

Our Last Date



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“Howdid you guys meet?”

Jon stops mid-garlic-smash with the blade of a knife and looks across the kitchen table at his partner, Nate. They raise their eyebrows at each other, and both of them look to their twelve-year-old daughter, Lizzie, who hadnt paused in peeling a potato when she asked.

“Um,” Nate says. “It was before we moved to New York... so it was in LA...”

“Funny story, actually,” Jon says. Nate looks to Jon and opens his eyes wide in a way that seems to scream, *No, my God, what are you doing?*, but Jon waves a hand at him and looks to Lizzie, who nonchalantly moves on to another potato. She looks at them expectantly, and Jon smiles, always a little gleeful and terrified when she mirrors an expression that is so unbelievably *Nate*, its hard to believe shes real.

“Ill tell you about our first date,” Jon says, turning back to the garlic he had abandoned momentarily. “Because, truth be told, we dont really... *remember* how we met.”

“*Really?*” she asks as she looks to Nate for confirmation. “But—well, okay.”

“But what?” Nate asks.

“I was expecting something totally gross and romantic, but this sounds way more fun,” she replies.

“Oh honey,” Nate says. “Dont even. When you know that it all ends here in our kitchen, with you peeling potatoes on a Saturday afternoon, believe me—its totally gross and romantic.”

“Totally?” Lizzie laughs.

“Like, so gross and romantic. Deep fried romance, and itll teach you something about—well, I dont know if theres a *lesson* in it.”

“So can I tell the story or what?” Jon asks.

“Yes, please, story,” Lizzie says. “How many more potatoes do I need to peel?”

“Every potato ever grown,” Nate says as he shoves a few more toward her. “Start now, you should be done by the time you can drive.”

“Im going to look up lawyers to emancipate me during story time,” Lizzie says confidently. “The storys just a big distraction, actually. Im running away.”

“Come on, you guys,” Jon whines. “Now I want to tell the story! Lizzie, you can run away later, after the potatoes and *our story*. You wouldnt *be here* if it wasnt for this story!”

“But shes running away,” Nate says as he chops his assigned mixed vegetables. “Does she want to hear how were responsible for this state shes in? The one she has to *flee*?”

“Im bored already,” Lizzie interrupts. “Dad, can you check my e-mail for me on my phone? Its right over—”

“No e-mail during family time,” Jon says sharply. “Okay, shut up everyone, Im telling a story. It all started, um, I guess five years before you were born. No... more than that.”

“No, less, I think—I think it was four,” Nate says. “Right, because it was two years *before*—well, youll get to it.”

“Right, right, okay, so flashback: four years before you were born. Dad and I were still acting a lot—I was on this awful but popular prime-time drama, and Dad was filming episodes for TV shows that would never get picked up because that was his luck.”

“And one night—”

“My story!” Jon laughs. “And one night, our mutual friends threw a party and we... drank a little too much.”

“Gross, I dont think I want to hear this,” Lizzie interrupts, scrunching her nose and determined to focus on the potato in her hand and *nothing else*. “This isnt a kids story!”

“If you let me get on with it, youll see what a good job I did of editing this for your innocent ears,” Jon assures her.

“Because youre *twelve* and that boy who keeps calling the house—”

“This isnt about me!” Lizzie says as she laughs and turns a bright, bright red.

“Honey, I think youve peeled that potato back into... whatever potatoes grow from. Seeds? Where do potatoes come from?” Nate asks.

“I can look it up on my—”

“No phones during family time! Can I tell this story or what?” Jon asks.

“I guess,” Lizzie sighs. “So you and Dad drank too much, so what? Dont make it gross.”

Jon glances at Nate, who looks up from almost slicing his finger off and grins at Jon, urging him on with the story now that there would be no more interruptions for at least five minutes. Jon clears his throat and says, “So your dad and I were at the same party, drank a little too much, and I woke up one Saturday morning, really hungover.”

“Oh, ew, was—”

“Ahem. It was 2007, and I woke up next to my new, first-generation iPhone, already proving itself to be my savior.”

“Wow, thats *old*,” Lizzie laughs. “Did it have a *keyboard*? And like, *buttons*?”

“Not important!” Jon replies.

“Four buttons,” Nate interrupts.

“Thats it, total silence until the awesome story of how I met your father is over—*no talking*.”

AFTER five straight minutes of his phone refusing to shut the hell up, Jon grabs it and squints at the screen.

REMINDER: AIDS carnival

“Oh my God, what?” Jon asks his phone.

REMINDER: date with Nat

“Oh my God, *who? Natalie?*” Jon shrieks. “Im *straight* now?”

REMINDER: 2 hours: AIDS carnival

“Please stop it,” Jon whines to his phone.

Jons shaggy monster dog, Pedro, rushes in to hush his

cries, but maybe thats just another reminder that hes hung-fucking-over and theres apparently an AIDS carnival to get to? Why did he—

Of course. It was... someones party last night. And... *REMINDER: invite Nat to brunch?*

“Who is Nat? Who?” Jon asks his phone.

REMINDER: kill felix

“Okay, this is helping,” Jon says, because killing one of his co-stars sounds like a reminder he *would* put into his phone. “Keep telling me things, iPhone.” He looks to Pedro and scratches his head. “You didnt wake me up, boy,” he notes. “That must mean Im going to find turds in my favorite shoes again, right? That cat is a bad influence.”

REMINDER: beards yay

“And you stopped being helpful,” Jon sighs as he puts his phone down. He takes a moment and stares at his blank ceiling, reviewing the information his phone had spat at him in the span of sixty seconds and formulating the questions that need answering. “All right. Who... who the fuck is Nat? Why am I talking out loud to my dog? And my ceiling? Who is going to clean up my fucking life?”

Ugh.”

He grabs his phone again, and in his inbox, he finds an e-mail from earlier in the week, reminding him about his contractual obligation to appear at a carnival with his network cohorts to support AIDS research—

“*Not* a carnival supporting AIDS or a carnival full of AIDS, okay, thats... why would I think that? Why am I so stupid?” He looks to Pedro, who is similarly baffled. “Go make me food. Go kill me something and put it in a roll. Come on, boy. This is your evolutionary purpose in—” Pedro snuffles at him and jumps off the bed, leaving Jon to whine, “And youre leaving now. Thats fine. I... I can take care of myself. I guess.”

Jon looks to the ceiling again and closes his eyes for a full minute—the night before, his nineteen reminders, Nat, most of it comes flooding back, and he sits up in bed, having just remembered all the careful plans Drunk Jon had made last night.

First up: tight jeans. Quirky shirt. Call Nat. Jon climbs out of bed and decides to do all three things at once, or do the first two things while also doing the third thing— multitasking is *not* his strong suit at the moment, but the carnival is fast approaching and its *work* and he needs to *be there*.

“Umm, hold on,” the voice on the other end says as Jon searches through his closet for the pants Drunk Jon had had in mind the night before. Somewhere in the hangover haze, Jon manages to register some relief that at least Nat *sounds* male, so he wasnt *completely* out of his gourd last night.

“Im a little hungover, so could you, caller, tell me why youre in my phone as *Massoud Sucks So Good?*”

“Oh God, why,” Jon cries into the phone. “Look. Hi. This is Jon. Jon Nunez? I... I played Massoud on that really short-lived sitcom... Im Hispanic but pass for Iranian, somehow.” Jon takes a moment to shut his eyes tightly and reflect on how he is thirty years old and *those* are his lifes descriptors.

“The *Homolarious* guy! You hit on me! We—my phone says we have a date tonight.”

“Im also the nurse on *One is Enough*,” he replies pathetically. “Did your phone tell you anything else?”

“Oh, I dont know. I got sick of it after a few minutes and Im actually surprised to be using it right now. Whats up, Jonssoud?”

“Thats an awful portmanteau, you sad bastard,” Jon laughs as he zips up his pants. “Anyway, I made like, forty iCal appointments to remind me to ask: are you busy today? Before our date? By the way, do you still want to go out on this date?”

“Oh,” Nat says, and Jons stomach isnt sure as to whether it should drop from nervousness over the possible rejection or relief that he might be released from the strangest situation hes found himself in to date. “Well, the half-lit picture of you I added to my phone—oh, one more of us—hmm—yeah, lets go out. Youre pretty cute. But its not until to—”

“Well, heres the thing,” Jon says as he chooses between two quirky T-shirts, one of which is definitely a womans Tshirt, and how did he not notice that before? Maybe he hadnt cared. Its probably for the best that he continue not to care, at least for one more day. “iPhone just reminded me that I have to be at a fund-raising carnival all afternoon. Should be fun and... do you want to go with me, maybe?”

Nat groans and then sputters, “That wasnt a no, that was just my death rattle, sorry! Um, but, Im guessing because of the gorgeous June sunshine outside that this is an outdoor carnival?”

“Yeah, is that a problem?”

“No, no problem, I just have to find my SPF 100. When did you think of meeting up there?”

“I can pick you up in an hour? We can eat there. Carnival food and shit.”

“Well, as long as theres lots of shit there, Ill be happy,” Nat laughed. “Okay, Ill text you my address—and its Jon, right?”

“Jon, yeah. Ill see you in an hour.”

“So you had no idea what Dad looked like,” Lizzie

interrupts. She had finished peeling potatoes and moved on to sneaking vegetables into her mouth from the pile Nate had chopped up. “But you went out with him anyway?”

“Your dad had a *really* great voice,” Jon says as he wipes the garlic juice off his fingers with a dishtowel. “*Had?*” Nate asks with an indignant spike in his voices pitch.

“*Has*, has always had, will always have, Im sorry,” Jon quickly corrects. He looks back to Lizzie and says with a smirk, “Besides, how was I supposed to know he was going to be bioluminescent and a very, very, *very* red-haired redhead?”

“And even though I took some photos of us on our phones,” Nate interrupts, “the bar had been very dark, and I didnt know your fathers eyebrows were actually eighty percent of his face.”

“Oh right, that was before I, like, actually shaped them. Sad days,” Jon sighs. “But—you know. It was a Saturday. There was a carnival. Why not invite this nice-sounding stranger out? If he had wanted to murder me, he could have done it the night before when I was... very compromised.”

“Uh, sure,” Lizzie says as Nate lightly hits her hand and takes the carrot slice she had grabbed for herself. “Ow, Dad! I dont think youre bioluminescent, by the way. Theres this kid in my class who is way paler than you—when we go outside, you can see *all* his veins, and he always reeks of sunscreen, its so gross.”

“Honey, I grew up in Arizona. I *was* that kid. Be nice to him. He could be your future husband,” Nate informs her.

“Gross, please.”

“Its *science*,” Nate laughs. “Women marry men who look like their fathers, so take a good look at us—its the pasty ginger wonder or—” Nate looks to Jon and grins a little as he adds, “Or Mr. Generically Ethnic over there. Take your pick. I think we cover the spectrum of maleness rather thoroughly.”

“Except youre both mostly white.”

Jon watches them for another moment, kind of lost in watching their little moment and how absorbed they are in each other, and then clears his throat and continues the story.

JONsits outside the guys house and sifts through his phone looking for evidence of who, exactly, hes going out with. So far, he had only been able to find bits and pieces, like:

- No less than four calendar reminders about seeing Nat today;
- A new event to be repeated yearly commemorating their meeting;
- A text to his brother and another friend that said, simply, *my next husband is a redhead tell no one* (made extra hilarious by Jon having never married to begin with);
- A complex thread of text messages to himself stating things like *wear the straw hat like in cuba, no guacamole southwest cliché, don't call him the colonel, he likes dogs & cats!!!, tell drew he loves princess movie;*

A flood of texts from all his co-stars and everyone else at that damn party conveying, essentially, *HIT THAT knock the gray out of his beard.*

“A gray beard, what,” Jon sighs, and opens up his photo gallery to see if he took any photos of the

mystery Nat—

Who had just closed the front door of his house behind him and was standing on the porch, looking at all of the cars for some sign of his ride to the carnival.

Jon thinks he isnt bad-looking. Not his usual type, but the conversation from this morning seemed to indicate that, though Jon may have drank enough to propel him into another dimension, he hadnt been *completely* gone out of his mind, taste-wise. Jon puts his phone in the cars coin tray and waves an arm up out the drivers side window of his car. Nat notices and walks down the steps of his porch, heading over to Jons car.

He climbs in and they exchange the same hesitant, awkward smile that has them laughing immediately. “So, here we are,” he says. “Im Nate, again.”

“Oh, Nate?” Jon asks. “Not Nat? I... I had Nat all over my phone. Dont know why.” Jon blinks slowly and takes in Nates appearance: the reddish beard growing in with hints of gray, none of it long enough to dye yet, apparently. Nate takes off his sunglasses momentarily when he introduces himself, presenting Jon with the quickest glimpse of ice-blue eyes that light up his pale, *paleface*. He didnt wear a hat, even though he looked like he was about to burn just sitting in Jons car, but that meant Jon could appreciate the dark red hair that had been artfully gelled, even after the night they had both had and the short notice Jon had given him. This was Nat—no, *Nate*.

“Yeah, you were trying to make it happen last night, but... its not? Im not a Nat. Sorry.”

“No worries,” Jon replies. “Im Jon. Jonathan. Please dont call me Jonathan, and I wont call you Nat.”

“Okay, awesome,” Nate replies, and they tentatively shake hands, laughing again as they do so. “So. Here we are, and were going to a carnival.”

Jon says, as he starts the car again, “You werent kidding—you are pale as... fuck, I dont know. You really did bring SPF 100, right? Because I might have already been responsible for the death of your liver—dont want to add skin cancer to that too.”

“I did bring SPF 100! I brought all the SPFs I could find,” Nate says. “And heres my hat, and I seriously considered a parasol or one of those umbrella hats? Mostly I save those for really important occasions, like royal functions or funerals.” Nate lifts a hand and lightly runs his finger along the brim of Jons straw hat, the one his phone had advised him to wear for some mysterious reason. Who was he kidding? It was summer in LA and this was his favorite hat—he would be wearing it until November, when his favorite knit cap came out, and the cycle would continue for time immemorial. “I like your straw hat, by the way. Very....”

“Cuban? My phone said to mention that. Say Cuban. Im Argentinean, though.”

“Um, okay,” Nate says, with absolutely *no* follow-up to help their conversation continue.

As he drives, Jon taps the steering wheel and looks over briefly, watching Nate stare out his window, and lets the silence extend for exactly two more seconds before he launches into another conversation, hopefully this one interesting enough to engage the sort-of-stranger next to him.

Jon sighs and says aloud, “Dammit, phone, we were doing so well, what with you getting me places on time and getting me dates to work functions and shit.” He looks over and Nate meets his eyes, and Jon looks down into the coin tray at the iPhone sitting there.

“Aw, poor baby iPhone,” Nate says as he takes the cue and picks it up out of the coin tray. “Are you upgrading to the new one coming out in a few weeks? July 11—I cant wait, love the current one as I do. I think theyre only going to get better.”

“Oh, definitely,” Jon replies. “Except, guilt: Im actually letting my personal assistant go because I dont need her like, calling me every hour to tell me where to go and reading my e-mail and shit.”

“So it was your human personal assistant or your iPhone, and the iPhone made the other obsolete?”

“I am the technophobes worst nightmare come true,” Jon says. “Id rather have a smartphone than pay someone to walk into my house on a day like today and try to wake me from the self-made inferno of debaucherous filth I found myself in after that party.”

“Self-made inferno of debaucherous filth,” Nate repeats. “Thats pretty hot. Thanks for letting me be the Beatrice guiding you out of that, by the way.”

“Youre white and pristine enough for it—I guess Im swarthy enough to be Dante,” Jon replies.

“Watch it, Massoud,” Nate says. “I... I have no threats after that, but I just found out that only saying „Massoud— yup, theres that twitch in your eye. So cute. So debilitating. You really didnt like playing flamboyantly gay on that show, did you?”

“Not as such, no,” Jon admits, a little aware when he stops at a light that hes clutching the steering wheel tightly enough to blanch his knuckles. “You act too, dont you?”

“Yup,” Nate says. “But I havent done anything that makes me break out into a sweat and spasms yet. Do you think I ever will? Oh, wait.” Nate leans back in the passenger seat and sighs deeply. “Just remembered I did a *lot* of soda commercials when I first came out to LA. So, yeah. I dont drink soda, if I can help it.”

“If you *did*,” Jon says slowly, “we probably wouldnt be here right now.”

“There are worse places to be,” Nate notes, and Jon looks over to give him a skeptical eyebrow, but instead finds a brilliant grin waiting for him, the first time he had ever seen it— okay, seen it *while sober*, and sober enough to remember, even.

“Youknow,” Jon says as he leans on his hand and watches

Lizzie surreptitiously check her phone, “you may be biologically mine, but you definitely have your dads smile.”

“Thats the sappiest thing Ive heard... gosh, has to be at least this month, I think,” Nate considers. He nods to himself and glances at Jon, quickly mimicking his position—one elbow up on the table, leaning on his hand and grinning brilliantly, that same knee-melting grin hed kept all these years. “Yes, I just checked with my mental catalogue. Thats the sappiest, grossest, sweetest, dripping-with-cuteness, most saccharine thing youve said all month, and if you know whats good for you, you wont push your luck, buddy.”

“Just for that,” Jon says, “maybe Ill surprise you with something even worse the next time we go out to dinner.”

“No,” Nate says with a little genuine terror in his tone. “You wouldnt. Would you? You wouldnt. You hate that stuff as much as I do. A little less than I do. *You would*. No, you wouldnt. Would you?”

“Is the story over yet?” Lizzie asks absently. “I think Im going to a friends house in a little while, if story time and dinner prep time and everything is over already.”

“Whos the friend?” Jon asks.

“Is it your pasty boyfriend?” Nate asks.

“No, just a girl from my class,” Lizzie replies as she tucks her phone back into her pocket.

“Is it your pasty girlfriend?”

“Dad,” she whines, “there are no pasty people in my future!”

“Thats just racist—I thought we had raised you better than that,” Nate laments.

“Oh my *God*, can I just go?” she pleads.

“Nope,” Jon says as he leaves the kitchen table and walks over to the potatoes she had peeled and he had put to boil earlier. “I think you can start mashing these in a little while, Lizzie, and well have an early dinner.”

“Like were retirees or something, geez,” Nate sighs. “Get on with the story! It gets really awkward after this!” “Awkward like I should leave right now?” Lizzie asks.

“Awkward like you should listen and enjoy the fun, or zone out and focus on the horrible task your overlord father has set on you,” Nate says.

“Ill decide when I hear it, I guess,” Lizzie says. “Are we *just* having potatoes and vegetables? Is this some kind of child labor workhouse?”

“Youre adorable,” Jon laughs. “Okay, the story continues!”

JON and Nate arrive at the carnival, wander, mingle, eat hot dogs and cotton candy and watermelon slices, and eventually find themselves at a table, coloring in child-sized T-shirts for charity and keeping it Casual.

“So, first-date small talk,” Jon says as he tries not to choose too many clashing colors for his charity T-shirt design. “What have I seen you in?”

“Lets see,” Nate says as he looks around for another marker. “I had a role in *Unforgettable* a few months ago. I filmed it like, a year ago, but it just came out this year.”

“Was that the Bruce Willis movie?” Jon asks. “Where hes immortal—”

“Nope,” Nate replies. “But my brother thought that too, and dont worry, the irony of the title is *not* lost on me.”

“Ouch, sorry,” Jon laughs. “What else?”

“A bunch of pilots that havent been picked up, a few short-lived series—just wrapped one up, actually—and a lot of theater. How about you? What have you done since Massoud?”

“Seriously?” Jon asks, realizing a few seconds into his incredulous glare at Nate that he had his sunglasses on and, as a result, the effect was mostly lost.

“Oh, should I know?” Nate asks. “Because Im usually watching reality TV. Also, *America’s Got Talent* just started up again! And next month: *Project Runway*! I am so pumped. Real pumped.”

“Love *Project Runway*,” Jon lies. “I want Tim Gunn to adopt and dress me.”

“I want Tim Gunn to dress you too,” Nate says, and Jon catches him looking over, his eyebrows lifted over the rim of his sunglasses. “Thats a womens shirt.”

“And you look like a French sailor,” Jon replies. Nate looks down at his blue-and-white striped shirt, and Jon can see the moment he realizes he went one button too far in the careful unbuttoning process.

A photographer comes by to interrupt them, and Nate buttons that one more button when he thinks Jon isnt looking. Jon gladly allows the photographer and the interruption, shooting Nate a Look every few seconds as he poses with his work on the T-shirt and other random shit to be found at their crafts table. Nate colors away happily, returning a smirk occasionally, but mostly focused on coloring.

“So where were we? Right—Im on that prime-time drama, *One is Enough*,” Jon says when the photographer leaves. “Im the nurse? The super swarthy, steamy, sexy nurse?”

“I like your alliteration,” Nate laughs. “Other than that... sorry. Ive never seen it. Is it good? Kind of like a *Grey’s Anatomy* thing?”

“I guess? And *House*, and—look, every network needs a hospital drama.” Jon continues to color and doesnt say much, and doesnt look at Nate until he hears an *awwww* from the other side of the table. When he looks over, Nate is grinning at him.

“Im sorry, did I offend? You cant actually *listen* to me. Look, at least youre *on* a TV show, and

they want you at these events and shit—that's really cool!"

"Our ratings are pretty amazing," Jon admits.

"See?" Nate leans over and rubs Jon's back consolingly. "There, there, baby, you're going to be just fine on your super-successful television show that has made it out of its first season—I'm guessing, right?"

"Were on our third."

"Jesus, well *that* settles it. Get past the third and I don't think they can ever actually cancel you—it'll be like *MASH* but not as good! Ever! Because nothing can *ever* be as good as *MASH*!"

"Oh, I know that," Jon says, "But I think I'm the *MASH* element of the show. I'm a vet who was sent home, and I freak out every other episode to remind America about What Really Matters."

"Just don't get legitimately preachy, like Alan Alda in those later seasons, and you're golden, okay?"

They laugh, and Jon sits up and smiles when Nate's hand stays on his shoulder, his thumb stroking his collarbone lightly as they talk. "Tell me what your next project is, since you're so sure that whatever you're working on now isn't going to last."

"Well," Nate begins. "I'm not *positive* it isn't going to last, but I know there's a good chance it won't, with my track record. I have a small role or two to film in the fall, but until then I'm going back to New York."

"Oh? Is the TV industry better there? I only know about *30 Rock* and... *Law and Order*?"

"No," Nate laughs, "I mean theater. I do a *lot* of theater. It's what I'm trained for."

"Like... like singing, dancing, acting theater?" Jon asks as a smirk forms on his lips.

"Yeah—why is that so funny? I've been doing off-Broadway stuff for about ten years and spent last year opening a Broadway show."

"Oh, I don't know," Jon says. He crosses his legs and takes a long, appraising look at Nate. "I don't know, I guess when I picture Broadway I... you don't seem... I don't know, what am I talking about, I haven't been to a show in months."

"Well, thanks for the only mildly backhanded compliment," Nate replies; he smiles, though, and Jon takes his smiling a little to mean he was only a little hurt, and not all his chances with this guy are lost. "Anyway. I sing and dance and act, and I love it, but I probably can't do it forever, so I figured I'd try my hand at getting some steady TV and movie stuff."

"Were always looking for some patient of the week stuff," Jon suggests.

"Honey, no," Nate laughs. "Me and my pastiness in all that sterile, hospital white? Come on."

"Well, that could be your thing—a fabulously stereotypical terminal queen who teaches us all how to feel and seize the day before your timely death."

"*Scrubs* did it better, I'm sure," Nate grins and squeezes Jon's shoulder. "See? I can be a jerk with the backhanded compliments too!"

"I'm so proud," Jon laughs, and he leans into Nate a little, squinting against the sun to block out some glare coming in over the rim of his sunglasses and see Nate's smile a little better. "So when are you heading back to New York? In the fall?"

"Um," Nate begins with a short, awkward bark of a laugh, "two weeks?"

"Oh," Jon says, and he tries not to let his face fall in disappointment. He's not successful, though, since he sees the disappointment mirrored in the corner of Nate's mouth tightening and dropping a little too. "That's pretty soon."

"That's *really* soon, yeah," Nate says. "I auditioned a few weeks back for a role in Shakespeare in the Park, and, lucky me, I got a pretty decent part in *The Tempest*. And since it's their MO to do a comedy and a drama in repertory, I also have a part in *Henry V*. Exciting, huh?"

“Henry Vis a history,” Jon replies matter-of-factly.

“With elements of drama and comedy, so shut up, you smart-ass,” Nate snaps at him with a warm smile. Jon has to laugh because no one ever bothered to tell Nate that being an asshole with a smile didnt cancel out the asshole element, yet it was so *refreshing*, for some reason, to meet someone so quick and so sharp... even if he wouldnt stay, and this carnival was all they had.

“OH, so you guys have always been like that,” Lizzie notes.

“Bitchy about clothes. And... everything else.”

“Bitchy to each other, mostly,” Nate says as he sneaks a glance at Jon. Jon smiles and reaches for Nates hand, running his thumb over the back.

“I think its why all my friends think youre cool,” Lizzie says.

“She just called us twelve-year-old girls,” Jon says to Nate.

“You cant buy that kind of compliment,” Nate replies. “Well, not without creepy amounts of plastic surgery.”

“Dads, dont, please, you dont have to act anymore, so dont look like freaks in your old age, please?” Lizzie asks.

“Well think about it,” Jon says slowly, like hes really considering paying thousands of dollars to have terrible things done to his face and body.

“Ill listen to more of this story if you promise me,” Lizzie says, and even holds up her hand for a pinky swear with Jon.

“Am I that bad at telling a story?” Jon asks as he pinky swears with Lizzie. She laughs and he pulls her in for a quick hug. “I have to make some kind of blood oath to get you to sit through it?”

“No, of course not! Im totally interested!” she laughs as she hugs him back. Lizzie quickly squirms out of his arms and goes around the kitchen table to Nate and holds up her pinky for another swear. “Same goes for you.”

“I cant make that promise, sweetie,” Nate says. “I really want a super-elaborate hair-plug surgery so I can have a luxurious bouffant or Afro to keep me warm in my old age.”

“Like Carrot Top?” Jon asks.

“Who?” Lizzie asks.

“You *never—ever—*what have I told you!” Nate says, full of fake rage. “Its the ginger *code!* You *never* bring up—”

Jon stifles his laughter behind his hand and watches Nate take Lizzie, hold her upper arms firmly, and look at her very seriously. “Youre so lucky. *Carrot Top* was this awful comedian from when we were young, and just about the worst thing you could *ever* call a redhead.” Nate shoots a look at Jon over Lizzies shoulder and adds, “Which you *know*, because—”

“You just get so much redder when youre mad, I cant help it,” Jon replies.

“I always forget you had that sadistic streak in you,” Nate sighs.

“Whats *sadistic* mean?” Lizzie asks. “Wait, never mind, I can just look it up.”

“The noun is sadism,” Nate clarifies as he pulls Lizzie close and rests his chin on her shoulder, watching her look up the word on her phone. He looks over to Jon and grins brightly, and Jon returns the smile. Its so many things, really. The quiet afternoon together, their daughter making excuses about *wanting* to go to a friends house but sticking around later and later just to be with them, and something small like taking initiative to find things out for herself— sometimes, she was too much to believe.

“Dads not *sadistic*,” Lizzie laughs after a moment, and she leans back against Nate and gently

elbows him in the stomach as she reads off her phone. “Whats—oh, I know the phrase. *Ball-busting*, thats what Dad does to you.”

“And thats one more phrase you should avoid using at school in front of adults who... well.” Jon scratches his chin and adds with a laugh, “Yeah, avoid using it around adults who will take the chance to bust your balls about it.”

“Okay, but Im going to use it everywhere else,” Lizzie asserts.

“You are so crazy-cute,” Nate says as he presses a kiss to her cheek. “Who do you get the crazy from, hm?”

“Uh, both of you, obviously,” she says. Nate makes a loud buzzer noise and shakes his head mock-sadly, keeping his eyes and his usual playful and warm expression trained on Jon.

“Incorrect, the answer is Dad,” he says as he nudges her so she looks at Jon. “And who do you get the cute from?”

“Umm,” she considers, and Jon laughs when her eyes dart to him and she shrugs a little. “Probably a next-door neighbor you guys used to have before I was born.”

“Oh my *God, wrong!*” Nate yells. “The answer is *me*, obviously, *God*, Lizzie, I thought you were the smart one here!” He sighs loudly and looks to Jon with a smirk. “How wrong we were. Maybe you were switched in the hospital. We specifically demanded an intelligent child.”

“Wasnt I telling a story?” Jon wonders aloud. Nate claps his hand over Lizzies mouth and makes an elaborate flourish with his hand that Jon takes as a signal to continue. He opens his mouth but doesnt speak until Lizzie rolls her eyes and settles against Nate to listen. “Thank you,” Jon says, and grins when Lizzie mumbles what Jon hopes is *you’re welcome* against Nates hand. “As I was saying....”

THEY finish decorating T-shirts and hats for the cause; they have to finish, Jon thinks, once he sees Nate pick up yet another plain white baseball cap and grab the hot pink and purple markers to start drawing *yet another* swirly fluorescent and pastel vomit design all over a perfectly decent cap.

“Hows your hangover?” Jon asks as he tilts his straw hat a little further down into his face, a futile attempt to get the sun directly overhead to stop trying to give him cancer of the face. Without his face, what else does he have? Very little, he thinks.

“Its not doing too badly, actually,” Nate says as he adjusts his own cap and sunglasses. “I think the sun is burning the toxins out of my body. Or just burning me and the toxins are going with it.”

“But is that really how biology works?” Jon asks with a quick laugh.

“Do you *really* want to risk it? Im telling you, just dont inhale near me, you know, because of the toxic fumes.” Jon laughs and says, “Well, I think you smell okay.”

“*No!*” Nate cries out. “Thats the first sign the toxins have invaded your brain! Maybe! I dont know!” Nate smiles a cheery, obviously false, made-for-late-night-infomercials smile and says, “Im not just a carrier, *I’m also a victim.*”

“Well,” Jon begins. He leans on his hand and looks away a little, smiles when he thinks enough of his face is turned away, knowing he looks like a complete idiot who cant hide how much Nate amuses him. “Do you think a trip on the Ferris wheel would help at all? You know, to air you out a little?”

“Oh boy.”

“Yeah. The Ferris wheel.”

“Do your insides feel like theyre just sloshing around inside you?”

“A little bit, but that could make the experience all the more memorable.”

“You just want me to throw up on a carnival ride and maybe hit some *children* on the way down—gross, oh my God, this is a terrible idea.” Nate lets out a full-body shudder and then grins at Jon. “So

let's go. Lead me to this Ferris wheel!"

Jon stands up at the table and looks over his shoulder at the Ferris wheel looming in the distance.

"Because you couldn't find your way to it yourself."

"I wouldn't *dare* to presume what my body is or isn't capable of today, okay," Nate says as he gets up.

"So," Nate says when they've taken exactly two steps away from their table, "are you out?"

"Um," Jon considers. "That...well, to who?"

"Publically—you know, the world at large."

"No," Jon replies. He bites on the inside of his lower lip and glances over at Nate. "Not *that* far out, no, but the important people know. Family, friends, agent."

"Those really are the only people who matter, aren't they?" Nate laughs. "Well, that's. Hm."

"That's what?"

"Not that anyone cares at this point in my career," Nate replies, "but I'm out. *Out.*" He sighs and flails his arms as if that would fill in the rest of his thought. "I mean, I was on *Broadway*, I'm a Broadway *actor*, of course I'm gay, of course I'm out."

"So you're wondering if I'll ever hold a guy's hand in public," Jon says after a moment. "Or if I'll invite a man to stand with me on the press receiving line at some premiere or event."

"Sort of," Nate says. "How far out is—"

"I wouldn't," Jon says. "I had a boyfriend—I've had boyfriends. Of course I have. And that's... not my relationship style, really." Jon sticks his hands deep into his pockets and adds, "I'm not the holding hands on the street kind of guy, or the draped on each other when we're out to dinner guy."

"You're the making out with the closeted varsity linebacker backstage after the talent show kind of guy," Nate says, and when Jon looks over, Nate grins and raises his hand slightly. "Guilty and completely proud of it, thank you."

"But," Jon says, trying not to let his expression sour too much at the direction their conversation was taking, "I take it from your leading questions that... that's not *your* relationship style."

Nate raises his hand again and then looks at his hand, completely baffled, before he glances to Jon. "I—don't know why I just raised my hand—but yeah, basically. I'm... not clingy, that's not the word, and really! I'm not clingy!"

"Uh... you're... expressive."

"Yes, that's a word that doesn't sound awful," Nate says.

"And you're... subdued?"

"Reticent," Jon corrects. He's had enough time, the thirty-something years he's been alive, half of that spent dating people, to know himself that much.

They walk the rest of the way to the Ferris wheel in silence, mulling over all that new information, trying not to let the stillness bother them.

"No, BUT you.... *Parents!*" Lizzie whines. "What—how did

you *fix it?*"

"How *did* we fix it?" Nate asks across the table.

"Compromise," Jon says simply. "Also, not overthinking it."

"I *was* clingy and showy when I was younger," Nate sighs.

"And I really didn't like... letting people in," Jon adds.

"And then we met each other and realized that... that there are way more important things to consider when you're serious about someone."

“Like how does your wine collection fit with theirs?” Jon laughs.

“Hes not kidding, its *really important*,” Nate assures Lizzie.

“You guys suck,” Lizzie replies, and then leans on the table, her weight on both her elbows. “Come on, did Dad throw up on the Ferris wheel? Did you *both* throw up on the Ferris wheel? Did you know then youd totally shove your wine collections together?”

Nate chokes on his own air and gets up from the table for a glass of water, and Jon lets his head fall to the kitchen table, ears turning bright red. “One thing at a time, honey. Ferris wheel first.” Jon lifts his head and looks over at Nate as he gulps down water and tries to make his eyebrows ask, *Do you think she knows what a euphemism is?*

Somehow, Nate understands, and he gives Jon a lopsided smirk and a shrug of his shoulders as an answer, which isnt comforting with regards to Lizzie but is comforting when it comes to how well the two of them can still understand each other after all these years.

“So,” JON says as they stand in line for the Ferris wheel,

flanked by children and parents on all sides.

“Yeah,” Nate agrees.

“Do you know whats a fun game to play?” Jon asks as he adjusts his sunglasses, giving himself the opportunity to look at Nate and flash his own smile at him. “*What the fuck happened last night?*”

“Children!” Nate hisses as he motions around them. Jon looks around and sees a few parents determinedly not looking at them, which is good enough for him.

“Whatever,” Jon says. “My game is much more fun than listening to your skin sizzle—luckily, standing in line, we can do both.”

The truth of the matter is that Jon had had one of those moments of clarity in which he could see that he and Nate just *wouldn't work*. Nate would be one more of those easy, casual friends he would keep in his contacts list and see occasionally, invite to his parties, maybe occasionally sleep with if they both had a little too much to drink, but there is nothing substantial there. He isnt the kind of guy Nate wants or needs—someone to prance around West Hollywood with and... what else did youngish, fashionable gay couples do? Shop at Williams and Sonoma? Support the arts? He does all that on his own. He is his own fashionably gay unit, and he is comfortable with that.

The realization allows Jon freedom too. He is no longer trying to *forge a connection* or something; he can open the friendly, occasionally awkward side of himself up and keep Nate at a distance. He can start age-inappropriate conversations in front of children at a network charitable event and not have to worry about how his *potential soulmate* is judging his interactions with children.

“Yourdad wrote me off like a waiter with a check,” Nate

informs Lizzie.

“No way,” Lizzie laughs. Jon watches her look at him quickly, shocked and baffled, and he buries his head in his arms again.

“And not even like a waiter at a nice restaurant, who gives you time to finish up your meal and lets you linger,” Nate goes on. Jon can feel himself turning red, but luckily his family cant see his face. More to the point, he can hear how much Nate *relishes* telling Lizzie all this.

“No, he was like a mean diner waitress,” Nate adds, “who you *dared* to interrupt in the middle of

the dinner rush to ask for the check, and she drops it onto your table and reminds you that theres a lot of people waiting so if you wouldnt mind....”

Jon raises his head and sighs loudly and then looks to Lizzie, who loves this as much as Nate. Its difficult to fluster Jon and embarrass him unless one knows what to say, but of course, Nate knows.

“To be fair,” Jon finally says, “I was very, very dumb.”

“And *young*,” Nate adds. “I mean, how old were you then? Thirty? And you still dressed like you were seventeen, and you acted like you were twenty-two. You needed time to grow up.”

“I was so young,” Jon says to Lizzie, pleading his case. “I didnt like you then, either,” Nate says.

“Stop lying in front of your daughter,” Jon laughs. “You did. I was charming and amazing.”

“Wow. Um. I dont know how to tell you this—”

“Dad,” Lizzie says softly and just a little sarcastically, “dont break him.”

They all burst out laughing, and Nate walks over to Jon so he can rest his chin on Jons shoulder, wrapping his arms around him. When Lizzie says something about how gross they are and goes to the fridge for something to drink, Nate sneaks a kiss to the spot just below Jons ear.

“Ill always like you too much,” Nate says quietly near Jons ear.

Jon smiles to himself and presses back against Nate, who wraps his arms a little tighter around Jon.

“Understatement of your life,” Jon replies.

“Oh, come on,” Lizzie whines. “Finish the story! I have a *life!*”

“If it werent for this story, you *wouldn’t*, so be patient,” Jon reminds her. She sighs and sits back at the kitchen table across from them, and Jon cant help but laugh at her staring fixedly at her glass so she doesnt have to see her parents being gross and affectionate. “Come on, get off me, I cant finish with you distracting me like this, Nate,” Jon laughs.

“Ill just find other ways to distract you,” Nate assures him as he lets Jon go and takes the chair next to him.

“So we were in line for the Ferris wheel....” Sure enough, theres Nates foot pressing against Jons calf, and he *knows* how *ticklish*he is, dammit. “And then I murdered your father and this is an android I found in the future when I had a brief stint as a time traveler. Story over.”

“Okay, okay, Ill behave,” Nate laughs, and he folds his arms over his chest so he can look at Jon expectantly. “Well? Story, please?”

“So who invited you to the party last night?” Jon asks as he

watches (from the front of the line, finally) the Ferris wheel turn and the occupants of each car shriek and chatter above them.

“Who invited *you?*” Nate asks, but he shakes his head and waves his hand. “Ha, did I snap that? Sorry. One of my co-stars knows *your* co-star, Felix, and I think said co-star was trying to ask me out? By inviting me to a strangers birthday party?” Nate squints against the sun as he looks up at the Ferris wheel and flashes a smile at Jon. “Now Im on a date with someone else, so clearly, he needs to think his strategy through a little.”

“Awkward,” Jon says. “Should make things fun on Monday morning.”

“If it helps, Im pretty sure were not going to be picked up for a full season, so I dont really care.”

“Yeah, its almost July. Its not going to happen.” Jon clears his throat as he realizes that was a little harsh, even for him, and apologizes. He can sympathize showing up for work for six weeks, filming the beginnings of a television show, and then just not being invited back to finish the rest

because no one wanted to *watch* the rest. “Just saying,” Jon adds, “I should know! I mean, what actor in this town doesn’t?”

“Good save, my ego appreciates it,” Nate laughs. “Okay, so—reconstructing the scene of the crime against our bodies. I got there with my friend at, like, ten, I guess.”

“Wow, that late?” Jon asks, and then he shakes his head. “Okay, let’s not bother putting times to things because you know how it is—there’s no chance of matching drunk time to earth time. It just doesn’t happen.”

“Or it does and then you end up sobbing into a stranger’s lap, begging to know where your life has gone,” Nate says casually. When Jon shoots him a concerned look, Nate smiles innocently and adds, “So I’ve heard.”

“I’ll take your word for it. Okay.” Jon hums to himself for a moment and asks, “So what were you drinking? Are you a lightweight? Were you completely blasted when you showed up, or did we do that to each other? These are things we need to know.”

“Oh, I was sober when I showed up,” Nate assures him. “Had dinner, my requisite glass of wine —”

“Red or white?”

“Red,” Nate says, and then he looks at Jon almost suspiciously. “You?”

“White.”

Nate sighs deeply and says with a little smile, “Guess it’s just not *meant to be*, what with our differing wine preferences and all.”

“Yeah, *that*’s it,” Jon laughs. He can feel how hollow the laugh sounds as it leaves his mouth and notices that Nate notices it too; in the interest of pleasantness, he supposes, they both ignore it and keep talking.

“And then when I got to the bar,” Nate says slowly as he struggles to remember, “I think... yes, okay! I started with a mangotini.”

“Are you serious?”

“They’re delicious at that bar! No other place on the planet, just that one.” Nate crosses his arms over his chest and asks, “And what was *your* butcher-than-butch drink of choice?”

“Oh, come on, I didn’t mean to mock you—I meant to tease you, and that’s totally different,” Jon says. “And my drink of choice is a G&T, usually, but my effeminate drink of choice is the classic margarita.”

“*That*’s how we met up!” Nate realizes. “We were both at the bar getting refills. No, I was there, and you sashayed up—”

“I don’t sashay,” Jon interrupts.

“Shut up. You sashayed up and kind of threw yourself up on the bar *and* at the bartender—”

“This doesn’t sound like me.”

“You’re right,” Nate says sarcastically, “I’m totally exaggerating the first impressions of the stranger I’m at a carnival with just to make myself feel better.”

Jon thinks about it for a moment and concedes. “Okay, maybe I do... my hips might get a little out of control when I’m not at one hundred percent.”

“A little, Shakira?” Nate laughs. “Anyway, so you wandered up and were like, ‘Would it be awful if I got a pitcher of margaritas for myself? I just *love* margaritas. And then you did something obscene to a lemon slice—”

“Wait, how do you *remember* all this?” Jon asks. “You—”

“A really hot, drunk guy wanders up to the bar next to you and starts fellating anything in sight—”

would *you* look away?” Nate asks.

“I understand,” Jon says very seriously. “Mine is an intense power, not to be used lightly.” Jon laughs when Nate elbows him in the ribs, and then he asks, “So you stepped in? Yes, you did! Because you were fighting with me over getting a mango pitcher instead of a regular one!”

“And we compromised. First a regular, and then a mango.” Nate looks at Jon and holds up his hand for a highfive. “Come on, we solved part one of the mystery! How we met! It was the alcohol! Isn't that how it always goes?”

“Totally. Okay, so we met, we got pitchers of margaritas—but then what?”

They think for a few long seconds until the gate in front of them opens and the Ferris wheel operator ushers them inside to the car and helps them buckle up.

“Im not feeling sick anymore, are you?” Jon asks once the operator has moved on to another car.

“Uh, define sick,” Nate says.

“Are you going to throw up all over me or my shoes?” Jon asks. “Should I move to the other side of the car? Do you need to get out of the car? Oh, ew, am I going to have to see that giant pretzel again? That looked so gross.”

“Keep bringing it up,” Nate warns. “I might throw up on you just out of spite.”

“Aw, well, thats a little more acceptable. I mean, its something I can understand.” Jon smiles a little, trying not to show how hes maybe just a little concerned for Nate, who is looking less pale and more green as the operator announces the wheel is about to begin moving. Suddenly, it occurs to Jon to ask, “Youre not afraid of heights, are you?”

“What, no, thats insane.” Nate laughs awkwardly. “Ive been this high up before, totally.”

“Were on a platform four feet off the ground. I dont know how to tell you this, but were going to get a little higher before this ride is through,” Jon says. “I was hoping you had noticed that while we were in line this past half hour.”

“Stop fretting, Im totally fine,” Nate says, and suddenly, their car lurches forward and they begin to move up and rise in the air. “Okay, maybe Im not totally okay with this and maybe we should keep talking, huh? That would be pretty awesome, you know, the talking, lets talk! Talkings *awesome*, isnt it?”

“Okay, dont freak out—”

“Who *tells* a person that is clearly freaking out not to freak out?!”

Jon unbuckles his belt and moves to the opposite side of the car so he can sit next to Nate and put an arm around his shoulders. He looks at him and smiles as casually (or goofily) as he can. “Hey there. Cozy, huh?”

“Great, now all the blood in my head is rushing to my dick, Im going to fall out and die *and* my corpse will have an erection, and—”

“Shut up, okay,” Jon says quietly. He tightens his arm around Nates shoulders and moves his other hand to Nates jaw, forcing Nate to look at him and, after a moment of hesitation and focus, Jon leans in and kisses him. His eyes stay open long enough to see Nates fly open with panic and then close, and once he relaxes into it, Nate does too. Jon keeps his hand on Nates jaw, lets his hand travel to the nape of Nates neck, and he lets Nate pull him in by the waist.

The car lurches when the wheel stops somewhere near the top, and Jon hears Nates breath hitch. Jon pulls Nate in again and lets his tongue run across Nates lips and push past them, tasting the sugar from the cotton candy and maybe mint from gum he hadnt known Nate was chewing this whole time.

Nate breaks the kiss and says, “I think I swallowed my gum.”

“I didnt even notice you were chewing any,” Jon laughs as he keeps his face close to Nates, justifying

it to himself as letting him focus on something besides how far up they are or how much their car is swaying back and forth in the breeze. “Do you still feel hysterical?”

“Completely,” Nate says confidently. “You should kiss me again so I don’t do anything crazy like, I don’t know, emotionally manipulate you into kissing me again. Wait, already did that. So kiss me again already, jeez.”

“I’m going to take that babbling as „yes, I’m still scared of heights,” Jon laughs as he leans in and kisses him again.

“But you go on scary rides all the time!” Lizzie interrupts.

“Well, yeah,” Nate says slowly, and Jon can see the blush creeping up on his neck. “Because you like them so much! And because Dad is around to let me hold his hand until I break all the bones in it.”

“That’s totally cute,” Lizzie says. “So that’s how you guys met and got married and had me and the stories over? Can I go to my friend’s house now?”

“Actually, not quite,” Jon says slowly. “We didn’t start dating until, hm. Two years after this?”

“Something like that,” Nate agrees.

Lizzie looks from Jon to Nate and then at both of them and then sighs loudly and asks, “Okay, what happened next?”

“We should stop if we’re boring her,” Jon stage-whispers to Nate.

“But it’s so fun to watch her suffer!” Nate says. “No, come on, I totally want to hear, I guess.”

“Great! Dad totally wants to tell you!” Nate says as he looks over to Jon. “Dad? Go on, finish it up.”

“Right, so after we got off the Ferris wheel without throwing up everywhere or your dad throwing himself off to his death, we decided to leave....”

“So,” Jon says as they walk through the parking lot to

Jon’s car after the carnival. Jon noticed they were walking identically, hands deeply in their respective pockets, maintaining a safe distance from each other after the necessary closeness of the Ferris wheel.

It was strange, but as soon as the ride stopped and they left the enclosure, it was like the spell had been broken. As long as the ride was in motion, they had talked and laughed, so at ease with each other, Jon’s arm around Nate’s shoulders almost too natural, too easy to become accustomed to, considering Nate wasn’t going to *stay*. It wasn’t going to *last*.

It was like Nate had remembered that too and so left the enclosure with his hands deep in his pockets and acted a little awkward, a little cold, as if Jon hadn’t held him in the car of the Ferris wheel for a good twenty minutes and kissed him whenever they were more than fifteen feet off the ground and Nate happened to look down.

So they walk toward Jon’s car, and once they reach it and Nate walks around to the passenger side, Jon clears his throat. Nate looks over the roof of the car at Jon standing by the driver’s side and raises his eyebrows over the rim of his sunglasses.

“So,” Jon says again. “We have like... nothing in common.”

Nate nods a little and looks down and then adds, “Also, it’s not nice to lie about watching *Project Runway*. Tim Gunn is going to get you.”

Jon laughs and shakes his head. “And *you*—you’re going to New York for the next three months to

do some Shakespeare.”

“Thats right. Thats what Im going to do.”

“And we were *really* wasted last night, so the thought of going out right now and drinking more makes me want to die,” Jon says.

“I agree, and we couldnt possibly go out and *not* drink, being young, fabulous adults,” Nate says a little sarcastically, a little awkwardly.

Jon leans against the drivers side of his car and raises his eyebrows behind his sunglasses, mimicking Nate, who has his hand on the passenger-side car door and a smirk on his lips. Jons mouth twists into a regretful smile. Nate is nice, but not too nice; good-looking, but not *gorgeous*; maybe a little too sharp for his tastes and a little too pushy. Hes just... not what Jon wants.

“I think,” Nate begins before Jon can think of a way to tell him “thanks but no thanks,” “this was a pretty fun last date.”

“Last date?”

“Dont think of it as a first date that went nowhere, since the way you listed everything keeping us apart? It seems like we were never in the cards,” Nate says with a wave of his hand.

Jon swallows nervously at being so transparent, even with his giant sunglasses taking up eighty percent of his face, his carefully guarded body language, and what he hopes is a placid expression on his face—but maybe all those symbols of lukewarm indifference are exactly what Nate picked up on.

“Yeah,” Jon says slowly. “Seems like it.”

“But,” Nate interrupts, giving Jon his dazzling smile and resting both his hands on the roof of Jons car as he speaks, “if its a *last* date, and after today we can go our separate ways and hang out whenever were in the same city... thats way better, isnt it?”

“I could get behind that,” Jon considers, remembering that he had decided something like that earlier, but he honestly had never considered someone would beat him to the punch and actually *declare* themselves acquaintances before rejection could set in. It was new. It was bold. Isnt that Nate all over?

“Good,” Nate says.

They stand still for a moment and by some silent, mutual agreement, walk to the middle of the car, right behind the trunk, to quickly meet for a kiss—what Jon thought would be a quick peck on the cheek, finalizing their amicable resignation. Instead, Nates hands rest on Jons arms and pull him in for a gentle, slightly open press of their mouths. That turns into Jons hands on the small of Nates back, pulling him in, their sunglasses clinking against each other until they laugh and separate. Jon rushes in for one more kiss and laughs: embarrassment, shyness, everything coming together to make his cheeks hot and the hot LA sun even more palpable on their too-warm skin in the asphalt parking lot.

Jon keeps his hands on Nates waist a little longer because he can see his laughing smile reflected in Nates lenses. Nate looks away, Jon thinks because he probably sees the same in Jons glasses. Its promising and disheartening all at once, considering their agreement, but he could always use more friends in more cities.

“Watch some fucking *Project Runway*, dammit,” Nate says when he pulls away from Jon and walks back to the passenger side of the car. “Or, you know, *any* TV. Like maybe any of those nine thousand pilots Ive filmed. My career is made possible with the support of viewers like you—or *any*viewers, really.”

Jon laughs as he opens the drivers-side door and adds when hes sitting inside, “Only if you watch my TV show.”

“Yeah, thats not going to happen, Im sorry,” Nate admits. He looks over and takes Jons hand before

Jon starts the car and clasps it gently between his own. Jon swallows a little and tries not to read too much into the sudden contact and how he kind of cant help the way its affecting him, but Nate doesnt seem to notice anything wrong or different. “Now that were not going to date ever, I feel like I can be honest with you and tell you, from the bottom of my heart, that I am *never* going to watch your fucking television show, because it sounds terrible.”

“Youre just the *cutest*,” Jon says, and he squeezes Nates hand warmly, then tightly until Nate groans a little and wrestles his hand out of his grasp. “Oh, did you need this hand for something? Like dealing with your perpetual loneliness?”

“*Nope*,” Nate says as he massages the feeling back into his left hand. “Im right-handed,” he adds with a smirk. “Thanks for thinking of my extracurricular activities, though, you considerate bastard.”

“So youre going to have to give me your address again,” Jon says as he pulls up the GPS app on his phone. “And then tell me the long way to get there.”

“Wow, you are an incredible glutton for punishment!” Nate says. He takes Jons phone and programs his address into it, then sits back in the seat and says, “Lets talk about more ways in which we totally dont work as a couple. Or maybe just as people? Is that fun? Huge, fundamental differences—lets go.”

“Hm, well....”

“*No*,” Nate whines playfully. “You werent supposed to *follow up*, you were supposed to... I dont know, smolder at me, or just glare outright, and start the date-wrap-up questions.”

“Except I did that in the parking lot,” Jon notes, “when I pointed out that we have nothing in common, and you see where that got me.”

“And wheres that?”

Jon glances at him from the corner of his eye and flashes Nate a smirk, and that agitates him to even louder levels than before.

“You know,” Jon continues. “Here in my car on a

Saturday afternoon with a talky, annoying theater actor—” “I dont like the tone you used there, when you said

theater actor. Whats that supposed to mean?”

“There was no *tone*,” Jon laughs.

“I can hardly help it if Broadway is doing things a thousand times more creative than can be seen in television and the film industry right now.”

“Like making new shows of every movie it can think of? Whats next, board games?”

“Dont say that where the board game people can *hear you*. With my luck, Ill end up cast as Red Pawn in *Sorry! The Musical*.”

“Well,” Jon considers, “you cant say it wouldnt be *apt*.” “Its because Im white, isnt it?” Nate asks.

“And because youre a redhead.”

“Well, thats okay, then.”

“No, WAIT—cheaters! That... a *last date*? Thats not what I

asked,” Lizzie whines.

“Technically, you asked how we met, and thats how we met, to the best of our recollection,” Nate says.

“Well, do you want to hear how we—”

“No, that’s okay, I’ll just get dressed so I can go to my friend’s house after dinner,” she replies. “But thanks for the story, it was really fun and stuff.”

Lizzie rushes out of the kitchen, checking her phone as she goes, and Jon and Nate glance at each other across the table.

“Well, that was anticlimactic,” Nate comments. “Seriously,” Jon says. “I at least expected an *aw, you’re so cute, Dads* or something.”

Nate sighs and rests his chin on his hands. “She’s almost a teenager. We’re not cool anymore. I don’t care if she *did* say her friends think we’re awesome. They’re twelve and most of them probably haven’t discovered sex and alcohol—what do they know about standards of awesome?”

Jon stares at him for a moment and blinks a few times, as if that will help his brain make sense of what Nate just said, but shakes his head and gives up after a few moments.

“It’s okay, *we* know we’re awesome,” Jon says, and then snaps his fingers to signal his sudden revelation. “No, we’re so lame we’ve gone full circle, so now we’re ironically awesome, which is a kind of awesome, so we’re awesome.”

“Kids don’t even *say*, awesome anymore, Jon, which leads me to believe your whole scale needs a major overhaul,” Nate replies.

“It was a thought,” Jon says. “And *„*awesome is an old, practically *ancient* word, to be completely full of—”

“Shit, I know,” Nate laughs as he stands up from the table and takes the long way around to the stove, where the beginnings of dinner await. Jon watches him go and grins when Nate’s hand travels and lingers across his shoulders. “I’ll take care of these potatoes our darling daughter abandoned.”

Jon, for the life of him, can’t think of a snappy comeback or retort, or some sharp comment to start a minibickering-war between them in the kitchen, or even think of something to *do* besides sit there. He stays at the kitchen table and watches Nate look down into the pot of potatoes, poke them with the wooden spoon and masher Lizzie had abandoned, and open the fridge to grab more ingredients. It takes Nate a while to realize Jon is still sitting there, staring at him, but he doesn’t turn around.

“Will you help with dinner, or is this part homemade, part takeout?” Nate asks. “I could also just, you know, *stop* and we—”

“No, I’m helping,” Jon says as he gets up from the table. “Sorry, just thinking.”

“Bad idea. Such a bad idea. If you think too much, all of this disappears. Didn’t anyone tell you that?”

“Thanks for the advice, King of the Overthinkers, but I’ll take my chances,” Jon laughs as he glances around the freezer.

“Don’t say I didn’t warn you,” Nate replies in a mocking, singsong voice.

“I *said* I’ll take my chances,” Jon says as he closes the freezer and steps over to Nate at the stove. “Also, I’ve thought about it, and I’m very glad thirty-year-old me was proven completely wrong about pretty much everything.”

Nate seems almost taken aback for a moment, but he recovers quickly and beams at Jon before he replies, “Especially about his hat collection. Wow, that craze of nouveau fedoras with the cheap and ugly bands could not pass fast enough, and somehow, you managed to own *all of them*. I was impressed and horrified, all at once. I can’t deny it—that might have been your special, unique talent that nothing in the universe could emulate.”

“Oh, come on, I’m sure *some* planet in *some* remote galaxy has a sentient being with a much worse hat collection.”

“Fine, take away your standing as a special and unique snowflake—I was just trying to make the best out of an awful hat collection.”

“What about the fact that its gone?” Jon asks. “Okay, thats definitely the best part,” Nate laughs.

“Hey,” Jon says suddenly, and he doesnt wait for a response from Nate. He pulls Nate to him, taking his face in both his hands and kissing him, and then grins against Nates mouth when he feels Nates hands on his waist, sneaking just a little lower to the back pockets of his jeans. “I should make margaritas.”

“Thats your dinner idea?” Nate asks quietly, nearly talking into Jons mouth, both of them unwilling to let go just yet. “Mashed potatoes and margaritas? I like the alliteration, but Child Services might have something to say about it.”

“Only if Lizzie reports us,” Jon laughs. “Who *doesn't* love margaritas?”

“Come on,” Nate says as he pulls away a little reluctantly and turns back to the potatoes. “Dinner, then we can sit out back and drink all the margaritas we want while Lizzie is at her friends house.” Nate looks at Jon with his most pitiful, pleading face. “Do it for the margaritas, Jon. Make dinner so we can drink the *shitout* of them.”

“Ill do it for them,” Jon agrees in all his mockseriousness. “Ill do it for you. Ill get you drunk like that night all those years ago and wake up remembering only you.”

In any other house, that could have been considered wildly romantic and a knee-buckling moment worth a swoon or two.

Instead, Nate laughs and shouts, “Shut up already! God! Just make dinner! I want some drinks, and I want some food to go with them! Just make some chicken or whatever! It matters *less and less*, just *makesomething!*”

“Just one—”

“No! Shut up! Just cook! Oh my God, I will burn this house down and then we will have *nothing*, Jon!”

“Dads,” Lizzie says suddenly, and Jon and Nate turn around to see her dressed and ready to go. “Ritas parents invited me to dinner at her house, so do you think it would be okay if. . . .”

They exchange a quick glance, and Nate glares at Jon to stop looking so *giddy* at getting exactly what they wanted tonight. Jon clears his throat and looks back to the doorway at Lizzie.

“Okay,” he proclaims, and Lizzie shrieks a little in delight. “Just thank Ritas parents for inviting you, eat like a polite little human, and be back before nine thirty.”

“Come on, Dad,” she whines, “Ritas just down the street, like, *walkingdistance*, can it be later?”

“Dont impose on people and dont whine,” Jon warns. “Well text you when were outside Ritas house to walk you home, okay?”

“Fine,” she sighs, but then she remembers shes going anyway and brightens instantly. “Okay, Ill see you later! Bye!”

“Bye, dont be a pain, thank them for the invite, we love you!” Nate calls out as Lizzie turns and leaves, calling back something intelligible only to Nate.

The front door slams and Jon and Nate look at each other, Jon grinning so widely he feels his face might split.

“Oh no,” Nate says. “Were doing this, arent we? Were having mashed potatoes and margaritas in the backyard. Were going to be a little trashed when we go get Lizzie.”

“Were *adults*, Nate, well be *fine*. Like you said—well only be a little trashed.”

“Not as comforting as you think it is,” Nate replies, and then he adds, “but go on, make a pitcher, these will be ready in five.”

“Yes,” Jon laughs. “Best night ever.”

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KRISTEN WYATT grew up in New Jersey and, after a stint in

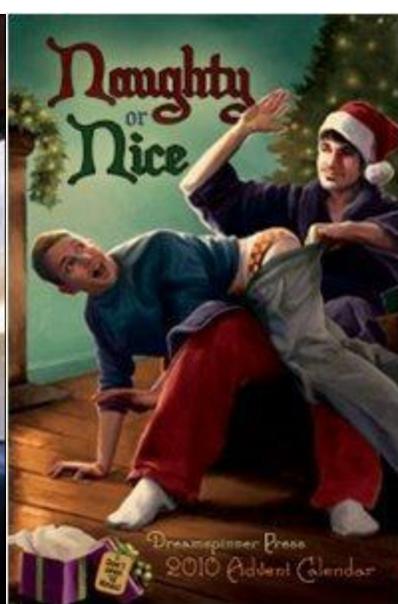
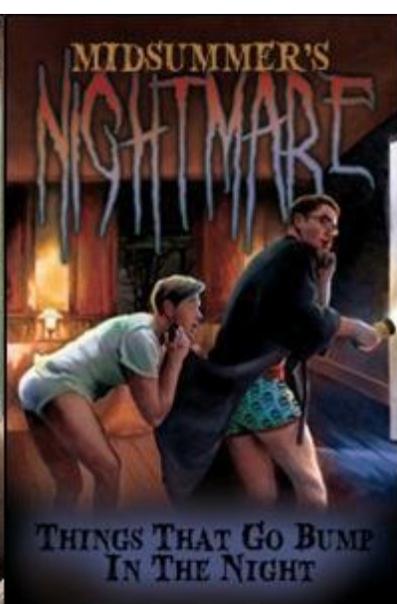
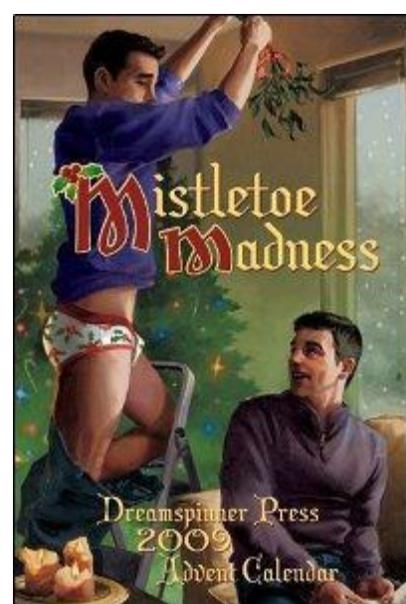
New York for college, currently lives in Philadelphia. She was trained as a teacher, a classicist, and an academic but prefers writing stories to literary criticism. Kristen currently works for lawyers and writes in her off hours, but she probably spends too much time playing word games on her iPhone.

She has loved stories her whole life, regardless of whether they're delivered in the form of 11,000 lines of dactylic hexameter or the latest celebrity breakdown documented in the half-dozen gossip blogs she follows. Her influences include a few authors and novels, but she's really a child of sitcoms and movies.

Many thanks go out to her friends for their endless support of her pursuits. Contact Kristen at a.kristenwyatt@gmail.com (because there are too many Kristen Wyatts for her to be "the" Kristen Wyatt, so she's settled for being "one" of them.)



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