

SUITORS

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Michael had her huffing Sharpies. Bennett bought her punk. Jude lit her cigarettes. Adrian stole her virginity—which is the word she'd use, eventually, whenever she told that story, not Took, or Relieved, or even Lost, like a magnet she'd stuck on the fridge and forgot about. He lasted longer than all the others. Probably because he had the Sedan. Because he could be counted on, immitigably, to pick her up from Frenchy's. Or the apartment. Or wherever the fuck she'd found herself in the thick of the Heights without him.

But Jude's the one that hurt her. Jude couldn't drive. He didn't toke the color blue. He wore broken glasses. You couldn't tell unless you'd been staring. He let me smoke his mints, and he let me sit on the edge of the bed, and when he took Jenna with him to tag the neighborhood with paint, he let me tag it too, spraying canvasses on uneven fences across the whole of Wayland Drive.

He was white. Her girls called them mocha latte. Jenna kept her mouth shut, neck cocked like a rooster. He was her first white boy, her only white boy, and when Ma called this to her attention at the dinner table, she looked her in the eye. She called herself color blind.

As a bat, she said.

Ma nodded. She said vermin had a way of finding their own.

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They'd met once. Accidentally.

He knew to take Ma's hand with all ten fingers. He knew to smile too widely. He'd found time to brush his cowlick. While our mother never could've approved, she

allowed herself to nod.

She said he could be an exception.

If nothing else, he could be tolerated.

Jenna told him near the end. It's one of the only times I saw Jude laugh. He laughed at her imitation. Lips puckered, fists on her hips. He pulled her closer and he didn't kiss her.

I watched him do that. When he looked up, I looked away.

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By then I knew what I wanted. I'd had the usual fantasies. Scoured the psychology online. Ducked around the library with *A Boy's Own Story*, *The Joys of Gay Sex*, *The History of Sexuality*, all three volumes.

I'd had thoughts, but never with the boys I knew. Strangers, mostly. All it took was a foreign glance on the sidewalk, running into a jacketed shoulder. It had me jet-packing for home. I'd all but mutilate every pillow I got the angle on. All I mean's that no one had to tell me my sister's boyfriend was contraband. I knew this. I respected it.

When I felt the rush coming on, I'd start for a glass of water. Step barefoot through the backyard. Wrap my hands around myself, enveloped by something stronger.

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But the thing Jenna wanted didn't really have a name. She'd never seen it before. Ma didn't entertain young people in the house. Our aunts' kids coupled happily enough, so that we couldn't tell one newlywed from another. They'd all found each other on the same African search engine.

Our father had his own vision of her ideal match, but I never knew it, and then he left. Jenna didn't either. He'd smiled the same smile at all of them, these young men who'd come to snuff his daughter in their backseats.

Not that she was helpless. Jenna took her pick. One of those girls for whom boys were never an issue. For whom men, lifting their own daughters from the schoolyard,

couldn't help but snip a glance at, casually asking their sons about the dark-ish girl in the snow grey cutoffs.

Maybe Never is what she'd told Larry Saunders. He'd found the boldness in him to ask. Shifting his sneakers, waiting for a number, a bite to eat. A moment of her time. The fist in his balls tightened a little further, shrunken even deeper in her girlfriends' eyes.

I had like two friends, maybe. I didn't know anyone and I knew Larry. I saw the Before and After.

She'd turned the Big Man on Campus into a mortal.

Then she did it again, to Jonathan Harris, who'd made the cover of the Chronicle. And again, to DaRell LaCarr, who'd sold drugs in Dallas.

He'd stung a tat on his armpit. A pit of snakes, he told her. One for every loose sink he'd had to plug downstate.

There's stories about what she said next. How she flicked his nose. Spat on his shoes. Told him to join them. I neither confirm nor deny. All I know is that he didn't bag her, didn't even make it to register. He spent the next month kicking the shit out of underclassmen, but of course he'd lost the aura.

The wavelengths molded off of her. Desdemona in the flesh.

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Jeff Tan and Okri sat with me at lunch. We all wore glasses and shared filthy magazines.

The hell do you put in her dinner, Jeff asked. We watched my sister glide out of the cafeteria. She'd taken a single step inside, glanced at the scenery. Then she left.

Look at these other girls, said Jeff. Look at them. Rice and peas don't do that. You know she's God, right, said Okri. You know that your sister is Allah.

Your sister is Yahweh, said Jeff.

Your sister is Buddha, said Okri.

Your sister is Padme, said Jeff.

Fuck you both, I said.

No, said Jeff. Just your sister.

Doesn't matter, said Okri, chewing. Whatever's she's eating, he's not getting it.

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Not that it lasted. It could've been that she'd finally opened her eyes. Caught a whiff of the testosterone. Took the sudden gasp of breath that defines female awakenings. But, most likely, she'd concluded that not giving a fuck inevitably meant not getting fucked.

No one waits forever. Someone else could play Penelope.

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She broke the spell on a Wednesday.

Julie Carter. Popular enough. Forever plagued for the fem first name. An unlikely choice for a start, but she sidled right up to him in between classes, put his hand on her hip.

He gave her the same look you would've. Waiting for the punch line.

Don't fuck this up, was all she said.

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And so it began. Of course it didn't last (Julie? her girls chided. You live in a Disney special or something?), but those first weeks after the Decision were full of epiphanies: the first boy to smell her breath on his face; the first boy to set his palm in her lap; the first boy to have her squeeze the shit out of it.

It had to have felt good. To be the first.

But Jenna wasn't having it. The heart quickened and the blood flowed. And it was

nice, for once, to tell her girlfriends how John couldn't tongue for shit, or why Adam never knew what to say when she licked his ears. And they'd turn to her, ready for a contribution to the Ring of Fire.

She had nothing to contribute. Just the obvious conclusions:

He's nice.

Or

His teeth are white.

Or

He talks good.

Because she just didn't see it.

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But Jude didn't mind me being there. That made him different. I'd answered the door for the others, they'd acknowledged my existence; but when Jenna finally made it down the stairs they gave me the slant-eyes straight off, like, You're still here? Jude just shrugged. He asked if I was coming.

Mostly they just walked. She'd talk about the people she knew. Family, friends, boys who'd tried to fuck her. The homeless woman she'd seen on the street. Strangers she wished she'd spoken to. He'd nod and he'd mumble, and you'd think they were the same.

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Sometimes he unearthed a pack of menthols from his hoodie, fist raised like Wart and the sword. When he cupped the lighter beneath her chin, he'd talk her through the flame's chemistry.

He didn't talk much. I know Jenna was grateful. She'd spent enough time with talkers. Talking about the weight they'd pushed. Talking about the tackles they'd whiffed. She'd mastered a means of appearing to care.

This one said so little though. If she tuned out, she'd miss it. And it wouldn't come back.

When he opened his mouth, she listened. They heard each other.

Sometimes she looked a little like Mary. Mary in the tent. Like her shepherd had snatched Wonder out of the sky, clearing the dirt just to share it with her.

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They'd met at a costume party. Or the end of a costume party. Jenna had gone with another boy, a golf player. Dressed as a vampire. Ma crossed herself on her way out the door.

Leave like a whore, you'll bring back the pest, she said.

At least that'd be exciting, said Jenna.

They were in a transitioning phase. The kind where Ma told Jenna she was all fucked up but didn't do a thing to fix it.

Me, she'd have plucked the nose off of. I watched it play out from the porch, pelting Smarties at whatever toddlers waddled by.

Save some for me, said Jenna.

I thought, Sure, bitch.

There was plenty of candy at the party. Kennedy Nathan's parents were out of town, or at least out of the neighborhood, so their single story turned haven to any number of ghouls. All slutty nurses and too-tanned ghosts.

I suffered stories from Kennedy's party for months, but Jenna couldn't be bothered to give a shit on-site. She found a sofa, surveying the scene.

She stood. Saluted no one. Left.

The sidewalks were moderately occupied. She found it in her to hit a steady pace, between the Batmen and Gretels and Barbies. She walked the length of the ward, down to where the road dips before you reach the park by White Oak Drive. If you're

lucky, most nights the most you'll deal with's some narc dealing bud.

There were too many parents out for that now. Jenna walked until she reached the next set of suburbs. She turned into the next, and then the next, until the pavement became dirt, the fences became shacks, and a hooded stick of a boy in black jeans stood before her in silence.

My sister wasn't stupid. Some girl had been raped in town some months ago. Ma took every opportunity to remind Jenna that it could've just as easily have been her (White men, she'd said, 'dey scoop you up as soon as you set it down).

She watched him watch the fence for a while, wondering if she could see what he saw. She wanted very much to. She didn't know why.

She'd called it a lost cause when he lifted his hand. He began to spray.

The two of us had seen graffiti before. Thinly veiled threats. Calls to arms. It lined the cement of Houston's abandoned townhouses, on the corners of its bars. Sometimes a mural might make it on a basketball court. Some labor of love scrawled in the shit of night.

Most of it was poppycock.

Sometimes we found something beautiful.

He started with a base of green. He stenciled a hue over that. A mansion, Jenna thought, or a castle. Behind it, he switched colors. Green to gray. Partnering the palette.

It was a dragon. It circled the structure, tongue flaring. Mouth open. Instead of fire or bullets or semen, water seeped through its teeth. He crowned his dragon, drenching the wall in gold, opting for a darker orange when that didn't bleed through. He shook the canister and turned.

Jenna stood behind him.

Not that she recognized him. For which she was grateful. She could pack herself the fuck out of his life.

But he spoke first.

It isn't finished, he said.

Dark as it was, he blushed. For some reason, Jenna did too.

What is it, said Jenna, and he told her, the YMCA on Richmond and Fairview. It's supposed to be a metaphor, he added. They charged my dad for cancelling our membership. They're basically the undead.

She said that the YMCA was a Christian organization, that his father must've forgotten to pay it.

Then she wished that she hadn't. Jude looked at his feet.

Wouldn't it make more sense to do this, said Jenna, waving at whatever it was, On their wall? They'll never see it.

They don't need to see it, said Jude. It's the fact that it's out here that matters. That someone thought enough to do it.

The two of them stared at the dragon, which had begun to smell. Is that another metaphor, said Jenna.

I don't know what it is, said Jude. He closed his eyes to think about it. Saying it made me feel better.

Then the two of them, finding nothing else to say, said nothing else. They looked at the sky.

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There were clouds up there. I know, because I saw them.

They bled a bit of black-blue, bruising the back of the stratosphere. I'd given the last piece of chocolate to a pillow-sheet and her sister.

When they'd asked for more, I told them the truth.

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Ma was waiting behind the drapes when she made it back in. Landed a whole palm on the back of her head. Cursed her for staying out. Told she was could've been drugged or baked or sold on the highway.

Jenna said she was safer on the road than her own damn doorway.

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She hadn't gotten his name, but she knew the usual channels. An easy inquiry on her end got her Jude's whole life story.

He was a junior, like Jenna. Lived with his father. He'd gone to school with the rest of them, but his parents split. Nasty enough for her to hear about it. The dad was like a wife-beater, but no one knew for sure. Jude had to move. Now he was at one of the neighboring cesspits; but he put in an appearance, every once in a while, at school with the rest of the proletariat. Jenna asked about the spray paint, and the whispers dimmed to a murmur.

Fuck if I know, said Kennedy. That's news.

And anyways, she added, Why do you care?

I don't, said Jenna. Just curious.

Right, said Kennedy. Because you're the fucking type.

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But her girls pulled some strings. They knew a question about a guy, any guy, was more feedback from Jenna than they'd gotten for months. So it wasn't three days from their pow-wow that my sister, wasting time on Some No-one's front stoop, spotted Jude, smoking, crossing a street the next block over.

They made eye contact. She waited. When he turned, shaking his head, she was in pursuit.

Hey, she said. You know that shit'll kill you.

He had a cigarette in his mouth. He stopped when she caught up to him. He was paler than she'd remembered. She counted the freckles.

Maybe, he said. Some people it doesn't.

Jenna looked at his nails, which were clean. His sneakers weren't. He hadn't shaved. Defiled anything lately, she asked.

I don't really talk about that, he said. With anyone.

She watched him smoke.

She thought that no one, anywhere, could make smoking sexy.

Good, she said. She pushed her hair up. I'm sure it's boring as shit.

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People asked me what the deal was. Jeff asked me and Okri asked me and everyone else wanted to know. Why. Why she'd picked him. What it was that he had.

I wanted to tell them that I saw what they saw. That, if anything, their sight was clearer than mine. But no one catches sense when you throw it at them.

So I said he was quiet. He was quiet and collected and probably good at sex.

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Jenna never talked about him, but you saw him on her face. Tried so hard not to look preoccupied that she percolated. Could've been multiplying tri-duplicate integers. When anyone asked, she'd say it was nothing. Nothing. Then it was back to the numbers.

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He picked her up on weekdays at the house. Sometimes he'd cut class to see her. Less frequently, he'd grab her in the middle of the night. She packed her bag and a sweater and told me to keep my fucking mouth shut. I wish I'd been the type of brother to challenge her, to say the only way I wouldn't talk was if she took me with her. But what I did was nod, Yes ma'am. It meant one less set of ears to worry about on my end, puppeteering the Karma Sutra in the next bedroom over.

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It took Jude having to ask, one afternoon, if I'd ever tagged before.

Jenna gave him a look like he'd grown a dick on his nose.

The next night, or maybe the one after, she was shaking me awake, fingers around my neck.

Screw this up, she said. I dare you.

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He'd been waiting on the sidewalk.

I trailed behind them as they stumbled, not saying much of anything, occasionally running into each other. At one point he mumbled something. She laughed. After that, silence.

I watched them walk. I watched the tops of houses. I thought about the chains we set on ourselves.

We were well into the neighborhood when he tossed down his bag. They'd established a routine by then: Jenna reached in, extracting whatever colors struck her fancy. He surveyed the surrounding area. When it satisfied him, he snatched his black spray paint. The two of them hit the front of the wall, and Jude started in on his canvas.

Eventually he asked if I wanted to try. My sister wore a face I'd never seen on anyone, anywhere, before.

Nah, I said. I'm good watching.

Bullshit, he said, and Jenna turned her head. Nobody's ever been good watching. He told me to pick a color. I found a darkish blue and settled in front of the wall. I sprayed into a clearing.

No, no, no, he said, laughing, and Jenna shook her head.

He's a fuck-up, she said. You're wasting your time.

Listen, he said, to me. You have to see what you're making.

He leaned over, grabbed my shoulders. Exhaled on my neck.

I do see it, I said.

Right, he said. But in your mind, too.

He guided my wrist towards the wall. About shoulder high. Surveying it. I couldn't see his face, but I felt the expression on it. Jenna was in my peripherals. I tried to shut her out.

He pushed my finger. The fizz from the paint started slowly, steadily, misting the auburn into a darker gray. He lifted my wrist, and I gave it to him, and the wall became a cloud. A cloud with roads behind it. The pressure was soft, just enough to relieve the paint.

Feel that, he said. You should really feel it.

I told him I really felt it.

Good, he said. He let go of my finger, but his wrist still swallowed mine.

Rise up a bit, he said, and by God I rose.

I wanted him to stop. I did not want him to stop. I wanted him to stop.

Keep going, I asked. He looked at me from my shoulder.

Yes, he said. Until we get it right. That's how you get better.

That, he said, is the only way it works.

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We went a few more times. Like he said, I got better.

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Once, I asked if she loved him or not. They'd been together about a year. For her, they could've been centennials.

It's one of the only times I can remember her really looking at me. Not just meeting my eyes, but really looking.

He smells nice, she said.

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I won't say I lit up whenever Jude was around, but I won't lie either. He'd come for Jenna. Sometimes he'd ask for me, too, if I was free. As if I had conflicting plans.

What matters is I noticed the change in her. Nothing like mine. She was slower to answer the door. Less quick to snap when Ma asked about the raccoon that'd stolen her daughter.

Of course she'd never confide in me, but word makes it around. Okri and I were waxing Marvel when Kennedy and the crew found us huddled at lunch.

She said, Make space, and of course he disappeared.

We have a question for you, said Kennedy. Sitting across from me, legs crossed, she smelled like a raspberry smoothie.

About Jude, she said. He isn't fucking your sister.

Oh, I said.

It's been weeks, added a muse in the background. The rest of the Chorus nodded.

And it's not natural, said Kennedy. It's just fucking weird. She won't talk to us about it. But you think she'd tell me this, I said.

We think you're close with Jude, said Kennedy.

I studied her.

You need me to ask him why he's not smashing my sister?

Not so eloquently, said Kennedy. Just talk to him. Sway him. You're a boy. You should know what they want.

I looked her over. I looked behind me, ready for the camera.

I looked for Okri. He was at another table, frothing.

I started to ask why I should. Kennedy had already started to stand.

Please, she said.

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By now I knew where he lived. His father's apartment. I was sweating when I made it beyond the walk-up, knocked on the door.

Nobody answered. I took that as a sign. I'd all but walked down when it finally opened.

He was balding. He wore pajama bottoms, over a dressy white top. Blank faced. Boyish. He could've been thirty, or possibly fifty. His smile was just too wide. He said hello.

I said I was looking for Jude, I'd catch him later.

Are you a friend, asked the man, and I knew that it was easier to just say Yes. He nodded.

That's good, he said.

Better than good, he said. Great, actually.

I wasn't looking for it, but you could smell the liquor from the doorway. He was barefoot.

It's always good, I guess, to have friends, he went on. And even better when they visit. Sometimes mine visit.

I saw the whole of his life story then; the wife, the kid, whole sad affair. Didn't like what I saw, wished I hadn't seen it, and I don't know what I would have possible said, but

before I could say it Jude was upon him. Nudging him back inside. Moseying like a one-legged toddler.

Sorry, he said. Wait a minute.

He closed the door.

I forced myself not to listen. I let it play out in my head.

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He had his sneakers and a backpack when he came back out.

Let's leave, he said, and I followed him, and we walked.

The afternoon gelled to a crisp cool. Beside us was the road, with its cars trickling by. Jude slipped a cigarette from his pocket. We walked into the neighborhood beside his, until we'd reached a park behind the cul-de-sac. We waved to no one and said nothing.

We ran into a bench and sat.

He's not always like that, he said, after a while. He's been doing better. Going to the meetings.

I made some vague noise of assent. Jude reached for another cigarette, He nudged the box towards me.

I could've said I didn't smoke.

I inhaled, and it made him laugh.

No, he said. Come here.

Leaning over, he motioned for me to put my head next to his. His cowlick grazed my brow. I inhaled when he set his cigarette over mine, right above my mouth, and I knew not to hold it.

We smoked.

Your sister's nice, he said. Most people aren't so lucky.

She's okay, I said. I tossed the cigarette.

He asked if she'd sent me and I said no. I watched the stub between my fingers burn.

I like her, he said. She told you how we met?

Sort of, I said. She called you mysterious.

Right, he said. He threw his cigarette into the grass. That's the exact right thing.

I said I didn't think he was.

It's been a long time. I still don't know why I said it.

We talked about tagging, and we talked about school, and what it was like to have to walk every day.

We stopped talking. We watched cars run the road. I wondered what they saw. He scanned my face.

I like your sister, he said.

I said, I never said you didn't.

I'm just saying, he said. Just so you know.

He put his hand on my shoulder, and I didn't move. It slid lower, awkwardly, until it sat on my knee.

There's a light that fills the center of your chest, sometimes, when you let it. I'd felt it once or twice before. I didn't want to feel it then.

He left it there. It sank like a boulder. The only thing heavier was mine, and I set it on top of his. And I let him look me in my face. And I let him put his lips on it.

Everything that happened was fast and sure. I knew where to put my hands, but also I didn't. I let them wander, until he stopped jostling. We moved from the bench to the jungle gym behind it. Fumbling on the ground, through t-shirts and jeans. He knew

what he was doing, and at some point I accepted that. He had his hand on my chest when he said my name.

I tested his out, quietly. I tested it again.

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It didn't last long.

He slid onto my chest when he'd finished. I flew back inside of myself. We were just two boys again. Two half-naked boys in the middle of a playground.

I listened to him breathe. I realized he was listening, too.

He asked if I was okay, and I told him that I was.

He asked if I was happy, and I told him that I was.

Good, he said. And he said it again.

He said that he was, too. That he hadn't been in a while.

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Jenna was at the door when I finally made it home. I'd wiped my face raw walking back, scratched the white from my shirt.

Ah, she said.

Yeah, I said.

She asked where I'd been, half interested, not interested, and I told her the truth, I told her nowhere.

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I told Kennedy that Jude was a faggot the next morning. I asked to speak to her alone and that is the information that I gave her.

She didn't smile. She didn't ask me how I knew.

She said, Right.

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I wasn't there when Jenna found out, but I was present when she walked through the door. She didn't wear the thing that'd changed on her face. It may have been that there wasn't one. I never heard her say a word against his name. I haven't heard her say it, period.

Kennedy never spoke a word against me. The reason for this fidelity I neither knew nor sought. But I heard the stories that flew around Jude. What actually came out of the whole damn thing.

Shit I wouldn't wish on a mutt.

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I waited to run into him. I waited to apologize.

But I didn't see Jude afterwards.

I just didn't.

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The only thing I saw was in the evening, weeks later. I'd woken up for water, walked down the stairs. Hadn't bothered to change out of boxers. The light in the back porch spilled into the kitchen.

Jenna laid sprawled on the grass in the yard, smoking. Ma sat beside her. Legs crossed. Combing Jenna's hair.

Jenna's eyes were closed, and the mother gazed at her daughter. Yellow splashed in their faces. Couldn't tell if it was the bulb or the moon.

I knew then that I'd stumbled on a primal thing, something fundamental to human existence. Something that had never happened before. This was timeless. This was the glow of something new. I stood and I watched and I wondered what in the hell I'd just done.

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In another version of this story, I see Jude again.

He rats me out.

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Then I tell it again, later. And when I do, maybe he doesn't.

Maybe he just asks me, honestly, Why.

Maybe he forgives me.

•

In that one, I'm brave. I stick my chest out. I see the tags on the walls, and I don't shut my eyes when we pass.

When he finally asks, I say that they're beautiful.