she's wrong. He's exactly what meets the eye.

He walks her back to her dorm and she swoops in just outside the door and plants a kiss on his cheek.

"I'll see you tomorrow, Sam." She vows.

-

They're dating now, Sam thinks. Neither of them actually ever asked the other specifically but Jessica doesn't strike him as the type of girl who'd pull a boy she wasn't dating into her dorm and introduce to all of her friends as, "My boyfriend, Sam." So.

She's more than Sam could have ever hoped for and she lets him get away with all sorts of bullshit. They've never gone out to eat, and Sam's not even sure if Jess has noticed. Most of their 'dates' double as study sessions. She lets Sam put a hand at the small of her back, the curve of her waist, the smooth plane of her shoulder and she looks pleased rather than put off by those marveling, proprietary gestures.

She makes a point of kissing him at least once a day, sometimes calling him at all hours of the night when she realizes that it's been too long since the last time she told him that she loved him.

Sam feels like he's full to bursting with her. He loves her so much he chokes on it sometimes, freezes up in conversations with her when she talks about her sister or her parents and looks to him expectantly and he can't say a word.

He loves her so much he doesn't even care that every time she stands up on her toes and catches his mouth with hers she's kissing a stranger she barely knows. He loves her so much he doesn't even care how selfish that is.

He eats up her kisses, craves them like he's never wanted anything before. He wants everything that she is, everything that she represents, everything that they could be.

"Wow," Jessica laughs breathlessly when he curls his fingers into the back of her neck and drags her up into a kiss outside of her dorm for no particular reason at all. "Aren't we fired up today?"

Sam chuckles into her collarbone before capturing her mouth again.

Her lips are soft and warm against his, tongue wet and coaxing. A contented little noise hums out of her when Sam lets her in. His fingers slide up into her hair, threading through to cup at her skull, supporting her like suddenly he's her spine and she returns the favor.

She breaks off first, laughing in airy puffs against his neck.

"I guess I should get going," Sam starts, rubbing his lips against her skin for a few last moments of sensation before he made the trek back to his own room but she cuts him off by weaving her fingers through his and tugging him through the door, deeper into the dorms.

It's not really until she's shoving him through her bedroom door and whispering, "Molly went home for the weekend," with this wicked glint in her eye that the situation and implications thereof click in Sam's head.

People have sex. Sam's aware. His own roommate is a connoisseur. Orgasms are great, or so Sam's heard. He remembers them vaguely from a time before his blood pressure wasn't so shot that masturbation became more time and effort than it was worth. It had been scary for a while, but without physical intimacy erections were never really at the top of his list of priorities until college and grades and friends and food just knocked it off his radar for the most part.

Maybe he's been pointedly avoiding thinking about it lately, though.

It would have been too much to hope that Jess's sex drive was anything like his, though- like an old engine that can't turn over, spluttering and rasping but ultimately puttering out.

"C'mon," Jessica pants and tugs him closer towards the bed because she doesn't know that everything inside of Sam just froze solid.

She's going to want him to take off his clothes, touch his skin.

"I- I don't think," Sam stammers, staring at the bed.

"Sam!" Irritation and exasperation creep into her tone, her patience and tolerance for his crap finally fraying. "This happens every time I try to start something. You stall!" She clenches her jaw, fists trembling at her side and every inch of her body is pleading. "Do... do you not want me?"

"No!" Sam protests quickly.

"So you don't want me?" She crosses her arms over her chest.

"No, no! I meant-" Sam backtracks quickly. "You're beautiful, Jess."

She cocks an eyebrow at him and as soon as the words escape his lips he knows they were the wrong things to say.

"Beautiful? As in, aesthetically I'm pretty, but you're not attracted." Her eyes narrow.

"No!" Sam snaps, skin itchy and he's blindly frustrated with how she's steering the conversation and how he's retreating to her advances. "You're sexy, Jessica, c'mon!"

"Sam," she intones, face softening but no less pleading. "Are you... are you gay?"

"What?" Mortification floods through him with such a force he gets lightheaded. "God, no!"

"Because, it'd be okay if you were, Sam. I'd still-"

"Jess, stop!" He grabs her shoulders, forcing her attention onto him. "Stop, please, stop!"

"So it is me?" Those big green eyes are glossy with tears.

"No!" He snaps and she jumps. "It's me! It's- It's just sex! I can't, Jess- I can't-"

"Like," Jess starts slowly. "Like you can't physically or- or like... you said that... your father..."

"Christ, Jess!" Sam recoils.

"I'm just trying to understand!" she shouts.

"You wanna understand?" Sam snaps, that angry reckless streak he's got twining right through the very makeup of him flaring bright and hot like a star going supernova. "You sure about that?" His voice is all dark black tar and bone deep spite.

"Yes!" she sobs.

He jerks at his sweatshirt without thinking because the world is just static in his ears and his girlfriend is standing in front of a stranger, hysterical, and nothing about what is about to happen is fair for either of them.

The seams of his t-shirt pop and snap when he wrenches the entire swath of fabric over his head, balling it up and hurling it across the room so hard that Jessica jumps when it slaps against the wall.

Sam holds out his skinny arms, ribs heaving against the thin skin of his torso and he grits his teeth, bracing himself for when she *gets it*.

Jessica's hands fly to her mouth, fingers denting her cheeks. Those big green eyes scrape over him, take in every angle and shadow like Sam's some sort of macabre statue. Tears slip down her cheekbones and she understands.

"You happy?" Sam demands, so angry at her, at himself, and his body, at the world.

She shakes her head, blond curls tumbling.

Sam snorts derisively through his nose, nostrils flaring, hands trembling. He moves to get his shirts so that he can just get out of here and go for a run to calm down.

"Wait." Jessica's fingers are wet with tears when they wrap around his wrist and he can tell by the little wheeze that punches out of her she hadn't expected her fingers to overlap. "Sam, wait, please." He voice sounds congested. "I didn't know, I'm sorry. I didn't realize. I wouldn't have ever pushed if I'd known, I swear."

"Known what?" Sam asks like a whisper because he needs her to be very clear about what she thinks is happening here.

The paleness of her fingers practically glows in the low moonlight of her bedroom when she reaches the short distance to graze against Sam's ribs. Sam flinches at the contact and she jerks back before a stone-set look of determination locks in her jaw and she presses her palm against his stomach, like she's trying to feel him out.



"I've never seen you eat," she mumbles, stark realization in her tone. Her fingers are warm against his skin and Sam realizes that she's the first person to have seen his bare chest, touched him, in almost four years. "This isn't healthy, Sam."

Sam snorts a dark, cynical sound.

"Please talk to me," she whispers like her words are as fragile as he is. "Please, I want to understand. I want to help."

He has a sudden startling flash back to a bathroom in Walla Walla, Washington a lifetime ago populated by a girl who needed help and a boy who was piss terrified but determined and desperate to understand.

"Talk to me, Sam," Jessica implores.

"What's there to say?" Sam mutters.

"I think there's a lot to say." Jessica finds his hands, presses a firm, assuring kiss against his knuckles and for the second time that night she leads him to the bed.

Sam doesn't know how or where to start, so he just begins where most things in his life begin, "My brother Dean," and ends with, "and now I'm here. With you." He leaves out the hunts and the blood and the things that go bump in the night, but he leaves in Dean's girls and the wedding band around his father's finger that he twirls with his thumb whenever he gets nervous or when November comes rolling around.

The sunlight is pulling at the horizon and his throat hurts from talking all the way from fifteen to here and his stomach is cramping around nothing, but he's warm and comfortable with his head pillowed on Jessica's lap with her fingers combing through his hair.

"You can't keep going like this," she says after a long few moments of silence.

"I know."

He expects her to take her fingers back from his hair and urge him to sit upright so that they can both get on with their days and she can have some time and space to figure out what she's going to do for herself in this situation, but instead she just says, "We'll figure it out."

-

When he finally gets around to prying himself out of her arms and excusing himself to go home and get some sleep and a shower it's with the promise that the subject isn't dead just because the conversation is over. There's a note on his door from his resident telling him that a bloody guy in a leather jacket was looking for him and they called to have him escorted off campus because he wasn't taking, "Sam's not here," for an answer. The note goes on to apologize if it had been someone Sam had, in fact, known and signed off with the pointed suggestion that Sam get some less psychotic friends.

-

The first motel in the phonebook is the Atlas Inn and Jim Rockford is registered for room 17 and the familiarity of these Facts of Life with Dean Winchester are the only thing that helps Sam keep his fingers from shaking when he reaches up to knock against the door.

He's exhausted, inside and out. He feels like he's made out of yokeless eggshells, smooth and pale and hollow. His eyes feel swollen with fatigue and he wants nothing more in the world than to turn away from the door and everything on the other side of it, but he knows beyond a shadow of a doubt that Dean might breeze by Stanford when the fancy strikes him, but he doesn't stop and single Sam out unless he needs help.

So Sam shoves everything about the last six hours of his life onto the backburner, feels the schism between his Stanford skin and his Dean skin as he rips himself out of one and sews back in to the other. Sam can't have problems here; Sam can't have skinny wrists and an empty stomach on the other side of this door.

Well, he can. He just can't acknowledge it.

The hinges of the door squeal slightly when it's wrenched open from the other side and Dean's bloody face pokes out and he shouldn't still be the most beautiful person Sam's ever seen, but he is.

"You look like shit," Dean says by way of introduction and leaves the door open when he ducks inside.

"Right back atcha, princess," Sam scoffs and lets himself in.

"Right, well," Dean grunts and groans as he settles himself on the bed, clutching the wadded up motel towel to his shoulder. "'Least my face is still pretty."

The room feels like every room Sam slept in between the ages of six months and eighteen. It's just an empty space with two beds in it that Sam can inhabit for a time but will never really truly belong to him. He can fill the room up with himself, but it will never be his.

"What do you need me for?" Sam asks instead of asking Dean why he got a room with two beds instead of just one, partially because he doesn't want to know the answer, but also somewhat because if they get going about beds Sam isn't sure he'll be able resist crawling into one of them and never coming out again.

"How steady's your hand, college boy?" Dean tosses the first aid kit in Sam's direction –an old tool box that houses all of the required paraphernalia for a well-stocked kit with a few Winchester additions to make the entire thing more hunter-friendly- and Sam's stitched up worse while he's had worse, so he picks it up and sits behind Dean.

"Need anything?" Sam starts to sort through the pills bottles prescribed to people who live somewhere in America that probably didn't know their insurance information had been stolen until long after the medical assistance had been reaped, the pills collected, and the hospital cleared.

"No," Dean says, slurring it into a 'naw'. "Way ahead of the pain. Not so much the open wound. Which is why I got you. So... chop, chop, Sam, I'm bleeding all over my favorite shirt here."

Sam knows that's not his favorite shirt just like he knows that it's beyond salvageable at this point. He still says nothing.

"What'd you get into this time?" Sam asks as he finds the pre-threaded needle –somebody splurged on some decent medical supplies- and gauze.

"Kelpie," Dean shrugs with his good shoulder. "Thought I had it down, came over to wrap up and burn, but it came right back up, caught me in the shoulder 'fore I could pin it down again."

Sam hums and rubs at his eyes to urge some wakefulness back into them before he starts sewing Dean back up. He places a steadying hand on the broad expanse of Dean's back and gets to piercing and threading through his brother's skin.

"Hey, Sam?" Dean asks after a few minutes of solid silence with Sam working meticulously behind him.

"Hm?" Sam hums, crouching awkwardly to get a good angle on the slashes gouged into Dean's shoulder.

"Where were you?"

"What?" Sam looks up, startled by question and content not directly related to Dean's blood and Sam ability to fix him. His hands stall out on Dean's shoulder. This isn't how these conversations are supposed to go.

"When I came to your dorm you weren't there," Dean says slowly, peering over his shoulder at Sam with eyes a little too narrow and jaw a little too firm. "Where were you?"

Where were you when I needed you, Sam?

"I-" Sam stammers. The walls grow, up and up and up like sycamore trees all around him, closing him in. The heat of Dean under his palms isn't a comfort, it's scalding.

Where was he?

"I was with a girl," he says, feeling stupid.

Dean was bleeding and he was with a girl, talking about feelings.

"Better have been one hell of a date," Dean snorts, tone fringing into derisive and bitter but Dean's working hard not to let all of it out.

Sam slides one bony wrist through the swamp of sweat that's broken out across his hairline, a burble of gaudy laughter falling hard from his lips to land on the floor with a heavy *thud*.

His fingers twitch sporadically and he swallows compulsively because he's thirsty, needs water now, right now.

“Sam?” Dean grunts, gazing back over his shoulder. “You good?”

Sam chases after those frayed pieces that are winging off of him and claws them back to his chest, stuffs them deep down into his ribcage and then trips the lock; heading himself off, shutting himself down before his palms start to itch and he has the insane urge to bake himself into a loaf of bread, burn up inside of an oven like the wicked witch, surrounded by the thick, comforting smell of warm yeast while choking on dough.

“Yeah.” Sam bounces his foot anxiously. “Yeah, I’m good. Turn around, I’m almost done.”

Dean turns back around and Sam’s the doctor in *The Nightmare Before Christmas* and Dean is Sally and Sam has to sew him back together, punching through flesh and mopping up blood to keep him all in one piece when, really, Sam’s not qualified because he’s Jack Skellington.

“Shit!”

“What?” Dean whips around, heedless of the mostly-finished stitches. “Sam, what?”

“Sorry,” Sam blurts, clutching his hand as beads of blood overflow into full out rivulets and he feels like he’s losing his fucking mind with the frenetic bubbles of laughter that are burbling up his throat and making his lips tingle. His brain has always worked choppy, alternating between processing double the detail in half the time and nothing at all for extended periods, but this is too much. Too much. There’s too much happening in his life right now and he has to keep it out of this room, this moment; he *has* to. He sucks in a deep breath, swallows those giggles and that thirst back down long enough to explain, “I caught my thumb with the needle.”

“How bad?” Dean demands, catching Sam’s hand and jerking it forward over his shoulder for inspection without asking.

Sam didn’t punch all the way through his finger with the force of jabbing through Dean and into himself, but it was a close thing. Dean’s blood and his blood are pooling in his palm and in one insane, hysterical moment Sam thinks about how he can’t even tell the difference.

“God, you’re a mess,” Dean huffs with some old wry amusement on at Sam’s expense and grabs a handful of gauze and tape to wrap his thumb with.

Sam still needs to plant at least four more stitches into Dean’s shoulder and he’s not sure how many painkillers or how much booze Dean’s consumed and the effect it’s had on how qualified he is to tend to a wound.

“C’mon, Dean,” Sam mutters and tugs at his hand, disrupting Dean’s wrapping job. “Lemme wrap up here first.”

“Stop,” Dean snips. “You can’t fix me up if you’re hurting.”

The beautiful simplicity of the sentence strikes Sam sharper than the needle did.

He can't fix Dean if he's hurting. He can't help Dean if he's broken.

Dean catches his dumbfounded expression when he's passing Sam back his hand and asks him what's wrong.

Sam says nothing, carefully sutures the rest of the line, and sits back to take stock of his life.

He's sitting in a room with his brother and they're both covered in blood and Sam has an empty stomach. His thumb throbs in time with his heart and he knows beyond a shadow of a doubt that Dean is going to stand up and grab a bottle of whatever and pour two drinks and ask Sam about life. Sam knows that he's not going to drink whatever's in that glass and if he tells Dean about classes or Jessica his eyes will get pinched around the corners and his lips will firm and thin in the fight to keep impassive and supportive. Dean will return the favor, tell him about dad and hunting and all of those things that Sam doesn't want anything to do with anymore.

He's been here before. He's been a player in this scene and nothing changes and nothing gets better and Sam can't do anything about it because he's tired and he's skinny and he's hungry.

Dean stands, muffling a sound between his clenched teeth, and starts to make for the duffle bag he's got stuffed in the corner, the bottle in the front pouch.

Sam's fingers are like bare, scraping branches on a dead tree when he wraps them around Dean's wrist. There's a startling juxtaposition between Sam's cold and delicate and Dean's warm and firm. Dean has hands. Sam has twigs.

"Is this working?" Sam doesn't look at Dean, just stares at their hands.

"What?" Dean snorts. "What are you talking about, Sammy?" he asks, despite the fact he knows damn well what Sam's talking about.

And, really, Dean not being able to acknowledge that there's a problem is all the answer Sam needs.

"This isn't working." His head throbs like his temple is being used for drumskin when he stands up, head going hollow for the few moments it takes for him to adjust.

"Sam!" Dean puts himself in between Sam and the door. That sharp edge of panic and those wide Dean Winchester eyes make a brief but pronounced cameo across his features before he pulls himself back together, clears his throat and tries again. "Sam."

"Dean."

They're a circuit. A useless, endless circuit that powers nothing and goes nowhere, consisting entirely of, "Sam," "Dean," "Sam," "Dean," like they're having an actual conversation but they're not listening and neither of them is really saying anything at all and Sam realizes with stark, startling clarity that he may have left the life but he never actually got out because he keeps walking back into rooms that will never belong to him to try and fix up a brother he can't talk to on an empty stomach.

"We can't do this anymore, Dean," he says, when he actually means that he can't do this anymore, that this, them, is killing him.

Dean blinks at him, shaking his head slightly like he doesn't believe a word out of Sam's mouth.

Sam rubs at his eyes again, scrubs his palms down his face and exhales out between his fingers, collecting himself so that he can look Dean dead in the eyes, say, "Don't come back here, Dean," and walk out the door to room 17 at the Atlas Inn.

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Sam sleeps for fourteen hours and feels no inclination to get out of bed when he wakes up. He rolls over and sleeps for six more.

-

Fingers stroking over the bridge of his nose rouse him the second time that day. Afternoon sunlight muddies the air and creates this swampy, oppressive heat that's trapped inside of the room. It catches in Jessica's hair brilliantly, though, so Sam can forgive it.

"Hey, baby," she whispers gently, still petting over his brow and down the bridge of his nose coaxingly. The bed dips more towards her sitting on the edge than it does for Sam lying down. "How are you feeling?"

Sam makes a throaty, noncommittal noise and closes his eyes again.

"Nu-uh-uh." Jess prods at his cheek. "Sleepy time is over. I've got something I want to talk to you about."

Sam groans long and loud but forces his eyes open and fixes them on Jessica. She looks tired, a little duller around the edges than she did yesterday, which Sam guesses is his fault. She's still got that Jessica Lee Moore set to her jaw and that bright green fire burning bright in her eyes, though. When she pulls her shoulder bag into her lap and pulls out a sheath of paper thicker than Sam's wrist that fire flares up, bright and hot.

"What's this?" Sam rasps, propping himself up on his elbow.

"Research," she chirps simply and shuffles out the papers.

Sam touches over the paper, some of it still printer-warm and reads, over and over again, anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, irregular eating, abnormal, insufficient, and treatment options.

"When did you have time for this?" Sam's brow scrunches up and he starts to sift faster, skipping over therapy, behavioral treatment, kidney failure, suicide, westernization, body image.

“Skipped Anthro today,” Jess says around a stifled yawn. “Went down to the psychology department and pretended I was in one of his classes to get him to suggest some sources to me. I have some books he recommended, too, if you want to look at those. The pink sticky notes are mine, don’t move them.”

Sam stares down at the papers and then up at her calm face and then circles back around again.

“I don’t understand,” he finally says, which isn’t exactly true. He understands just fine. He did much of the same research a few years back, chanting, “self-diagnosis, self-diagnosis, self-diagnosis,” over and over in his head as he printed and highlighted and ate around the browning parts of a banana.

“Sam,” Jessica says, stressing his name to get him to focus on her. She licks at her lips for a moment, stares at him with earnest eyes. “I’m willing to put in the time on this. Whatever it takes. But I need to know if you’re willing to do the same.” She licks at her lips again quickly. “We wouldn’t have to do anything you were uncomfortable with; I know you don’t like hospitals. Baby steps. With me, Sam. I think we can do this. Do you?”

Sam blinks, looks to the papers spread out across his bed, looks to Jessica’s face in the sunlight, and says, “Yes.”

-

She asks him what he’d be willing to eat; making a clear divide between willing to and want to, and Sam has to really ponder the question. He never really thought about the difference between foods. It all sucks to put in his body, everything makes him feel black and oozy on the inside. Lettuce is the best, he guesses. Salads and fruits.

She says okay.

The next day she takes him out for smoothies, demands the entire menu and list of ingredients from the teen behind the counter who goes from zero to piss terrified in three point four seconds and does as commanded. Sam stares at her, awed.

She snatches up the list of everything the shop provides, sits Sam down in the corner, and asks him to make a smoothie.

Sam nibbles on his lip and picks out strawberries and bananas, because that seems safe. There’s an option to add protein or nutrient powders to the smoothie or even filter out the fruit pulp so that it’s fundamentally cold fruit juice and Sam says he wants that.

She stands up and comes back three minutes later with Sam’s cold strawberry banana fruit juice with protein powder in it.

She says that he doesn’t have to drink it all and he doesn’t.

The corner of the smoothie shop is dirty. The tile on the floor is chipped all to hell and the table is scarred and stained with fruit juices long past. The window is wide and lets in the California sunlight in swatches that give more light than the shoddy ceiling strobes do.

In that corner of that smoothie shop with Jessica sipping her own smoothie and accepting that he's not going to drink all of his Sam feels comfortable enough, secure enough, to drink almost half.

He feels sloshy with the water weight later, hates himself for being weak and drinking so much. She goes for a run with him, rubs his back when he coughs the fruit back up.

She starts to keep snacks in her purse. Bags of trail mix and grapes and carrots that she'll nibble on. She always has a drink in her hand; a smoothie or a one of those double half-caf Frappuccinos that Sam hates himself for loving when she lets him steal sips.

She takes him to the gym and they work out together, lift weights and do work designed to develop muscle.

On his birthday he eats a salad and a slice of cake at the Cheesecake Factory and laughs and claps with everyone else when he blows out the candle.

The summer comes and he gets booted out of his dorm and she helps him find an apartment and they set it up for two. All the food in the fridge is clean and healthy and requires little to no preparation. They have sex for the first time in their bed.

Slowly, very slowly, Sam starts to reach for those bags hidden in her purse without her slipping him pieces. He gets himself a smoothie, keeps the pulp, drinks almost two thirds of them, and doesn't feel like burrowing his hands into his flesh to pull it out later.

He'd never weighed himself before, and he doesn't start. He feels the weight gain, though. It's across his shoulders and in his thighs, toughening up his abdomen. It scared him for a while, made him irritable and snappish. Muscle definition rose up underneath his skin like the seas parting. He doesn't realize he used to be cold all the time until he's not.

He grows up more in those two years that he did in all eighteen beforehand. He's getting his degree, he's scheduled for an interview, he's going to make something big and solid and alive out of himself, and he's going to do it with Jessica.

And then Dean ruins everything.

-

Jessica doesn't wake up when the clatter comes from downstairs, which is for the best because she isn't the type to wake him up to go take care of it. She doesn't know he knows how to shoot a moving target at fifty yards or dislocate a spine using the heels of his palms, and he'd like her not to find out anytime soon.



The sound of a window opening creaks up the stairs. There's someone in Sam's house, in Sam's life, creeping through his halls like a parasite or infection. They're getting the dirt from their shoes on his floors, the stench from their skin in his air and he feels filthy with it. The need to flush them out itches in his palms as he rolls out of bed.

Sam slips down the stairs on silent, stealthy feet. Darkness cloaks him like an animal in his own home and he prowls. The clattering continues and he coils. His body is a temple and a machine and a weapon.

Someone picked the wrong house.

A shadow passes and Sam ducks behind the wall, biding his time listening to footfalls. He doesn't think before he throws himself at the intruder, every molecule of him committed to the movement, heart pumping, adrenaline spiking.

The body he connects with shoves back and Sam's not substantial enough to maintain balance in the face of the onslaught. He throws up an arm, blocked. He hurls a fist, blocked again. Fear spikes within him. He takes a hit to the side and gets shoved back through the kitchen door. Elbows in, Sam throws out a kick that smacks strongly of desperation and is blocked again before he's tackled to the ground. His head doesn't hit the hardwood because the body on top of him has a hand under his shoulders that levers him counter to gravity and keeps his skull from buckling against the flooring.

"Woah, easy tiger," the body rumbles, laughing.

Sam pants heavily, squinting up through the darkness. "Dean?"

Dean laughs with teeth that are bright flashes of white in the darkness. He looks good, better than Sam remembered. The two years between them have been even kinder to Dean than they've been to Sam. Dean's jaw is a sharp line and his body is firm everywhere it's pressing down onto his brother.

"You scared the crap out of me!" Irritation begins to buzz under his skin. Of course Dean would be the thing pushing into Sam's life and disrupting the order. Of course Dean was the one who took Sam's confidence in his own abilities and turned it in on itself. Of course.

"That's because you're out of practice," Dean dismisses, but makes no move to remove himself from lying over Sam, perched on top of him lazily like he'd be content to lie on top of Sam on the kitchen floor for days if Sam would let him.

Sam bares his teeth in a silent snarl and jerks Dean down, flips them so that he's on top with his knee braced over his neck, staring down at his brother.

"Or not," Dean says, chasing away the stunned look on his face. "Get off me."

Sam rolls off, pulls Dean up with him and fixes his brother with a glare as Dean makes a show of brushing himself off and looking Sam over. Sam's not that willowy kid that walked out on Dean two years ago who couldn't help without hurting himself.

"What the hell are you doing here, Dean?" Sam asks sharply, breaking off Dean's gazing.

"Well," Dean grins wider, not dulling for even a second, and his eyes go wandering all over Sam again. "I was looking for a beer." He slaps a hand over Sam's shoulder, squeezes reflexively like he can't help it.

"What," Sam says again, voice and eyes harder around the edges, "the hell are you doing here, Dean?"

"Okay," Dean sighs. "Alright. We gotta talk."

"The *phone*?" Sam fingers drum against his palm irritably.

"If I'd called, would you have picked up?" Dean's grin gets a little sharp on one side, but his eyes buff it out again.

"Sam?" Jess's voice wanders in through the door and the lights flick on, taking them from the darkness of the moment to blinding radiance in a split second.

She's wearing a Smurfs t-shirt that he scrounged up out of a bin in a consignment shop a year and a half ago that she swiped from him when he started to hyperventilate about his clothes not fitting anymore. She'd sliced off the collars and chopped off the hem and told him that his shirts were her shirts now, so he was going to have to buy new ones anyway. It looks better on her anyway.

Dean's eyes are skipping between the girl with the golden hair in the doorway and his brother and Jessica's between the boy in the leather jacket and her boyfriend, so Sam says, "Jess. Hey. Dean, this is my girlfriend, Jess," feeling like the words stumble out of his mouth.

This time Dean's eyes commit to the roundabout they give Jessica and that slow, predatory smile that Sam remembers from his childhood edges out over his lips and consumes the smile he had for Sam.

"Wait," Jessica looks to Sam, eyes wide, "Your brother Dean?"

Sam isn't sure how Jessica feels about Dean, or the concept of 'Dean' that Sam shared with her those few times. She knows that Dean's twined into Sam's issues so tightly he's not sure how to begin to untangle them and she knows that Sam ran away in part so that he doesn't have to try. She knows exactly how Sam feels about Dean, but Sam doesn't know where she stands.

Dean grins and when Dean grins he's beautiful like no one could believe and he's got his eyes on Sam's Jess, and the slope of her neck, and the way that her thighs run parallel, and that curve of her waist.

"Oh, I love the smurfs!" Dean's canine teeth flash in the light. "You know, I gotta tell you, you are completely out of my brother's league."

Jessica's eyes tighten. "Just let me go put something on."

"No, no, no," Dean scoffs as she turns to leave. "I wouldn't dream of it. Seriously."

Sam isn't sure what look is on his face when Dean spares him a glance but whatever it is, it's enough to knock Dean's smile off kilter.

"Anyway," Dean's focus shifts to Sam but his eyes don't leave Jessica. "I gotta borrow your boyfriend here, talk about some private family business. But, uh, nice meeting you."

Family business.

The Family Business.

"No." Sam crosses over some invisible line that divides the room between Jessica and Dean, places himself on her side and puts an arm over her shoulder like she's an extension of himself. He uses her to anchor himself to that side of the room so that there's no chance he'll float back over. "Whatever you want to say, you can say it in front of her."

"Okay." Dean's fingers play at his side, the only sign he's put off by Sam's stubbornness. "Dad hasn't been home in a few days."

"So he's working overtime on a Miller Time shift." Sam scoffs. "He'll stumble back in sooner or later."

Dean's fingers clench into a fist.

"Dad's on a hunting trip and he hasn't been home in a few days."

The other side of the room becomes a whirlpool, sucking Sam in.

"Jess, excuse us." She looks to him but he doesn't look back, keeping eye contact with his brother. "We have to go outside."

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Sam's father is immortal. Sam's father is larger than life, bigger than heaven, taller than hell, untouchable. There's legend in John Winchester's bones, in his blood. He's not dead because he can't die.

He's not dead.

He's not.

He gets into a car with Dean, tells Jessica that he'll be back before his interview Monday, just to prove it.

Sam's palms itch while Dean's slap against the steering wheel to the tune of Sam's childhood on tape all the way to Jericho.

They pull up to a gas station where everything is bright and hot and Dean shoots Sam another one of those smiles before he peels himself out of the car to pump gas. Sam pops his door without thinking about it, opening it to the elements and Dean like he used to for the entirety of his adolescence like a car door was too much to have between them. He picks up the box of tapes that used to live in the back

seat but now seem to have been relocated to the passenger's seat footwell and hunts for something that doesn't bring back a memory while Dean ducks inside to pay for gas.

Dean comes back out with a bottle of soda and a bag of chips in one hand.

"You want breakfast?" he asks and for the first time Sam realizes he didn't remember to bring anything with him to eat.

"No, thanks." Sam eyes the food skeptically. "So how'd you pay for all that? You and Dad still running credit card scams?"

"Yeah, well, hunting ain't exactly a pro ball sport." His voice hasn't dropped that amused tone since they got on the road, like he's so pleased with something he's about to start fidgeting and it's beginning to grate on Sam's nerves. "Besides, all we do is apply. It's not our fault they send us the cards."

"Yeah?" Sam swings his legs back into the car when Dean shoulders his way back into the cab. "And what names did you write on the application this time?"

"Uh. Burt Aframain." Dean puts down the chips and the soda on the seat and Sam scoots imperceptibly away. "And his son Hector." He shoots Sam another smile. "Scored two cards in the deal."

"Sounds about right," Sam swallows a bad face and turns back to the box in his lap. "I swear, man, you need to update your cassette tape collection."

"Why?" Dean shoots him a reproachful look.

"Well, for one, they're cassette tapes." Sam returns Dean's expression with a significant look before lapsing back to sorting through the tapes. "And two: Black Sabbath? Motorhead? Metallica?"

Dean snatches the tape out of his hand and plugs it in.

"It's the greatest hits of mullet rock," Sam emphasizes.

"Well, house rules, Sammy." Another smile, lit up big and bright in the sunlight. "Driver picks the music, shotgun shuts his cakehole." He ditches the case back into the box in Sam's lap.

'Cakehole' is pretty much the worst thing Sam's ever heard.

"You know," Sam huffs, "'Sammy' is a chubby twelve year old."

*Back in Black* pumps out of the speakers and Dean doesn't acknowledge him.

"It's Sam, okay," Sam raises his voice to be heard over the music.

"I'm sorry, I can't hear you." Dean points dramatically to his ears. "Music's too loud!"

They drive off in a cloud of road dust. It's been fourteen hours since Sam last ate.

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It takes nearly three days to wrap up in Jericho and by the end of it Sam is exhausted and hungry, has fingerprint bruises spanning across his chest and the words, "I can never go home," echoing around inside his head.

The Woman in White had leaned over him, responded when he said that he'd never cheated with, "You will."

Sam doesn't know what that means. Ghosts don't deviate from their conduct; it's not in their makeup. If she felt justified in attacking Sam then she knows something he doesn't.

In ninth grade Pre-AP English they did an entire unit on self-fulfilling prophecies, from Oedipus all the way to Macbeth. The thought that this prediction will be his downfall plagues Sam and he just wants to go home and hold Jess close enough that the lines between them blur.

Dean tries to pull him deeper into the hunt to find their father, but Sam puts his foot down. He has to go back to his life, to Jessica, to the interview he has coming that's going to open the door to absolute security. He has to go back to the place where he has potential because nothing has changed, no matter what Dean thinks.

Sam didn't know where his father was a week ago and he still doesn't know now. Dean can do this without him.

"Call me if you find him?" Sam asks through the window on his way into his apartment. "And maybe I can meet up with you later?" The question feels needy in Sam's throat when he blurts it out but he quit Dean cold turkey once and he's bigger than he was before, maybe strong enough to shoulder both of them this time. At least in small bursts at first.

"Yeah, alright," Dean says. He's not smiling as bright anymore.

Sam pats the door of the car that used to be the beginning and end of his universe before he turns.

"Sam?" Dean's leaning across the seat so that, even though Sam's farther from the car there's still an equal distance of space between the two of them. "You know, we made a hell of a team back there."

He wants all of Sam. No timeslots, no restrictions. He wants to fold Sam up and pack him into the passenger's seat, chain him there so that they can find freedom on the road together.

He wouldn't know what to do with all of Sam if he got it.

"Yeah," Sam says. When he walks away he doesn't look back.

There's a plate of cookies on the counter that are still a little warm, chocolate chips only mostly solidified. There's a note on top of them in Jessica's big, loopy handwriting that says "Missed you! Love you!" and if Sam loved her any more he'd burst with it. He takes a cookie without thinking too hard about it.

He calls out for her but the only response he gets is the sound of water in the shower pattering down on the porcelain of the tub.

He lays his aching body out on the bed and thinks about how he's going to explain away the bruises in his chest.

A warm droplet strikes his forehead and Sam twitches, tries to ignore it for the split second before a second warm, wet drip plops right between his wrinkled brows.

Sam opens his eyes and he's not sure what he's expecting. Jessica leaning over him with wet hair and a smile, maybe. A leak in the roof.

He doesn't expect to see her pinned to the ceiling with red and wet pooling around her belly, dripping from her nightgown like in all of Sam's worst nightmares.

"No!"

The fire starts underneath her, above her, and it feels just the way his father described it and smells in a way that description fails completely. Cooking meat, scorched air, burnt hair, charred fabric, and smoke clogging up the room and Sam's throat when he screams.

There's a bang, a clatter, a "Sam!" but Sam can't hear anything but the roar of flames and his own voice screaming, "No!" like it's going to change something, can't see anything but those Jessica Lee Moore eyes that used to have green fire but now reflect nothing but gold.

"Sam!" Hands, fingers on him, pulling him, jarring him out of place and Sam screams and fights, getting nothing but a lungful of soot for his troubles. He's being bodily shoved, practically carried and he doesn't realize until his fingernails scrape against old leather on the shoulder digging into his stomach that it's Dean.

Dean drags him outside and tries to sit him down on the lawn but Sam makes a break for it again and a forearm like a steel band catches him around the waist, drags him farther away from the flames.

"No, Dean, please!" he shouts and claws at the air like it's going to give him some sort of leverage, digs his heels in to the slippery mud and tries to stumble out sentences to *make Dean understand*. "I need to- I need-"

They trip, pulling in different directions and Dean holds him down on the lawn and whispers, "Sam, Sammy, Sam," and nonsense sounds in Sam's ear that Sam can't hear over those awful, horrible things coming out of his own mouth. The residual echoes of everything in his chest writhing and dying.

The fire trucks and the ambulances and the crowds come after Sam's screams have died in his throat and the only thing left of them are the ugly scars in his esophagus and the heavy weight of them in his chest. The red lights of the sirens strobe over the steaming black guts of his apartment. His blood is simmering inside of him. Grief and rage. His bones ache with it.

He shoves Dean off, dries his face, walks past the ambulance and finds the trunk of the car, Dean a half step behind him.

He feels like he's been crawling out of a well his entire life and on the very brink of sunlight, on the last handhold until he could throw his leg over and haul himself out, he fumbled and slipped. He's falling down, down, down and at the bottom of that well is a bloody, miserable death that tastes like self-righteous vengeance that Sam wants more than sleep or air or food.

He was wrong about the self-fulfilling prophecy, then. The prediction that will be his downfall wasn't that he would cheat.

He can never go home.

"We've got work to do."

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### **10 years later.**

The tray wobbles and old bone china tea cups clatter against their dishes when Mrs. Louanne Cole, widow, backs into the sitting room. Her arthritis ridden fingers crook around the edges of the sterling silver, nails painted an immaculate pale pink that matches her lipstick and the conservative heels she's had so much practice walking in over her sixty years she doesn't even totter with the added weight life has put on her.

She probably hasn't entertained much in the past few years. Hell, if those sugar cookies are half as good as they look on the plate, Dean's more than happy to let her dote.

"I hope you boys don't mind your tea on the stronger side," Louanne comments as she sets the tray down on low glass topped coffee table settled on the floor between the paisley couch Dean and Sam are currently squashed into and the dainty arm chairs across the simple rug. The stature of the couch indicates that it was not structured with two men over six feet tall in mind, forcing their knees to press up against one another so hard Dean can feel the warmth of Sam's skin through the suit leg and the bones shift in his knee when he tries to move.

"I prefer it that way, actually." Dean smiles disarmingly and doesn't offer to help her set up the two places for them so that she can mother hen to her heart's content; it's not hurting him any.

"Sugar? Cream?" The sweet, slow tang of her Mississippi drawl is practically sugar and cream all on its own.

"No, thanks." Dean smiles again.

She turns to Sam.

"None for me, thank you," Sam says and pulls one of those tight, polite smiles that are for everyone else.

Dean shrugs and grabs for a cookie. Louanne looks pleased when she settles herself across from them.

"I can honestly say I've never had anyone from the FBI come calling before." She smooths her hands over her stark linen skirt, crossing her legs. "What can I do you for?" Her lips purse slightly, lipstick emphasizing the wrinkle creases of a face made from frowning. She looks like she wants to ask more, but sips at her tea instead.

"We just wanted to ask you a few questions about your last home," Sam assures, compassionate and authoritative in a way that Dean's never truly perfected. "Address 1674 Black Briar Court?"

Louanne curls her lips into her teeth and lets out a slow exhale. When she puts her tea down her hands tremble. "Yes. I... I heard about the family that lived there now. Terrible tragedy."

"Right." Dean resituates on the couch and his knee bumps against Sam's.

"I don't see," Louanne compulsively smooths her skirt again, one hand going to fiddle with the modest pearls strung around her neck, "what that's got to do with me."

"We actually think it might be related to your daughter's death," Sam begins.

"Suicide." Her face sours, those sad grooves getting deeper and darker like trenches carved into her face. "Couldn't have had anything to do with that poor girl. Kristen killed herself."

"Right," Dean says again, shifting more perceptibly. "We just have to follow all potential leads or we wouldn't be doing our jobs, ma'am."

He smiles and feels Sam's shoulders hunch slightly and he knows that Sam's making himself smaller to seem more unassuming when he smiles, too.

Dean wills her not to argue with the badge and just answer the questions and, after a few pink-nail-polish-picking moments, she does.

"What do you need to know?"

"Is there anything that your daughter kept close to her before her death?" Sam asks. "Something she was attached to?"

"Why?" Mrs. Cole asks slowly, eyes narrowing slightly. Dean thinks maybe she'd like to take her tea back now.

"Confidential," he cuts in before Sam can. "We're not at liberty to say at this juncture."

Louanne takes a moment to chew this over, obviously displeased, but those good old southern manners aren't going to let her turn them out and they certainly aren't going to let her deny the FBI information that might help someone else's daughter.



"I don't know," she finally relents, reaching for her tea. "Towards the end there Kristin didn't really care about... material things. If you know what you're looking for, most of her room is packed up in the attic of the old house. I'd told the new couple to throw it out because I couldn't, so it might be gone, but if it's important..."

Dean glances to Sam.

-

The story had hit the papers two weeks ago, phrased like one of those riddles Sam used to have lined up when he was five, sitting in the back seat and asking how Marc Anthony and Cleopatra died if there was nothing but water and broken glass all over the floor, Dad playing along just enough to keep Sam distracted before the big reveal came and it turned out Marc Anthony and Cleopatra are fish. Only, Caroline Branting most definitely was not a fish.

Seventeen year old girl found dead in a locked room, every drop of blood in her body smeared over the walls without a scratch on her.

The police didn't know their ears from their ass on this one and had welcomed Sam and Dean with arms wide open so that they wouldn't be solely at fault when the case turned up nothing around every corner. Fuckers.

The only history the house had was another seventeen year old, fifteen years beforehand, who had died in the same room.

Everything about the case has been routine to the point of monotony. Dean's restless while active, and ain't that a kicker? Everything's mostly footwork at this point, the thrill of the hunt dulled down to finding whatever's tethered Kristin's spirit to the physical world and lighting it so that they could trek out and find something actually worth their time.

The attic of 1674 Black Briar Court is cramped and dusty. Dean can barely get his shoulders wedged through the access panel and has to haul Sam up after him. He doesn't even want to think about trying to shimmy back down. Worse if whatever Kristin's attached to is too big to burn in an attic and they have to drag that out with them too.

"Got it?" Dean asks and before he's halfway through the question Sam's tossing him a canister of lighter fluid. It fills up Dean's palm easily, momentum jarring his arm pleasantly. "Alright, let's get to it."

Sam hauls out the boxes in the corner and Dean goes to his knees in front of them as Sam jerks them out, dust coating his jeans in a swatch thick enough that it robs him of friction. The pocket knife *shick-pings* when he flips it open and then *krrrghkrrrghs* when he saws through cardboard and tape to flay the boxes open like skinning dead rabbits.

The first box is sheets and pillows, gauzy white with a faint floral print across them without any bloodstains so Dean pushes them to the side.

The second box is stuffed animals that smell overwhelmingly of mothballs and mildew. He tears through them quickly and, again, no blood stains. Nothing human inside the box, just beady-eyed bears.

The third box is papers and smaller boxes and pens crammed together haphazardly in the tight space. Dean sighs and starts to disassemble some girl's life fifteen years after the fact.

The shoebox he surfaces is faded pink, from some company that probably went under years ago. When he pops the lid it's full –*full*– of shoddily torn out pictures, disjointed cuts made with unsteady scissors to outline the same thing over and over and over again.

"Dude." Dean recoils slightly.

"What is it?" Sam leans over and Dean holds up the box so that he can really see the pictures of women from magazines and catalogues that fill the box, heads hacked off, arms and legs and stomachs and chests circled and highlighted scratchily, repetitively.

"What do you think?" Dean's mouth twists downwards.

Sam reaches for the box without answering and sifts through it with intent eyes. Dean waits a beat and a half, knees slipping again in the dust, but Sam doesn't answer so he rolls his eyes and dives back in.

The next two shoeboxes are in similar states, lined with photographs of models and actresses with shiny veneers that Dean's seen crack and dull over time but Kristin never got the chance.

Dean wipes his palms on his jeans after he sets those off to the side, uncomfortable. Obviously a seventeen year old girl who kills herself isn't one hundred and ten percent stable, but the sort of obsessive hyper-focusing on images is talking real, true bone-deep issues that Dean doesn't want to delve into. He doesn't need to get someone else's problems all over him; he's already got his hands full.

The notebook at the bottom of the box is ratty to the core, yellowed pages falling out and curling at the corners with age and a general 'attic' residue. The cover is a nondescript pink and on the whole of the matter the notebook is average.

Dean flips it open, not expecting anything particularly exciting and gets a 'Day One: Nothing today. Coffee, tea, no food. Black. The coffee was black and it's inside me. My stomach hurts but I want to be beautiful. Day 2: Nothing again. I feel fat. Day 3: Water weight, I'll stop that too one day. Day 4: I cracked. Day 5: I'm starving,' for his troubles. There are pages and pages, the notebook is packed full with scratchy words and scribbled doodles of perfect bodies that quickly turn into skeletons and obsessive, methodical tracking of every single thing Kristin Cole put into her body in the year before her death.

Dean drops the notebook so quickly he gets paper cuts.

"What?" Sam ducks closer. "What's up?"

There's a word for this, Dean thinks, but he's never used it.

Food is one of the few honest joys in Dean's life. He tries to pray at an altar of a well-seasoned, medium rare patty at least once a week, preferably with a clergy of steak fries and a nice brew. Life is fucked up and food is a safe place, a comfortable indulgence. Why anyone would want to take that comfort and demonize it, turn it inside out into something that is the bane of their existence is a mystery to Dean. The bane of Dean's existence is everything that isn't food. Food is the way to his heart, food is the comfort he finds, food is supposed to be guiltless.

For some people it's not, though. He doesn't want to put himself in their mindsets. Doesn't even want to get near it.

Sam plucks up the notebook, leafs through a few pages, frowns, and starts leafing faster.

"I mean," Dean snorts and digs back into the box, "What kind of person does that?" Out of the corner of his eye he can see Sam look up at him. "Where do you have to be as a person to think that not eating is a good idea? I just don't get it. That's just stu-"

"Shut up, Dean."

There's a dead simplicity to the words.

Shut. Up. Dean.

The numbness around his voice is what gets Dean reeling, stricken by the sudden intensity in the room. His glance cuts into Dean deep enough to hit bone and vibrate through his skeleton.

It's the tone of Sam's voice more than the words that has Dean's words dying in his throat and eyes darting onto Sam and locking. Sam's not joking. His eyes are a flat dark blue in this light; lips a firm, thin line. He works his jaw slightly, grinding his teeth and his nostrils flare and Dean tries to backtrack, fathom something he's said any time recently that might have personally offended Sam.

Sam's been quiet since they started the case. Dean can't remember doing anything in the past week that might have put Sam in a snapping mood.

Dean opens his mouth with the thin hope that something profound will fall out but Sam cuts him off before he can even start, throwing a wooden cigar box that rattles loosely into Dean's stomach.

"That's it," Sam says shortly, already packing back up.

Dean blinks at Sam- floored, confused, affronted. "Do I even want to know what's crawled up your ass and died?" he demands sourly.

"Probably not," Sam snaps over his shoulder, lip curling.

Dean coughs up a scoff and turns to the cigar box, popping the lid.

He snaps the lid shut and closes his eyes.

Razors.

Right.

Perfect.

He can't fucking wait to get out of this town.

"Any time you're up to it," Sam snaps, tone that much tenser as he kicks the box back into the corner where he found it, not bothering to even close it back up again. His fingers are drumming along the outside of his thigh. He turns sharply and Dean thinks he can see the light glance off a thin sheen of sweat up on Sam's hairline.

Dean clenches his jaw and pops the lid on the box again. Lighter fluid, salt, a chill in the air, Sam setting his stance while hunching awkwardly to accommodate his height in the cramped attic, rock salt round loaded.

When Kristin comes she comes with cold and blood all over her white dress, crisscrossing up her arms. She comes as Dean's lighting a match. She comes skinny and pale in the center of the room. She doesn't look at Dean once.

She has small, pale feet that don't leave tracks in the dust. When she moves her bones shift first, followed by her skin, like her skin is the insubstantial, secondary part of her and the only thing solid or real about her is her skeleton.

Her head rolls on her neck, turning at an impossible angle to lock those sunken, dead eyes on Sam.

Sam cocks the gun with violently shaking fingers as she cocks her head, metal clacking, vertebrae grinding.

"Fuck," Dean curses as he fumbles the match, drops it into the dust and it snuffs out with a wisp of smoke.

She shutters in an out of the plain of reality as she crosses the room, eyes intent.

"Shoot!" Dean snaps, scrambling to relight the match. The match head crumbles as he strikes it against the pad. "Shit! Sam!"

Sam doesn't shoot.

His breathing gets louder and louder as Kristin corners him, Dean can hear it echoing around the room as the third match snaps under the force of his fingers and when did he buy such a stupid fucking pack of matches, where the fuck is his goddamn lighter, shit.

She's nearly seductive when she slithers up to Sam, body lithe and pressing every place it has no damn right to be, leg wedged between his thighs when he lets out this choked little noise and presses back

deeper into the wall like it's going to open up and take him home. The gun clatters to the floor and Dean wonders if Sam knows how fucking pissed he's going to be if his brother dies in an attic in Mississippi.

She slinks up the length of him, going to her toes, the match lights.

She leans in close, Sam's breath gets harder, the match drops, she whispers, "I see you," and goes up.

Sam's braced up against the wall, shotgun at his feet, shaky exhale at his lips. The first exhale is rough, but it gets rougher, hyperventilating as Dean sits stupidly in the dust.

-

Sam didn't eat after Jess died.

Dean remembers that almost more than anything.

On the first day he'd let it slide. He couldn't imagine having a girl like that to take to bed every night, let alone watching her bleed and burn above that very same mattress. Dean guessed it was enough to make you lose your appetite.

On the second day he brought bagels in the afternoon as a peace offering and Sam tore a single bite out of the side of one without even cutting it and tossed it aside.

They went on like that for days. Dean brought chips and sodas and buckets of chicken and burgers and Sam would rip out a bite –one violent bite- make this twisted, sneering face at whatever food was in his hand like he didn't even realize he hated it before he put it in his mouth, and then put it down, not to pick it up again.

It drove Dean crazy.

He felt like he was eighteen again and Sam was married to that stupid water bottle, rejecting everything Dean offered up like it wasn't good enough.

Dean was trying to fucking provide and for two weeks Sam ate maybe three bites of food a day, wilting under Dean's eyes as he ran himself into a wall hounding every loose end the city had to offer. Like Jessica had been the only reason Sam had been functioning on a day to day basis beforehand and now that she was gone Sam had forgotten the basics of living: sleeping and eating.

Two weeks and Dean couldn't stand it, pried Sam away by telling him that finding Dad was their best bet and maybe the fresh air would put a little color back in his cheeks, some want back in his belly.

It seemed a little cave man-ish at the time that Dean was so offended that he couldn't provide. Sam was a grown up. He could feed himself.

Just.

Dean was bringing home the bacon, but there was no one there to eat it.

-

They're out of Mississippi in two hours on I-296, heading north just because that's the direction Dean pointed the car and Sam's still shaky all over, tremors chasing themselves around his frame.

They haven't spoken yet.

When he thinks Dean isn't looking Sam peels the label off his water bottle and tears it into shreds, stuffs them down into the cigarette tray and then just stares at the clear bottle cradled in his hands.

-

Sam didn't eat much after Dad died either, come to think of it.

-

They roll through Tennessee fast and by the time they hit Missouri Sam's stopped shaking.

Dean's watching him in peripheral, in profile. He watches the width and shape of Sam's lips working over words that he's not speaking.

Dean doesn't want to talk about it, but has this nagging feeling that obviously avoiding asking what the ghost meant when she looked right at Sam and said, "I see you," or why it caused Sam to have a small-scale panic attack, pushing Dean away and coughing out thin, "Give me a second"s, will be an even bigger sign that Dean's disturbed.

"Do we need to talk about what happened back there?" Dean asks the windshield.

"No," Sam says, all sincere. "It's nothing."

Sam's been telling him that for ten fucking years, and it's never once been true.

Dean nods once and reaches over to plug in *The Ozzman Cometh*, their unofficial the-conversation-is-over-and-by-letting-this-tape-play-you-have-hereby-agreed-to-never-bring-it-up-again-ever tape.

-

He's trying to remember if he saw Sam eat at all the entire year his deal was coming due.

-

Dean pulls off at an exit and Sam doesn't question him. Dusk is falling and they're running on a quarter of a tank with no destination in sight. The chevrons light up when the headlights hit them, urging Dean towards the left and he follows the road all the way to an Exxon.

"You want anything while I'm inside?" Dean asks, looking forward.

"No, thanks," Sam mumbles. He pops the door open when Dean steps out to fill up the tank, stretching his legs out.

Dean knows for fact Sam hasn't eaten since yesterday afternoon.

He heads inside to the industrially lit station, nodding to the small Asian woman working behind the counter with horn-rimmed glasses and lips wrinkled in an eternal purse on his way straight for the candy aisle.

Sam used to like Swedish Fish and Skittles: fruity, gummy candy where Dean always loved thick and chocolaty. Dean bypasses the peanut M&Ms in favor of snatching up a bag of Twizzlers, a box of Sweettarts, a roll of LifeSavers, a bag of lollipops. He looks up and down the aisle, licking his lips nervously. Shit, what type of candy does Sam even like anymore? Dean hasn't seen him eat candy in *years*.

-

Dean remembers. They went to prison, years ago. It was a favor, a haunting.

Dean remembers the look on Sam's face as he'd sniffed at the noodles of something, chicken parmesan maybe. Something akin to disdain as his mouth twitched and he passed the tray over to Dean's side of the table.

Dean remembers. Castiel, decked to the nines in Asylum Chic and a trench coat, showed up with two sandwiches and rattled off a description of how he'd picked the wheat and milked the goats and slaughtered the cow or some crap, essentially making the sandwich from literal scratch. He'd held out the plates and Dean had taken the one aimed in his direction. It'd been a good sandwich too. He ate it all. Later, when he found Sam's untouched on the counter, he ate that one too.

Dean remembers. He came back from purgatory a few months ago and all he wanted was Sam and something to eat. They'd been looking for Kevin and Sam was set up with his laptop on a grate table outside a café and when Dean sat down a burger showed up, planted there by a waiter who didn't give them a second glance and then shoved over to Dean's side of the table with an open palm.

"Sweet mother of God. It's for me? Seriously?"

Sam gave him a look, like he was an idiot. Said, "Dude, it's a burger," when Dean bit into it and made happy noises, like there was no possible way a burger could be anything more than *a burger*.

"It's a treasure."

-

"Dude?" Sam's eyebrows make a run for his hairline when Dean drops the bag of candy in the front seat.

"Munchies," Dean excuses with a snort. "We haven't eaten since, like, yesterday, and its Indiana or bust tonight, so if you've got to use the bathroom speak now or forever hold your pee."

Sam rolls his eyes. "I'll get some water bottles while I'm in there, since I notice you conveniently forgot that hydration is a thing. Again."

Dean laughs a little too loud and feels like he's hamming up everything he touches. Sam shoots him a look caught between confused, amused, and suspicious with one eye narrowed a little bit more than the other as he straighten himself out, letting the stare linger as he walks away.

He's so tall, Dean re-realizes for the millionth time as he looks over the broadness of Sam's shoulders. Sam's so tall and no one ever even notices.

-

Dean eats. Dean eats all the time. Dean eats and Sam gives him these *looks* when he does.

Like, "Do you want to tone it down a little bit, father?" when Dean's got his face stuffed full of appetizers and they're both dressed as priests at a wake.

Honestly, most of the time Dean goes so over the top jut get a reaction out of Sam.

It wasn't until their first run-in with the trickster, when it still *was* a trickster, and Sam was telling Bobby his side of the story and dedicated huge chunks of description to Dean eating and drinking, describing Dean eating caramels with such exaggeration and disdain, that Dean got his first insight into how Sam really perceived him. It should have been a hint.

Dean remembers being angry at Sam at the time because he'd thought he'd let the air out of the tires and some little vindictive part of him that wanted revenge ran through a scroll of harmless things he could do to drive Sam absolutely insane and Dean had chosen putting food on Sam's bed, sitting there and eating it as Sam sent him dark looks from behind a book.

-

Dean's fingers drum erratically along with *Crazy Train* against the wheel as he watches Sam walk back out of the station, two fingers hooked around the cap of one of those huge bottles of Aquafina, the other pressed to his lips as he walks, head tilted back, throat working visibly under the tan skin of that long neck as he swallows.

Dean fists a handful of Sweettarts from one of the bags he's torn open and spread out over the front seat, popping all of them into his mouth and making a puckered face that Sam teases him for when he slides back into the car.

He puts them back out on the interstate and continues to watch Sam out of the corner of his eye.

Sam steals a couple of Twizzlers and something clenched up tight inside Dean loosens when Sam takes a bite and chews it over while staring out the window.

Dean breathes out for the first time since they left Mississippi.



Christ, what is he so worried about? He's seen Sam eat and drink; hell, he's seen Sam naked. He's not like... that. He's not like her. There's no way that Sam would have, *could have*, kept something like that from him for this long.

Dean laughs under his breath, shaking his head and exhaling again.

"What's up?" Sam asks, tearing off another chunk of strawberry licorice.

"Nothing," Dean chuckles softly. "Just, thought I saw something that wasn't there."

"Huh." Sam shrugs and turns back to the window and Dean watches the road and Sam eat.

They pass another mile marker and Sam takes another bite, chews it over contentedly and Dean's smile dulls a fraction. He eases up off the gas and waits, and waits, and waits. Sam doesn't take another bite until they come up on another mile marker. Dean speeds up. The next bite comes faster, at the next mile marker.

When Dean laughs again it's edging into mania.

-

The first thing Sam asked for when he woke up from his soulless coma was food. He looked at Dean and said that he was hungry and Dean had been somewhat astounded. He'd been sure Sam would ask for hand holding or tear therapy or some emotional huggy shit that Dean would have absolutely given to him in that moment. He hadn't expected something as simple as food to be Sam's first request.

He'd eaten two sandwiches, drank an entire beer, and Dean had watched with intent eyes as Sam chewed, mesmerized by the reality of his brother so much so that he never really registered that was the first time in years he'd heard Sam actually ask for food.

Sam had said he felt fine and Dean had believed him.

-

Sam falls asleep around the border between Tennessee and Kentucky and Dean turns off the music.

They pass under streetlamps that highlight that severe cut of Sam's cheekbone and dips deep into the hollow of the exposed part of his collarbone.

-

After Castiel crushed the wall Sam had told him that he felt good. Looked Dean right in the eye and said those words exactly, in fact.

He started running more. He went on a real health food kick- started shoving it down Dean's throat too whenever he could. He skipped Vegas Week to go on a vegan adventure in the middle of the desert for chrissake.

Now that Dean's thinking about it –thinking about how Sam weathered months of Lucifer and Hell when Castiel, an angel of the fucking Lord, lasted less than six seconds- maybe it all makes a little bit more sense.

You need mechanisms to cope with that sort of shit and you need them fast.

-

The first motel Dean hits over the border of Indiana is a Days Inn, and even if it's a little bit up on the higher end of their price range and doesn't have a neon sign pinned out on the front window assuring of hot water and color TV, Dean's too tired to find the next first motel on the road.

The entire town is damp like it's only just stopped raining after a week of downpour and the headlights glare off of the pavement of the parking lot when Dean pulls in. He cuts the engine and listens to the clicks and whirrs of idling as he watches Sam's lax face twitch with the barest traces of consciousness as he resurfaces slowly with the sudden shift from momentum to stagnation.

"We're here?" Sam slurs sleepily, blinking out the window.

"Yeah, Sammy." Dean's voice surprises him with its huskiness, like his throat is too tight to get all of the words out at once so they have to come in breaks and rasps.

Sam turns to him, bleary confusion clouding up his eyes and crinkling in his brow. "What's up?"

Dean wants to say something; he wants to tell Sam all about how Sam reads while they're in diners, crouched over his laptop or a newspaper and every time he lifts food to his mouth he reads something so substantial, so important, so significant, that it couldn't possibly split attention with him eating a full bite. He wants to tell Sam about how Sam only drinks beer when Dean drinks beer, but never finishes them.

He curls his fingers around the steering wheel and squeezes until his knuckles go bloodless instead.

"Nothing," Dean grits and feels exhausted in the marrow of him. "Just tired. Not all of us got to nap through two state lines, Sam."

Sam's jaw pops around a yawn as he makes a show of ignoring Dean.

They check-in in virtual silence, executing nightly rituals in much the same way. Dean watches Sam peel himself out of his clothes; long, thick legs going on forever as he folds his jeans down; the broad expanse of his back when he shrugs out of his jacket and his over shirt and his undershirt, peeling away the layers. He's all smooth, broad planes across his shoulders and down his flanks that look warm and solid; and sharp, harsh angles high on his cheekbones and in the notches of his hipbones and under his ribs that look like they could trap shadows and cut.

There's no softness to him.

Sam pulls a t-shirt over his head that fits across the shoulders but swims around his waist and folds those miles and miles of legs into soft fleece pajama pants with the drawstrings pulled tight to cinch around his hips.

“Night” Sam yawns and crawls in between the sheets, not inquiring as to why Dean’s still fully clothed or even if he’s going to bed at all. He flops down with the heavy *whump* of air being forcibly evacuated from the fabric of sheet and the squeaking protests of stale mattress springs.

Dean listens to air fill Sam’s lungs and the rustle-pull of his bare skin against stiff hotel sheets into the early hours of the morning when sleep finally lays a second claim on Sam.

Dean doesn’t sleep. Robbed of the distraction of charting inconsistencies in Sam’s breathing, he closes his eyes and is plagued by visions of sugarplums.

---

It’s no secret that through the majority of Dean’s youth he wanted with every fiber of his being to be his father. However, if there was a runner up, a –somewhat- close second, Dean would be Jack Kerouac. A dog-eared copy of *On The Road* that smells like blood and coffee stains that’s worn soft on every page from too many readings has taken up permanent residence in the bottom of his duffle. He knows Sam knows about it just like Dean knows about the packet full of film negatives Sam keeps in the bottom of his. They don’t talk about it.

He stole it from a high school library a decade and a half ago and never really looked back. He’d picked it out of a pile for the title and slipped it into his pocket for the blurb, this horrible, wonderful sense of kinship and foreboding building in his mind.

Sal and Dean. On the road.

How was Dean supposed to resist?

The book was devastating and enlightening in every way, and some terrible comfort Dean drew from it was within the highlights and scribbled notes in the margins by some nameless, faceless student of the past who had undertaken the responsibility of circling every significant thought Sal has about Dean, writing ‘obsessive’ and ‘standard of relationship’ and ‘Dean vs. women/responsibilities/domesticity’ and ‘Dean=freedom?’ over and over again, highlighting lines and lines and lines about madness; thirst, hunger, insanity.

He wonders if the person who did all that scribbling and highlighting understood life on the road. He wonders what they found when they read that book.

Hell, he wonders if Jack Kerouac himself ever really understood those concepts he was talking about.

Dean ate up all of his other books, his poetry, swung by that part of the world and stood next to his grave with some vague hope that the bastard was still hunting, still so mad for life that he wouldn't accept death and Dean would have a chance to look him in the eye, ask him how he dipped a quill in Dean's blood and wrote a story with it.

Essentially Dean would summarize the story as one about madness. Like those margin notes said. Obsession, thirst, insanity.

Dean wears all that on his sleeve. He's got a bad habit of indulging in food and drink and women, and a fixation, a preoccupation, an addiction, on, for, to, his brother.

And the damndest thing of it all is that Dean didn't really realize until now that Sam's on the road, too.

Where does he put it all?

Dean doesn't try to hide it, so he had assumed that Sam didn't either. But that just can't be true. Ghost girls don't see things that aren't there. Grown men who have fractions of the shit Sam's had buckle under the weight of themselves.

Where does Sam put it all?

Dean eyes his brother from across the table.

The diner is one of those throw-back numbers that's all bright American colors and smells thick like American food, with waiters in starched shirts and perfect bowties and bright smiles. There's a jukebox in the corner with neon piping that's lined up for the next half hour, the tiles are alternating black and whites, and the windows have frosted framing. Dean's been in this restaurant before. Nothing changes.

Sam's looking over the thick, laminated menu that could double as a brick under proper circumstances: dishes catering for breakfast, lunch, dinner, dessert, and subsections thereof for Weight Watchers and vegan and gluten free. Sam reads over each entry, every ingredient and description, pretending that he isn't going to get just a salad.

"Afternoon," a scrawny, freckled boy in the restaurant garb sidles up to the side of the table and introduces. "My name's Cameron and I'll be your waiter this afternoon. Is there anything I can get either of you to drink?"

Sam looks to Dean.

"Water," Dean mutters. He has this gross, absolutely correct feeling that if he orders a soda or a beer Sam will too. "And we're ready to order."

Between hunts is supposed to be easy. The air is supposed to be clear and the knot under Dean's left shoulder blade is supposed to ease up a little bit.

Sam sifts through newspapers while they wait for their food, flipping and scanning and reading through one article about a veteran returning home to a dog that missed her dearly that has nothing to do with

anything, but it makes Sam smile and Dean wishes that were enough to thaw the bitter chill pumping through his veins.

Cameron arrives again with their waters and Sam thanks him graciously as he set the glasses down. Dean watches Sam's eyes skip from Cameron's face to his skinny wrist setting out the glass and back again.

Dean scrubs a hand against his forehead and tries to do some fast math. Best case scenario Dean picked Sam up at twenty-two and there's been ten years, *ten fucking years*, of Dean just not noticing the way Sam gives Dean's burger a small disdainful glance when Cameron sets it in front of him before turning to his salad.

Dean chews methodically, tearing off bites without tasting an ounce of his burger. His jaw works in a mechanical circuit, the cogs of his joint churning as he watches Sam eat – two bites of lettuce, three turns of the plate around, bring the fork up, read something more interesting than the food, lower the fork back down, one stab of chicken, and the pattern repeats.

Ten whole years Sam's done that same dance around his plate and it never meant anything to Dean.

"You done?" Sam asks and Dean blinks and realizes that his plate is burger free. "Alright then." Sam smiles a bright white wedge that splits his face and dimples up his cheeks as he stands and pushes his plate away in the universal 'I'm finished' gesture as he starts to gather his things. "Let's hit it. I think I found something in Tulsa that looks like–"

"Sit down, Sam."

There's something potentially remarkable about the reflection of that deadened tone Sam used on him to start this whole mess on Dean's lips, but Dean doesn't really have the patience to hash it all out in metaphor and detail the way Sam would.

They're just three flat words to ruin a day.

The corners of Sam's lips wobble. "What?"

Dean closes his eyes and takes a deep breath and when he opens him again he's jammed a smile into his mouth so hard his face hurts. "You're not done eating, man. We don't have to leave on my account." The words ring loud and gaudy.

"I'm not that hungry." Sam shrugs.

Dean's lips fight against him to twist sourly, but he keeps them in order. "You ate four Twizzlers in the last fourteen hours. You wanna reevaluate?"

Sam licks his lips pink and shiny and shifts nervously on his feet. Dean can practically see the pulse in his neck start to jump and the cold sweat break against his hairline. "We should..." Sam's voice drops. "We should really get going."

“Sam.” The fake smile tightens and gets impossibly faker. “You’re not finished eating.”

Dean can’t fathom what taut, frigid expression is clouding up his face but he knows that it isn’t going anywhere in the face of Sam’s defiance, just like Dean isn’t going anywhere. He makes no move to get up from the table.

He sweeps his hand towards the other side of the table and jerks his head in indication for Sam to sit the hell down.

Sam sits slowly, like if he takes his time Dean will change his mind.

The way Dean sees it Sam has two outs here. He can finish his salad and there’s no problem and Dean’s blown this entire situation completely out of proportion, or he can’t and there is and Dean’s been a fucking tool for ten years. Dean’s going to be pissed either way.

Sam stares, bewildered with the sudden change of routine, and Dean shoves the plate of wilting greens forward center.

“You’re a growing boy, Sammy,” Dean says, nickname like a razor off of his tongue. “Eat up.”

Sam’s mouth twitches downwards in a childish, nearly petulant way before he looks up and catches the flint from Dean’s eyes and everything about him firms in stubbornness and suddenly they’re having an old fashioned Western-style face-off over a plate of salad.

This would be the dumbest thing Dean’s ever done except for how it isn’t at all.

Sam grits his teeth around a smile and those long fingers splay in the air and pluck up the fork, make it look slender and delicate in comparison to the broadness of his palm.

Dean slings one arm over the back of the booth and watches with unwavering eyes. It’s not hard, Sam. Just put it in your mouth, chew, and swallow. It’s not fucking *difficult*.

And Sam does.

He spears through another bite, glances up to see if Dean’s still watching, Dean’s still watching, and Sam puts it in his mouth, chews, swallows, breathes out heavily, and swallows again. And then Sam does it again. And then Sam does it again. Dean doesn’t blink until the tines of Sam’s fork scrapes against cold ceramic.

Dean looks at the smear of dressing and trifling bits of lettuce plastered to the plate and then up at Sam, who’s grinding down so hard on his teeth Dean can hear it across the table, and Dean asks himself if he’s satisfied.

And no.

He’s not.

He throws some money on the table, snorting and shaking his head as he wonders what he expected.

-

Sam's fidgety the entire ride back to the motel. He's strung taut, like he's been fashioned into a violin and Dean's been twisting the pegs of so hard that his strings don't even need contact to squeal, to snap.

Dean would feel sympathetic except for how he's in the same boat.

He's tempted, so very tempted, to drive right past the Days Inn, damn their shit still stuffed halfway under the beds, and just keep going for hours and hours, trap Sam in the car and make him digest and absorb. That's a little too petty, even for him, though.

Sam's out of the car and scratching at their door number 11 even before Dean's shifted into park.

"Hey," he says over his shoulder as he jerks the zipper on his duffle. "I'm gonna go for a jog real fast, okay?"

"Yeah, great idea," Dean retorts smartly. "Let's go for a jog."

"Wh-what?" Sam's voice wavers.

"Jogging, you and me, man. Let's go." Dean jerks his head towards the door. "C'mon." The word is almost a sneer out of his mouth. He doesn't own sneakers, he doesn't own sweats, and he hasn't run for recreational not-about-to-die reasons ever, but he'll keep up with Sam step for step today.

A stroke of helplessness passes frantically over Sam's features and he flexes and clenches his fingers at his side. The smile he finally plasters on his face is shaky. "Yeah. Yeah, sure. Let me use the bathroom first and then we can--"

He makes a step for the bathroom door but Dean puts himself in the space between with wide shoulders and hard eyes.

"What is your problem?" Sam snaps, lips tight so that there's too much teeth and anxiety in the words. His eyes get wide and start to roll between Dean and the bathroom door.

"What's *my* problem?" Dean repeats, eyebrows crawling up his forehead towards his hairline. "I don't think I'm the one with the *problem* here, Sam!"

"What are you even talking about?" Sam's voice goes high and tight and he holds his hands stiff out in front of him in absolute exasperation, like *Dean* is the one being ridiculous here.

"I'm talking," Dean snarls and jabs out a countering hand at Sam, Sam's stomach, "about you pulling a Mary Kate Olsen on me, Sam!"

Dean might as well have hit him.

Every soft tissue of Sam goes rigid and Dean can practically hear that blunt-force-blood-chilled-glass-shattered echo that assaults the senses when all securities and comforts are torn right out from underneath you and you stand, teetering and unbalanced, on the edge of terror and uncertainty.

Sam swallows compulsively, licks his lips, blinks and blinks and blinks again as he tries to stammer out a, “Wh-wh-what d-d-”

Dean’s lip curls. Sam’s still trying to lie to him; Sam’s still trying to play this off like it’s no big deal.

“You didn’t think I’d figure it out sooner or later?” Dean demands.

The tenuous burst of laughter that warbles from Sam’s lips drive him further up the wall.

“What?” he barks. “This is funny to you, Sam?”

Sam stops laughing but not looking fraught. “This is the farthest thing from funny. You’re being ridiculous, Dean. If you could hear yourself-”

“Don’t,” Dean growls warning. “Don’t you dare tell me I’m being ridiculous, or that I’m imagining things, or that I’m making it up. How long did you think I wouldn’t notice, Sam?”

“Notice *what*, Dean?” Sam hisses, backing up as Dean advances through sludgy thick air that’s hot and dry with tension.

“Your manorexia, or what-the-fuck ever!” The insensitivity falls from Dean’s lips and Sam flinches with his body. Spiteful satisfaction swirls, thick and cold like molasses, deep in his belly.

“I don’t,” Sam starts to sneer.

“You don’t what?” Dean advances again and Sam’s shoulders strike the wall between the bed and the door. “You don’t read while we eat? You don’t think I’m some food sucking fatty? You don’t drink half your beers and set them aside? What, Sam? What is it you don’t do, other than eat?”

“Shut up,” Sam hisses.

“So I guess the real question here is: when were you gonna tell me?” Dean plows right over Sam, voice cutting. “Huh, Sam? When the fuck was this going to come up? When you pass out on a hunt? When you’re too busy not eating to watch my back?”

“Don’t you dare!” Sam snaps, eyes flashing. “Don’t you even dare! I always eat before we go out! I would never-”

Sam’s voice falls out as he realizes that there’s no denial in his voice anymore. The blood drains out of his face all at once and his eyes go glassy and lost.

Dean grits his teeth so hard his jaw aches. He feels like he’s died a thousand miniature deaths in his life and this is just another blow, another funeral that he doesn’t have the time to mourn at.



“Yeah, yeah, okay,” Sam starts talking, too fast, too frantic as he licks his lips and shift on his feet. “You wanna talk about it? Yeah, alright, cool. Dean Winchester never wants to talk about anything but he wants to talk about this. You want to talk about my kidneys and how they look like shrinky dink, Dean?” A harsh bark of laughter bursts from his mouth and Dean flinches. “You want to talk about how my blood pressure is so sad the doctors at the institution asked me if I’ve ever had a stroke? Is this what you wanted to talk about, Dean? Is this where you saw this conversation going? Mr. No-Chick-Flick-Moments over here who didn’t want to talk about Dad or Hell or Benny wants to talk about eating with me, yeah, alright.” He gestures ‘bring it on’ violently, losing coordination as he grows steadily more hysterical. “Come on, Dean, let’s go. Let’s have a brother-to-brother chat about how I haven’t had a full stomach since I was fifteen. Come on. *Come on!*”

There is no one in this whole entire universe that Dean wants to punch bloody and broken more than his own brother in this moment, no person or thing he could even imagine wanting to hurt as badly as he wants to hurt this tall man with those long, thin finger and that broad chest that’s hitching and spasm with choppy breaths that barely scrape he edges of his lungs before they’re huffing back out. Dean wants to *hurt him*. His own failures looking at him right in the face, reflected in his little brother and he wants to beat the stupid out of Sam, hit the *wrong* right out of him and make him perfect like Dean used to think he was. There is not a thing that is going to put out the inferno building in Dean’s blood, roaring so loudly in his ears that he can barely hear anything outside of his knuckles popping as he clenches his fist against the urge to slam into Sam’s face again and again, beat it black and bloody and smeared until there’s nothing left to hate, nothing left to love.

Sam’s always been prone to fits, ever since he was a baby. Those loud, explosive bursts of everything he’s keeping bottled up flooding out of him violently. He throws things, he hurts things, he shouts things, and then he’s done.

Only, instead of turning it out this time, Sam implodes. He fists his hands into his hair so tight that his knuckles white out and his eyes go glossy, and then he *pulls*. For one crazy moment Dean is sure, absolutely positive, that Sam is going to start tearing out his hair; cutting and ripping until his scalp is clean and for the one moment Dean is sure, absolutely positive, that Sam’s hair is his last defense. Cutting it all off, tearing it all off, would mean something so much bigger than all of this.

“Sam.” Dean’s voice creaks on the word and that molasses turns into ice.

Sam’s breathing like air is broken glass, pulling harder.

“Sam!”

The tension snaps and so does some of Sam’s hair before Dean gets in there, grabbing Sam’s wrists and pinning him still.

“Stop it!” Dean intones frantically, scared in a way that he hasn’t been since Sam started cracking up with hallucinations of Lucifer. “What the hell, Sam?”

Sam's sucking in these deep, savage breaths like the air thinned out and there's not enough in the room, in the world, to fill his lungs. Dean's fingers are biting into the thin skin on Sam's wrists, grinding bones. His skin is cold but his cheeks are flushed bright red like mortification and fury that radiates heat, rolls out of him in waves and into the air they're sharing, into Dean.

"Sam." His voice comes out the shattered shade of what it used to be. His eyes burn, his head hurts, and he feels old all over. "Sammy, I don't know what to do here, man," he admits, words tasting like spoiled pride and fear.

"You don't know what to do," Sam repeats, mania bleeding in. "*You* don't know what to do. Okay. Okay, Dean." The words come out quick and choppy. He nods like he's a bobble head on a bumpy road and wrings his hands out of Dean's grasp. "You don't know what to *do*. Alright." He shoves Dean, hard and sharp at the shoulder, knocking him backwards.

Sam makes for the door, flighty in a way that defies definition. Dean doesn't know anything in this situation but he knows that if he lets Sam leave through that door Dean is never going to see his brother again.

Dean lunges frantically with his whole body, slamming into Sam when he's got his fist clenched round the handle, twisting when Dean's hand envelops his and the sliver of the outside world seeping in through the wedge Sam's opened gets cut off with a sharp *crack* as the momentum of Dean slams them both into the slate of wood.

"Jesus!" Sam coughs, spinning and elbowing. "Get off!" The tears spill as Dean pins him to the door, face going even redder like it used to when he really started to bawl as a child, demanding where their father was, where their mother was, why they couldn't stay. "Get off of me, Dean!" he screams, winging out with a fist that Dean catches and pins before it clips him.

Sam wrings his hands and shouts a wordless sound, working blindly for whatever freedom he can get so hard that he's welting his own wrists, bowing his own bones maybe in some muted hope that if Dean knows that he's hurting Sam he'll let go.

Dean grips harder, slams Sam's hand to the door up above his head and presses down so hard his palms start to numb.

Sam shouts, "Dean, get *off*!" with a cracking voice and struggles with his shoulders.

Dean smashes their chests together with a hollow *thunk* of empty cavities and ribs clashing, pressing Sam deeper into the door, pinned like a crazy man in a Dean straight jacket, and settles himself to wait the tantrum out, screaming, "You need to calm down!"

And Sam, the stupid son of a bitch, kisses him.

Dean's tasted desperation in muted flavors on so many lips in so many bars in his days from women who just need a moment of his time, a moment of his attention and appreciation to keep them over until

they can find someone prowling those bars who's willing to do the job full time. He's never had the distinct displeasure of tasting it in distilled ferocity until now, with Sam angling his jaw hard and sharp into him with a wet, open mouth like if he makes it really, really filthy Dean's going to flinch away, scalded and offended that Sam, his *brother*, would stoop this low, cross this line. He wants Dean to let go and not care what happens to Sam after.

Dean wants Sam to go fuck himself.

Dean wants Sam.

So Dean fights back, bites back, opens up to Sam and sinks his teeth deep into the base of Sam's lower lip and *drags*, scraping against tender wet tissue viciously, roughly laying absolute claim to Sam's mouth and the breathy gasp caught inside of it until he tugs back and runs out of runway to dig his teeth into and Sam's lip returns to its rightful place with an elastic snap. Dean hopes it swells like a motherfucker.

The air in the room goes stiff and stale, inexplicably thicker and colder than it was fifteen minutes before the Winchesters arrived and Dean feels stupid having to stare through it to look at Sam, who's looking back, and they're looking at each other like stupid idiot brothers with sore throats from screaming who just kissed.

Dean blinks.

Sam's face is flushed and his eyelashes are sticky thick and his lips are wet and red and the whole of him exudes this warm, living heat that Dean soaks up from proximity, every place where they're still pressed together across their chests and down their thighs, up to where Dean's still holding Sam's wrists above their heads.

Sam blinks.

When they kiss again it's a whirlwind mash of lips and tongues and cutting teeth that neither of them is sure of who initiated.

Sam arches into him and Dean presses his hands higher up the door so that Sam's just a long bowing line of muscle and bone that wants Dean like no one else ever did. They're sloppy, uncoordinated, breathing heavily through mouths and noses and pawing blindly once Dean is sure enough that Sam's going to grab for him instead of the door.

Dean shoves his hands up under Sam's shirts and gets his hands on the body Sam's made in fifteen years of hunger pains and obsession.

How did they get here?

Sam tries to push his hands away from further groping but Dean ignores him and burrows deeper until he's tearing Sam's shirts and jacket off in a sloppy wad over their heads and Sam's snarling wordless protest that Dean swallows back down.

What happened to them?

Sam's fingernails rake over his scalp, maybe drawing blood for how roughly he digs in and Dean returns the favor across the dip of Sam's lower back, pulling him away from the door and towards the bed.

This isn't right, a voice in the back of Dean's mind is screaming at him as Sam drags him down onto the closest mattress. This isn't how this was supposed to go. When *-if-* he ever got to take off Sam's belt he was supposed to do it reverently, not rip it off so roughly the belt loops frayed and blew out. When *-if-* he ever got to taste the line of Sam's neck he was supposed to kiss and nuzzle, not bite. They were supposed to taste like whiskey and sunshine in the doorway of death and there was supposed to be no fear. Not like this. Not now, when Dean's never been more afraid in his life and they're clawing at each other like desperate, angry animals.

For one crazy moment Dean has the image of a motel manager bursting in on them, called forth by a neighbor for all the yelling and only getting an eyeful for their trouble until his world narrows down to Sam, Sam's skin, Sam's ribs and stomach under his hands, and let the manager come, he can sit and watch them for all Dean cares.

Dean grunts out something that sounds vaguely akin to, "Come on," when he jerks at Sam's jeans, fumbling the buttons and the zipper and the hardness just underneath the fabric that's scalding his fingers.

He wants to apologize because he didn't want to start anything like this, and now he can't stop.

He burrows his fingernails into Sam's back and scores a line for every time Sam's made him scared, one for every time Sam's made him this hungry and thirsty and wanted, and Sam cuts them right back, reaching under his shirt and carving welts over his shoulders and down his chest like he's trying to scratch the freckles right out of his skin.

Dean pulls back and takes Sam's jeans and boxers with him, strips them right off those long legs and watches with hungry eyes as Sam's suddenly vulnerable, peeled of layers and completely without baggy jeans or t-shirts and over-shirts buttoned up to his neck and jackets to keep him hidden. Dean wants to look his fill, Dean wants to *see*.

Sam covers his erection first, no surprise there. Dean barely gets a good look at what Sam's cock looks like full and flush before big hands are clutching for modesty and knees are being drawn up like Sam can curl in on himself.

Every fiber of Dean screams at him to sit back and take it in, halt the momentum and appreciate for just one second because after all of this slips through his fingers he might not ever get it back and he's sure, so sure, that no one has ever taken the time to stand back and look at Sam the way he deserves to be looked at like this, but if the way Sam's breathing is hitching up again is any indicator there's no time. No time, no time, there was supposed to be more time.

Dean tears off his shirt and lays himself back over Sam, fitting himself right between those knees and trapping Sam's arms between their stomachs. Sam makes another one of those throaty sounds that Dean eats right up and puts his hands to good use while they're down there, jerking the fly open so hard that the worn denim tears down the inner seam and all Dean can do is groan in relief as the strain over his groin dissipates considerably. Sam arches up and digs his fingers into the back of Dean's neck and under his jaw to hold him pressed close as his knees hitch back up, pressing up behind Dean's arms as he does them both a favor and kicks Dean's jeans off for him.

The elastic of his boxers ends up stranded awkwardly over his ass, askew, and Dean has to surrender one hand to the cause of pushing the waistband off and kicking it away and when he gets his fingers back up to Sam's hair Sam surges up like Dean's been missing for a year. Like Dean's been missing for fifteen years.

Sam pulls at him like he's trying to pull Dean *in*, into the world where all of this, any of this, makes sense.

Dean rocks his hips, the edge of the crow on his dick catching the ridge of Sam's and Sam breaks away to whine. His legs lock, ankles crossed over Dean's lower back, slipping through the accumulated humidity swamping the air around them. Dean rocks again, rolling his body and Sam's fingers dig into his back and his mouth moves across his neck, muttering, "Yes, yes, come on," silently.

"Sammy," he groans, voice absolutely wrecked from all the not-talking they've done and he rolls his body again, Sam arching up into him like they're puzzle pieces slotted together so tight he can't unhinge himself. Dean is so okay with that.

They rut and cling like beasts, hands and skin everywhere, grinding into the sensation and no matter how much Dean wants to do this right with fucking candles and flower petals and expensive red wine and shit, this is all they get.

This, Sam flushed and eking out garbled little moans as he flushed and arches when he comes in hot streaks across their combined stomachs, thighs trembling against Dean. Dean's teeth scrape against the stubble on Sam's chin as he bites for anything he can get his teeth on and comes right after, earning high, strained gasps as he works himself through each pulse of pleasure by rocking down into Sam's steadily softening and undoubtedly oversensitive dick.

The fall back into the sloppy, soiled sheets and, for all their panting and sweating and scratching, nothing has changed.

This has been, fundamentally, an exercise in futility.

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The burn out from the tantrum and then the orgasm leaves Sam more or less useless, leaving Dean to organize their limbs into some semblance of order.

Dean fits himself behind Sam, pressing the scarred knobs of his knees into the tender undermeat of Sam's and does the opposite with his arms, Sam's knobby elbows fitting into the softness of his inner arms as he plasters himself to Sam's back like a shadow. He wishes he could spread himself thinner and coat Sam completely, maybe. Like those moms who joke about wrapping their children up in bubble wrap before sending them out only instead of little plastic pockets of air there'd be only a Dean shield between Sam and the rest of the world, taking the brunt of the damage for him.

He hasn't felt like that since Sam was a kid. Well, twenty five. Sam was pretty much a kid until Dean went to Hell, only grew up because Dean wasn't there to be that shield. Then again, Sam said he hasn't had a full stomach since fifteen, so maybe he hasn't been a kid a lot longer than Dean thought.

And the real horrible truth of the matter is that, even if Dean could curl so tight around Sam nothing could ever touch him again, he still wouldn't be able to protect Sam from himself.

Maybe that was the whole point.

He buries his nose into the back of Sam's neck and squeezes his eyes shut against thick, humid curls and just holds on.

Every breath Sam pulls in telegraphs through Dean, his spine digging into Dean's stomach as he slowly calms.

Dean wants to break the heavy silence with a joke, maybe something about being the big spoon, but figures that having his limp dick pressed into the cleft of Sam's ass so tight he's going to have to peel himself out of a tacky dry film of come and sweat later robs the moment of any plausible humor. Besides, this isn't his conversation to start.

So Dean settles, weaving his fingers through Sam's and curling his toes up into the arches of Sam's feet just to get all of the coverage he can for as long as he can, in case this is the only moment they get.

There are a few close calls; the wet crackle of Sam opening his mouth after a jump in his ribs signaling the sharp intake of a breath against Dean's bicep and across his own chest, only to be cut off again and again.

Dean waits him out.

He doesn't so much kiss at Sam's shoulders as he rubs his lips against them for the sensation, soaking up the moment for all that its worth because it exists between 'never end' and 'couldn't be over fast enough'. Sam doesn't feel malnourished in his arms. He doesn't feel fragile, like if Dean squeezed a little bit tighter he'd crumple in on himself, snap in half.

No, not bubble wrap, he thinks, picking up the train of thought where he dropped it. An oyster. An oyster holding a pearl under its shell, between the squishy, meaty, vulnerable folds of its actual substance. A pearl with a coarse, ugly grain of sand in the very, very center of it.

When Sam finally breaks the silence it takes less than four seconds for Dean to wish he hadn't.

"I don't know how to explain it so that you'll understand, but it's not... it's not something that I do just for fun or penance or whatever it is you're thinking. It stopped being something that I just do a long time ago and just sorta became me. You don't have to worry or anything, okay? I've got it under control."

Control, control, control.

The negative connotation Dean has for the word in association with Sam rears its ugly head and grind at Dean's molars for him, forces, "Control, Sam? Control like the control you told me you had over the demon blood? Or how about the hallucinations?" off his tongue in a flat, tight tone. "'Cause, from where I'm sitting, Sam, you're not exactly batting a thousand."

Sam twists out of his arms, tearing open a rift between their two bodies; his movements heavy and addled by exhaustion and distress, but so much so that he can't put space between them. He flops on the opposite side of the mattress, groping for the sheets to pull up around his body.

"You don't get it," he mutters as he jerks at the bedclothes roughly, tearing the elastic from the edge of the mattress and bundling it up around his hips like he can't stand being naked a second longer. "I knew you wouldn't get it."

"I'm trying, Sam!" Dean snaps, reaching for Sam's shoulder and yanking him back towards the center of the bed as he makes to break for the bathroom.

"You're really not!" Sam rounds on him as he rolls to his feet, all frowns and furrowed brows as he rips the top sheet and quilt off the mattress, leaving Dean exposed to the harsh exposition of the air. "I don't want a gold star from you, Dean! I don't need your approval and I sure as hell don't need you to *sign off on my fucking eating disorder*."

Dean recoils bodily. Shit, fuck, *he said the words*. They're out in the air now, undeniable; nearly physical in their absolute presence.

"You know what, Dean?" Sam says with too much teeth, mouth forming too broadly over the words. "I don't like eating. I hate it. If I didn't have to look out for you, if I didn't have to be there for *you*, I don't think I'd even do it."

"Don't make this about me!" Dean snaps.

"It is about you!" Sam screams back. "It's always been about you, Dean! I don't eat because of you, I eat because you, I want to be better because you! Because you, because *this*," he gestures to the room, the bed, their life, "And if I didn't have that I'd be back where I was when I was twenty and the first time I ever took my shirt off in front of another person she cried because she was so horrified by my body. But I do eat, Dean. I eat for you. Do you know what that means to me?"

Sam's got the sheets gripped in drapes around his narrow hips, bustled in encompassing folds of fabric that follow the trail down his legs and pool slightly around his bare feet in excess. Bruises are blooming

in roses in violets in lines and ovals from nails and teeth up his naked chest and over the broadness of his back. He's standing still, wearing them all over his skin, waiting for Dean to give some response.

When Dean opens his mouth, "Sam," comes out and nothing else.

Sam nods like he hadn't been expecting anything else and turns for the bathroom.

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In the end it takes a little over three weeks for Dean to thaw. They roam the nation aimlessly, not speaking to each other as the world passes them in blurs and smears as they jump from state to state, motel to motel, and barely look at each other the entire time. The bruises fade completely after about a week and a half and Dean's first instinct is to bite them back into Sam's skin and score his name into Sam's back with his fingernails so that they don't lose that –them- to the silence of the car and the repetitive scenery of the United States of America. But he's not allowed to touch right now. Maybe not ever again if they don't get this settled.

He yearns for a honeymoon period that they never could have had.

Whatever.

Dean expects Sam to grey and wilt under the onslaught of silence and momentum, never one for travelling truly extended periods without stability and even less for prolonged isolation.

Dean hasn't pulled out all the stops on ignoring Sam since he was twelve and Sam broke down two hours into Dean watching the television instead of him, heaving his warm little eight-year-old body right up into Dean's lap, bawling and apologizing for something Dean can't even remember what. Maybe it's childish that Dean's employing the tactic now, at thirty-six, in hopes of similar results.

Whatever his hopes were, though, it's not working.

Miles get eaten up by their wheels and Sam ignores him right back.

That white hot rage he felt so acutely three weeks ago mellows out slowly with time and miles and meals.

In the twenty three days since they fought and fucked and stopped talking Sam's just stopped pretending for Dean's sake. When Dean orders beers Sam orders water, when Dean gets pizza Sam rips the crust off and eats half of it, when Dean blatantly refused to order anything at all to see if he could starve Sam out like some sort of ill thought-out barricade Sam had simply stepped out and returned bearing what must have been half of the organic markets in Oregon and then proceeded to cook kale.

Dean hadn't even known what the hell kale was three weeks ago. He's a little bit bitter about the fact that it hadn't even been half bad.



All kale aside, though, whatever meltdown Dean was expecting, whatever faltering or failing or psychotic break he thought was on the horizon just... doesn't... come. In fact, if anything, some of the tension has leaked out of Sam's shoulders and his smile is less stiff around the edges.

The cab of the impala feels less like a pressure cooker than it has in years and Sam sprawls more, smiles more, sleeps easier in the passenger seat than Dean can remember in recent history.

Or at all. Ever.

Dean feels like, in some strange way, in his absolute failure to comprehend Sam's problems the simple act of holding on to his brother through the thick of it and coming out on the other side still determined to not let go, no matter how messy this might end, has been their saving grace.

They make a big loop around the east coast and end up in Michigan when Dean finally, begrudgingly, extends the olive branch.

And by 'olive branch' he of course means 'bag of butterless, saltless popcorn he picked up from one of those hippie grocery stores that he thinks Sam wouldn't be opposed to'.

The hotel they've setup in for the night is water-front and after Dean plucks the bag out of the microwave and tears it open to vent the swirls of steam he finds Sam sitting out on the balcony, arms crossed and braced against the lattice work of the rail as he looks out over the dying sun hitting the lake, loud kids screaming and drinking and trying to absorb the last bit of youth and summer into their skin on the shoreline before it gets too dark and too cold and they're forced back inside.

Dean sidles up on the right side of Sam –the opposite of where he's used to being on a day to day basis, but he's not driving right now- and delves into the bag with one hand without speaking up. He chews over the blandness of the unseasoned kernels. The back of Sam's arm radiates body warmth that touches at the back of Dean's and this is the closest they've been outside of the car in nearly a month. He tilts the bag towards Sam but Sam shrugs and shakes his head. They stand there together and watch the sun spark and die off the water and the youths shimmy back into their clothes as the temperature drops.

"I was thinking," Dean starts, staring into the darkness.

"Did it hurt?" Sam retorts.

"Shut up, we're about to have a moment."

Sam laughs, bright and soft, and when he turns to give Dean his full attention the sun catches deep in the trenches of his dimples.

"I was thinking," Dean starts again, picking slightly at the edge of the bag. "I don't... I don't want you to cut me out anymore." He glances up, fixes Sam with a solid stare. "If this is a big deal for you then it's a big deal for me, too. I wanna... I want to help, I guess. I can't ignore it. I won't, Sammy. If it's coming down to all or nothing with you, I'm picking 'all'."

Sam eyes him for a moment, gauging how serious Dean actually is about this, about them. “You sure you’re ready for that?”

Dean swallows around his dry throat, but doesn’t break eye contact.

The smile that touches at the corners of Sam’s lips is vaguely cutting when he leans forward into Dean’s personal space like he’s about to share a secret, testing the waters. “You know, Lucifer used to tell me that no one would ever love me like he did because no one would ever know me like he did.”

Dean flinches and grinds his teeth, irritated to the core that anyone –even the devil himself- would challenge Dean or that, in some twisted way, Sam believed him, but if Sam’s waiting for him to run he’s in for a rude awakening because Dean isn’t going anywhere. The moment ends.

Sam reaches for the popcorn.