

At the End
of the Gravel
Cemetery Road

By Robert Ki

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ch. 1**(Santi)**

Santi walked into the gates of Spruce Valley Cemetery at 5:35 AM, exhaling cigarette smoke, baked on insomnia. The Grateful Dead accompanied him in his hand-me-down headphones. He hadn't wandered over to this side of town in a long time, but it had been a long night of walking aimlessly, and with all the nights he had been walking aimlessly lately, he was bound to end up in every part of town eventually.

Santi's great grandfather was buried in Spruce Valley Cemetery. Santi had never seen the grave himself, nor met his great grandfather, nor completely memorized his great grandfather's name. As Santi walked, he couldn't be certain that any particular grave *wasn't* holding a body in his direct lineage. For many of the names though—*Smith, Wright, Anderson*—he could take a reasonable guess at exclusion.

The graveyard *was* sunken between two hills, just as the name *Spruce Valley* promised. Also as promised, pine trees dotted the graveyard along either hillside. There was one gravel path leading through the graveyard, bending and bowing gently as it snaked between the hills. Santi looked at the gravestones on either side of the path as he walked through, listening to The Dead *la da-da da* their way through the last stretch of Ripple. The names and dates on the headstones captured his interest. Mostly the dates, though. Mikael Everette, 1881 – 1899. Anna White, 1870 – 1872. Mother Emily Winston, 1902 – 1970.

Nearing the end of the cemetery's gravel path, Santi had found two names that might have been his great grandfather. Cecilio Torres was the name that Santi hoped he had come from, but somehow, Jorge Ruiz felt to him to be the more likely winner.

Santi dropped his cigarette butt onto the end of the gravel path, stamped it out, and took a deep breath. He looked around. Back the way he had come, he could see the wrought-iron tips of the gate he'd come in through. His view of the entrance was

partially obstructed by a spruce tree, which swayed in the wind. To either side of him, tall hills rose, marked regularly with headstones. Past the gravel path, there were only a few more graves before coming to the far side of the cemetery's wrought-iron fence. The headstones at this far end of the cemetery were short, and bore no elegant shapes or markings—they looked like molars jutting out of the ground. Santi walked up to them, looking down at each one. Liana Reid-Faust, 1950 – 1977. Paul Huff, 1960 – 1981. Santiago Delgado, 1962 – 1988.

Santi knelt down in front of that last grave in the cemetery, arms limp at his sides, mouth hanging open just a bit. His headphones slid down off of his ears, and came to rest around his neck. Morning birds chirped as he looked down at his first name, his last name, the year he was born, and the current year on the calendar. Chills swam through his arms and chest as he thought about himself and a second Santiago Delgado, the exact same age no less, being reflections of one another across six feet of dirt.

Santi put his headphones back on, stood up, and walked away from 'his' grave. He rewound the cassette on the walk back out of Spruce Valley Cemetery.

Starting again from the top of track one—for the fourth time on that particular walk through town—Santi headed back home. He passed through the uptown, with the winding hilly roads and the nice houses that had their own lawns and fences and driveways. He passed through the downtown, with the storefronts that hadn't opened their doors for the morning yet and the apartments overhead. He walked by the abandoned factory, the abandoned hospital, and the small abandoned church, and after walking by all of these, he arrived at the Black Cedar Apartments. He walked through the narrow alcoves between brick walls, turning his way along the maze of tightly packed-in living spaces, stepping around ashtrays and discarded bottles and cans. Coming to a fire-escape staircase, he stepped up it, mindful to keep his balance on its wobble. There, on the second floor, was his window, left cracked open so he could get back in.

He crouched outside it for a minute or two, to hear if anyone was awake inside. He could hear Jacob in the next room over snoring, and so he assumed that Maria was still in bed with him, since he usually woke up whenever she did. The radio wasn't on, which made it extremely likely that Hakeem was still passed out from last night. There was no talking at the volume of trying to shout across a gymnasium, which meant that Trev and Mark had gone home or were passed out too.

Slowly, and in just the right way to avoid making the window squeal, Santi let himself inside his room. He closed the window all the way shut behind himself, crawled onto his mattress, pulled all of the sheets over his head, and fell asleep before any of the day's real noises had a chance to begin.

When a bang on his bedroom door shot him awake, it was late into the afternoon.

—What'd you want?! —Santi shouted, throwing the wad of blankets he'd slept against towards the door. The blankets hit the door so softly that they didn't make a sound. He had imagined them bursting through the door like The

Incredible Hulk and knocking down whoever was waking him up. In spite of himself, Santi giggled a little at how underwhelmingly the blankets flumped to the ground. He sat up against the bedroom wall and rubbed his forehead as his sister spoke to him:

—Zach called. He says he's going to the quarry to swim and I said how dangerous that was and he said good and to tell you that he was going to go drown and haunt you if you didn't come meet him y comencé a decir que me importa una mierda pero que I'd kick his ass if he blamed *you* for him being un jodido idiota and drowning but he hung up before I could finish saying it so I tried to call him back but I got his stupid fucking voicemail where he does that thing where it's him acting like...

By the time Maria was finished speaking her sentence, Santi had changed clothes, combed back his hair, and wolfed down a breakfast's worth of dry Cheerios from the box he kept stashed beside his dresser. He opened his door with a smile just as his sister was putting the last vulgar points on her

tirade about that dumbass retrasado her brother hung out with every day of his life.

—He’s a good guy, hermana —Santi said, and patted her on the shoulder.

—It is *so* creepy how you say *hermana*, cabrón! —Maria shouted, and pushed Santi away down the hall.

Cracking up, Santi ran off through the living room and out the front door.

ch. 2

(Zach)

Zach waded around in a bizarro cubist landscape. Of the many abandoned places in town, the quarry was the most abandoned by far. The quarry was situated in a spacious pocket between tall bluffs. Workers used to come to and from it by way of a tunnel, but the tunnel had finally collapsed a month ago, leaving people like Zach yet another place in town to go to be totally isolated.

When it was active, the quarry had been mined in right-angled chunks. After abandonment, the bottom had been flooded with icy teal water. Zach waded through the water, freezing his bare-ass nuts off, feeling out where the steep right-angled drop-offs were below his feet. On the side of the quarry he was on, there was a long plane where the water was only three feet deep. Eventually, like the continental shelf in the ocean, the quarry floor dropped off and became too deep to see the bottom of. But even on the shallow shelf where Zach stood,

there were occasional prismatic dips: isolated vertical tunnels that had been mined out of the ground where the rest of the quarry floor around it was flat and smooth. Most of them were about three feet by three feet. Zach, at that moment, was wading around the edges of the biggest divot he's found yet: about six feet by six. He couldn't see the bottom, much like all the other divots—the water turned from teal to black as the tunnel went down.

Zach had a hope that the tunnel—or at least *one* of the tunnels around the quarry—went down and then curved back up into a secret cave: a place even more isolated than the quarry itself. A place he and his friends could fucking chill without the town's grandma-ass puritans getting on their case about shit.

Zach had seven empty boxes tattooed on the inside of his left forearm, running from the inside of his elbow down to his wrist. The boxes were labeled *Luzt*, *Glutteny*, *Gread*, *Slothe*, *Rath*, *Envvy*, and *Pryde*, in sexy spikey cursive. Zach kept a red magic marker in his front jeans pocket every day. He ended most days with three or four of the boxes

on his arm checked off. Fairly often he got all seven. Sometimes zero, though the zero-days were almost always because he had lost his marker somewhere, and not from an actual lack of sinning.

At present, Zach had *Slothe* and *Envvy* checked off, though the checkmarks had mostly washed away in the quarry's teal water.

"Hey, weirdo! Put some clothes on!"

Zach turned around and saw Santi waving from the shoreline.

Zach waved back with both hands high over his head, making no attempt to cover himself.

Not five seconds after chastising Zach, Santi began pulling his clothes off too, throwing them into a pile on top of Zach's. Santi, unlike Zach, did leave his underwear on as he splashed into the water.

"Sup, man?" Santi asked. He and Zach did their handshake.

"Check it out," Zach said, pointing down through the water at the six-by-six divot in the quarry floor.

“Ohh, *fuck*,” Santi said. “Did you go down in it yet?”

“Fuckin of course not. Not without my co-pilot around to yank me out if shit gets fucky.”

“*Co-pilot?*” Santi asked.

“Yeah, where two fighter planes fly together into dangerous shit to watch each other’s backs. Co-pilots.”

“Ohh. Right. Co-pilots.”

“So yeah,” Zach said, returning his attention back down to the underwater pit. “Gonna swim down and feel it out. I’m thinking you come get me if I don’t come up for six minutes.”

Santi agreed and called Zach a genius for planning this out so well, and then the two high-fived and Zach dove down into the teal water, taking a big breath before he went. He kept one arm straight out in front of himself in case he found the bottom of the lightless pit, and with his other arm and both legs, he paddled furiously downwards, fighting to sink in spite of his body wanting him to float. It occurred to Zach, as he was very far down and still hadn’t reached the bottom, that he could

sink even faster if he let out the used-up air in his lungs, which was no-doubt the reason his body was trying to make him rise up again—gorged on air, he was basically like a giant rubber duck trying to fight down against motherfucking physics. He would have to check off *Glutteny* when he got back on dry land. In the meantime, Zach blew out a few bubbles of air—the used air, of course—and found himself sinking faster already.

At one point he stopped swimming down and glanced up, squinting against the water.

And he realized just then how crazy-far down he had gone. Twice as deep as the deep end of any swimming pool he'd seen in his life. Thinking back and forth for a second, he decided he'd go back up and try again with a fresh breath—a smaller one this time, that would let him sink faster but still give him plenty to breathe as he went.

With both arms and legs, Zach tried to paddle upwards, but found himself gaining no ground at all—Zach's eyes widened when he realized he was actually still sinking.

The water up on the surface had been cold. The water down in the pit was goddamn arctic, and Zach had a motherfucker of a time trying to paddle through it. Every stroke felt weak. *Frustratingly* weak. There went *Rath* too, back-to-back with *Glutteny* in less time than Zach could hold his breath for.

Zach scraped his hands against the dark pit's walls, trying to feel for any kind of handhold he could climb up out of the water with, but the walls were completely smoothed out.

Just as Zach was considering going even farther down to see if there was anything that could help him at the bottom, he saw a figure leap down into the rippling light above him: Santi was swimming down, full breast-stroke, like a torpedo.

Santi locked one of his arms around Zach's, and together, the two of them were able to swim their way up against the frigid waters. Zach felt things getting blurry as they came up, and weirdly darker.

He felt himself nod off.

When he woke up, he was on the surface: Santi was running through the shallow waters, pulling him by the wrists towards shore.

Zach broke free from Santi's grip, then grabbed Santi's ankle and pulled on it, tripping Santi into the water. Santi screamed as he went down, his flails making an even bigger splash. Zach spun onto his back and floated away on the water's surface, laughing his ass off. When Santi reemerged he leapt straight on top of Zach like some pro-wrestling off-the-ropes jump, crashing both of them back down under the shallow quarry water. The two of them grappled with each other under the water's surface, fighting to keep the other one submerged, squealing and calling each other names in whatever language they were best at calling names in.

When they did reach dry land, Zach was shaking hardcore. His jaw was shivering so bad that it took a lot of tries before Santi understood what the hell he was saying when he said, "Thanks for getting me man."

“Hey, co-pilots, remember?” Santi said. Then he smacked Zach’s bare chest as hard as he could with his open palm. While Zach was curled up in stinging pain, Santi said, “Get some fuckin clothes on before you freeze to death, fuckin streaker.”

“*Tch*, you’re so good to me,” Zach said through gritted teeth. He looked down at his chest where Santi had slapped him, and saw the bright-red outline of a hand against otherwise super-pale skin.

After wicking as much water as he could off of himself, Zach put on his blue boxers, his blue jeans, and his dark-green shirt, which were all hot from laying out in the sun. He took the red magic marker out of his pocket and looked at his arm. *Sloth* and *Envy* from before were completely washed off. He re-checked the both of them, adding *Gluttony* and *Rath* while he was at it, and returned the marker to his pocket.

Zach splayed out on his back in the sun, trying to absorb as much of its heat into himself as he could.

Santi laid out beside him. Relatively speaking, Santi had become the nakeder of the two, having chosen to stay in just the soaked underwear he'd been swimming in.

"You were talking to Rachel today," Santi said. Zach could feel the smugness radiating off of Santi's face without even looking.

Zach let out a very long and exacerbated sigh. Then he nodded, absently digging at the *Envy* checkmark with his thumb.

"Do you like... *like* her or something?" Santi asked.

"Ew, christ no," Zach said.

"Figured not. I seriously can't think of any other reason you talk to her so much though."

"We're friends since first grade," Zach said, and shrugged.

"Yeaah, but she's a biiiiitch noww," Santi pointed out, as lightly as he could manage it.

"Fuckin tell me about it," Zach said, and checked off *Pryde* with no subsequent feeling of shame whatsoever.

Pryde was the weird one to Zach: it was the sin for thinking oneself better than other people. But sometimes being better than other people was just a fact. And really, if facts could be sins, it only made Zach's game easier.

ch. 3**(Santi)**

Santi laid in bed, blankets all balled up over his head, not nearly exhausted enough to sleep yet. It was way past midnight. The radio in the living room blared rock music. Trev, Mark, and Hakeem were managing to talk over it, punctuating their shouting relays with the sounds of crushing cans and knocking shit over.

Santi pushed the blankets off of himself and stood up. He grabbed his cassette player with the headphones and the Grateful Dead tape. He opened his window and leaned out to feel what the weather was like. As he waited a minute for the outside temperature to fully come to him, he looked up to the sky. It was a little cloudy out, killing Santi's chances of naming any constellations—his astrology was questionable under the best of circumstances. He was able to spot the moon at least. It was a new moon, which was to say, a moon that was completely black in the night sky.

—Hey, I see you —he told it, and tried to give it an easygoing smile.

The moon, understandably, had nothing to say in response to him.

Santi gave the moon the horns, and turned back into his room to grab his black leather jacket. In spite of how hot the day had been, it felt like a chilly night after all. Santi tucked the cassette player into his jacket's left pocket and a pack of cigarettes into the right. Santi stuck his white lighter into the pocket of his tattered jeans. Getup complete, Santi hopped out of his window, closing it most of the way shut behind himself. He placed a rock on the corner of the windowsill to make sure the window didn't fall all the way down while he was out.

Walking, smoking, and listening to *The Dead*, Santi found himself wandering over to the uptown again, where the big houses sat on roads that snaked around rolling hills. As he walked, he sometimes had a habit of arguing aloud to himself about things that were on his mind. That night,

walking the streets in front of people's lawns, Santi argued to himself about his ex-girlfriend Donna.

—She was never gonna last with you —Santi said. He pointed his cigarette at the air in front of himself, as though he was also walking backwards five steps ahead, facing back to receive his own gesture.

He raised both hands, palms out in a defensive gesture, and elaborated on his own point:

—I mean, she was beautiful, rich, white, spiritual, vegan... she was *nice*. Not like *you*, cholo-ass creepy-ass aggro-ass weirdo. Fun breath of fresh air for both of you when it started. Goddamn *exhausting* the more it when on.

This far into the argument, Santi realized he had taken his headphones off, since they had been distracting him from laying out his attack on himself.

He batted his head a couple of times, zipped his lips, and threw his cigarette over to the gutter on the other side of the street that he was walking down.

Only girl you dated in all twenty-six years of your life, he thought, before he could help himself from thinking it. And once the train of thought had started, it really wasn't possible to stop it from powering on. Been old enough to date for ten years at least. Only dated Donna for a year and a half of that. Whatchu been doing for the other eight and a half years, player? Not getting laid. That much is insanely fuckin obvious.

Santi looked up into the sky at the new moon.

Then he looked down at Donna's old house, which he had walked straight fucking to that night.

Grossed out by himself, he turned to walk back home.

On the way, he let the music in his headphones do its job: stopping him from thinking about shit.

He was sweaty by the time he arrived back at the Black Cedar Apartments again. *It had* been cold out—he hadn't been wrong to wear the jacket. He'd just also been on a long enough walk to work up a sweat anyways. His feet were sore and his mind was numb. Climbing up the fire escape to his bedroom window, he could no longer hear the

sound of the radio blaring inside, or the battle cries of Trev and Mark conversing. Bedtime. Awesome.

Santi pulled up on his bedroom window, and found it stuck.

He pulled harder, but still, the thing wouldn't budge: it had been completely closed and locked shut. The rock propping the window up had been knocked off of the sill, back onto the metallic grate of the fire escape platform. Santi cupped his hands up to the window and peered inside. As his eyes adjusted, he saw the fat figure of Trev: Trev slept on Santi's bed, snoring so loud that Santi could hear it outside.

Santi tapped on the glass.

—Hey, puto! —he whispered, trying to focus it with enough hatred that he would wake up Trev and no one else.

No luck.

Santi growled. He ran around to the apartment's actual front door, and—as expected—found it locked. He cursed, and paced back and forth in front of the door for a long time, picturing

the ways he would kick Trev's obese ass when he got the chance to.

He sat down with his back against the locked door, head hung down low between his knees, thinking.

He sure as hell didn't feel safe sleeping out on the doorstep. Not at Black Cedar. Not without a knife.

ch. 4

(Zach)

Zach sat with his back against the wall in his apartment above the bar downtown, listening to his neighbors bang. He'd never seen his neighbors at all, which was for the better: every night he could imagine two completely new people. Maybe a skinny blonde with huge tits one night, or a skinny brunette with huge tits the next—the possibilities of Zach's imagination were endless.

On his arm, all seven sins were checked off in red. It had been a productive day.

Zach still had his pants on as he listened. His dick was soft—he had blown his load earlier to the collection of porno mags in the bin by his bed. Sitting against the wall, Zach listened just to listen. To keep them company, maybe. Maybe just because he didn't want to miss anything. His mom had her shows, and he could have his.

Zach perked up when he heard a knock on his door. Lightfooted—he had gotten good at sounding

like he wasn't home—he dashed across the room. The apartment was, in fact, a single room, though a spacious one. It held everything from Zach's bed and dresser against the far wall by the window, to the TV and the couch in the middle, to the kitchenette and the washing machine near the door. Prancing lightly, Zach retrieved the M40 sniper rifle that was mounted on the wall beside the door, with a round already in the chamber ready to fire. Armed, Zach squinted through the door's peephole.

On the other side he saw Santi, who had his fists tucked into the pockets of his black leather jacket.

Zach put the sniper rifle back up on the wall and unlocked the door.

“Thanks,” Santi said, walking in.

“You look pissed off,” Zach observed.

“Fuckin pissed off as hell,” Santi said. He explained how his sister's boyfriend's friend's friend's fat ass was sleeping in his bed.

“Dude,” Zach said, and turned to grab the rifle back off his wall again. “Let's—”

Santi laughed, and said, “Let’s *not*, okay? I’m not *that* mad about it.”

“Fine,” Zach said, and put the gun back.

“Ooh, you’ve been busy,” Santi mentioned, looking at Zach’s array of red checkmarks.

Zach nodded. “Busy all day and I’m not even tired yet. You want a beer? Coffee?”

“Mix the two?” Santi suggested, cocking his head a little to see if Zach would go for it.

“Jesus, I thought *I* was the heathen. You’re on. Two Grounds and Hops, comin up lickety-fuckchrist-split.”

With that, Zach turned to his kitchen counter and got to work. He put a pot of coffee on, and while it was brewing, he picked through his cupboards to find his tallest coffee mugs. Eventually he gave up on the mugs and instead grabbed one beer stein and one ornate chalice. When the coffee was finished, he filled each vessel halfway up, then cracked open two cans of beer and poured each of them into the drinkware as well.

Concoctions finished, Zach handed Santi the chalice. “Delgado Special, on the house. Unless I puke. If I puke I’m stealing your jacket.”

“Pff. You *wish* you could pull off this look, ginger.”

“Strawberry-fuckin-blonde at worst,” Zach said, voice raised.

“Right right, strawberry-fuckin-blonde, that’s what I meant to say. Tongue slipped.”

Zach nodded.

The two of them drank.

As soon as the mixture hit Zach’s tongue he gagged, setting the stein down on the counter. But upon seeing Santi still drawing out a long first sip, Zach picked his stein back up and tried again.

The second time, it was actually stomachable.

“It isn’t the *most* awful thing I ever drank,” Zach admitted, after they had both finished their share. “I’d have it again if there was a gun to my head.”

“Dude, the hell’s wrong with you,” Santi said, and then stuck his tongue out, trying to get the last

few drops to fall out of the chalice. “I found my new favorite drink.”

Under his breath, Zach said, “Wow. So I *really* misjudged who the unholy one was here.”

“Like we weren’t *both* going to hell,” Santi said, bemused grin all over his face once again.

Zach, appalled, backhanded Santi’s stomach. “I go to church every Sunday!”

“You go to church to eat Kate out in the bell tower!”

“Still counts!” Zach asserted, and then turned and spewed violently into the sink. “*Fuck* that was bad,” he said afterwards, and wiped off his chin. “Never. Again.”

“At least make me one more?”

Zach went to slap Santi again, but this time Santi hopped back quick enough.

Zach sighed, and felt his stomach churn. “Look, you wanna go murder Trev or take turns on Mario or what?”

“Definitely Mario,” Santi answered.

“Sure?”

“Yeah, Mario sounds good.”

“Alright, fine.”

The two of them went over to the TV on the floor, and Zach switched it on while Santi got the Mario cartridge working.

Hours later as the sun was rising, Santi was settling in on the couch, blanket wrapped snugly around himself. Zach was a few feet away on the bed, lying on his side facing Santi, listening.

“You ever worry all your best years are behind you already?” Santi asked. “I know we’re still young, but I’m talking the *best* years: most energy, most *libido*, most freedom to do crazy shit... I know I’m not *short* on those things today. Heh. I just feel like five years ago, twenty-one, that was the peak.”

The room was quiet for a little while as Zach considered it.

Santi sighed, and shrugged. “I don’t know, maybe I’m just weirded out lately. I saw a gravestone with my name on it yesterday.”

“Woah. Tomorrow when we wake up, you’re taking me to go see that.”

Santi smiled. “Sure, why not,” he said, and then buried his face in the couch cushions to fall asleep.

ch. 5

(Santi)

Santi woke up on the couch, stretched, sat upright, opened his eyes, and saw Zach in the kitchen drinking from the coffee pot.

—Mornin —Zach said, raising the pot in greeting.

—You ever think you're addicted to that stuff?

—You ever think fuck off, I like feeling awake?

—I'm not sure how to parse all of that —Santi admitted.

In lieu of clarification, Zach tilted his head back and downed the rest of the pot. When he was done he grimaced and shuddered, then walked across the room past Santi to get a shirt from his dresser. On the walk by, Santi heard Zach's stomach gurgling uproariously.

—Did you eat at all this morning, or just...

—Coffee grounds —Zach answered.

—That’s not food, Zach.

—Eh. Matter of opinion.

Santi yawned, stretched again, and laid back down on the couch, looking up at Zach’s ceiling. The ceiling was a criss-crossing of wooden beams, way high up.

—I’m *really* convinced your apartment used to be the set of a sitcom —Santi said.

Zach laughed. When Santi sat back up again, Zach had put on a shirt. Light brown. One gouge in the hem where it had caught on a nail while he and Santi had been exploring the collapsed basement of the abandoned hospital. There was also slight splatter-stain on the shirt’s back from when they had knocked over a shelf full of chemicals in a collapsed corner of the abandoned factory. Santi also noticed the fray on the shirt’s shoulder, where a collapsing ceiling-brick had nearly taken Zach out in the abandoned church.

—Fuckin hell. I think this town is sinking — Santi said.

—Ugh. Tell me about it.

Santi sighed.

—We still doing this boneyard thing? —Zach asked.

—I'm still down —Santi said, and got off the couch.

Santi picked his jacket up off of the floor, put it on, and walked over to the door to get his shoes on with Zach. When the two had wrestled on their footwear, they stood and headed out.

Santi and Zach talked on the way over, although Santi felt like Zach's growling stomach was vocal enough on its own.

—When we're done with this you're gonna let me make you actual food —Santi promised—. No more just-coffee breakfasts for you.

It was a little before noon when the two of them arrived at the Spruce Valley Cemetery. The place didn't have the same feeling about it as when Santi had come early in the morning. In the early morning, after a whole night of walking around with The Dead, the cemetery had had a certain ethereal quality—it felt like the threshold to an afterlife. Midday, the place just seemed like a place.

Santi and Zach walked to the far end of the cemetery, past dozens of bodies and names. There, in the back corner, near the wrought-iron fence, Santi showed Zach the gravestone. Santiago Delgado, 1962 – 1988.

Zach took one look at it and then turned straight around, crossing his arms as he breathed out.

—I thought you said it was *your* name —Zach said.

—Um. Yeah? —Santi said back—. I'm *sure* you remember how to read. I know school was a while ago, but...

—Okay, ha fuckin-sillyfuck ha —Zach said—. Let's sound it out together: Zzz, Ayuh... okay the C-H being *kuh* is bullshit, I'll give you that part, but I know how to spell Zachary Thomas, you fuck.

—Hey dyslexic smartass —Santi began, pointing at the gravestone—, mira: first of all that's an S. The Z goes the other way. You did *very good* on the A being second, but after that you must be fuckin illiterate, because it's not even close to...

It took Santi and Zach a lot of name-calling before they each believed that the other saw his own name on the tombstone: Santi saw Santiago, and Zach, Zachary.

They looked at the face of the tombstone from every angle, trying to work out what the hell kind of optical illusion was changing *Delgado* to *Thomas*. A switch between *Santi* and *Zach* at least seemed within the realm of the possible to mis-see. The last names, though, were harder to figure out.

Both of them saw the years 1962 – 1988.

Santi suggested that they go to city hall and figure out who *they* had listed as being buried there.

Zach, after being convinced that city hall had anything to do with the cemetery, agreed.

In the meantime, because it was Saturday and city hall was almost definitely closed on weekends, Santi and Zach headed back to Santi's place, so that Santi could make Zach breakfast and so that the two of them could kick Trev's ass into orbit if the tarado was still bumming around the apartment with Mark and Hakeem.

ch. 6

(Zach)

When Santi and Zach got to Santi's apartment, it was only Jacob—Santi's sister's boyfriend—who was home. After letting Santi and Zach in, Jacob disappeared back into his and Maria's room, leaving the rest of the place free. Santi lead the way into the kitchen. He took a carton of eggs from the fridge, as well as a tupperware container of mixed diced peppers, a wedge of cheese, an onion, and some vegetable that Zach personally could not identify. Santi also retrieved a bowl, a frying pan, and a knife.

Zach looked over Santi's shoulder as Santi cracked half a dozen eggs into the bowl, knifed some peppers into the eggs, cut a few strips of cheese over the eggs and peppers, sliced off slivers of onion onto the cheesy-egg-and-pepper mix, and lastly added in whatever the vegetable of mystery was.

“Heh. D’you mind?” Santi asked, when Zach had looked so far over Santi’s shoulder as to be resting his chin on Santi’s collar bone.

“What’s’at?” Zach asked, pointing to the vegetable.

“Celery?” Santi asked, and then pushed Zach off. “Zach, have you literally never eaten food before?”

“Food is a conspiracy to keep us away from more coffee. I saw the light when I was fourteen, never looked back.”

“Food is a conspiracy to keep you not dead, dipshit,” Santi countered.

With the frying pan heated, Santi poured half the contents of the bowl onto the cast iron, where it let out a loud hiss and sizzle.

“Omelet or scrambled?” Santi asked.

“Mm?” Zach questioned.

Santi sighed. “Nevermind. You’re eating an omelet.”

“Yeah, well *you’re* eating an—”

“An omelet is *food*, Zach!” Santi said, and flicked the frying pan around, sloshing the eggy mix that was on top of it.

Zach huffed, stepped back, and after a moment’s pause, checked off *Rath* on his arm.

By the time Santi stepped away from the frying pan, two omelets had been produced, each one put on a plate, each one accompanied on its plate by half a peeled orange.

“Thaaanks Saaanti,” Zach said, beaming as he took his omelet and orange.

The two went over into the living room to eat.

“Oh my god, you food-wizard,” Zach said, shortly after his first taste. “How did you turn vegetables into this?”

Santi laughed as Zach tore into the rest of the omelet.

In less time than it had taken to cook the omelets in the first place, Santi and Zach sat with two empty plates.

“Hey, wanna go explore the quarry summore?” Santi asked.

“Hell yeah,” Zach said.

The two of them headed off.

ch. 7

(Santi)

At the quarry, Santi took particular interest in the now-collapsed tunnel that used to allow all of the quarry's trucks and workers through. The collapse had happened right at the mouth, on the side that faced the town. But that meant that the entrance to the tunnel on the side that faced the quarry was still open.

Before its collapse, the tunnel had been about a thousand feet from end-to-end. Neither Santi nor Zach had any clue how much of the tunnel was left, but it seemed like a thing to figure out. They headed in. The cool tunnel air felt like a physical medium that Santi walked into, like there was a curtain draped over the tunnel entrance. They walked slowly into the cave as they adjusted to seeing in the dark better.

Within a few feet, Zach walked face-first into a wall of boulders, called the tunnel a whorebag

shitmunch fuckin piece of collapsed dumbassness bullshit, and turned back around out into the light.

Apparently, the tunnel had collapsed on both ends. The end facing the quarry just happened to be deceptively shadowy.

Looking at Zach in the daylight, Santi saw that the rocks had scraped across Zach's temple, drawing blood that streaked down the side of his face.

Santi mentioned this fact to Zach, and suggested that Zach wash off in the quarry.

Zach, in agreement, stripped down and hopped into the water. After dunking his head a few times, he laid on his back and floated, looking up at the sky.

Santi, not in the mood to freeze his balls off right then, laid on the flat stone ground beside the water.

After a little while, the two fell asleep for a midday nap.

ch. 8

(Zach)

In the bell tower, Kate muffled her moans with both hands as Zach kissed her pussy. Normally she needed a *lot* of warming up, but on that particular Sunday, she was crazy-hot for some action—she had pulled Zach away from the congregation and up the winding bell tower steps herself, and pulled her dress up and dropped her panties down without hardly even saying to Zach, “How has *your* week been?”

Zach was not the least bit offended, considering pussy *was* his second-favorite thing to put his lips on anyways—the first-favorite being coffee, and the third-favorite being his own dick, back when he had been flexible enough.

Zach knew better than to think Kate would ever want to fuck him. She was hyper-religious. Premarital sex was an inflexible No. Still, her being hyper-religious also made her easy as hell to

please, and Zach wouldn't deny that he loved the weekly ego-boosts.

As Zach actually got to putting his tongue inside her, he heard her frantically whispering, "*Oh Zach!*" over and over. Her hands were still over her mouth as she said it, pitched over her lips like a little tent.

Just as Zach was getting started, she pushed his head away.

He glanced up at her.

"Do you hear that?" she whispered.

Zach listened. From outside, he could hear a woman yelling, "Kaaate?"

"That's my mom," Kate whispered.

"Huh," Zach acknowledged, and then made to go back down between her legs.

Kate kept him at bay with one hand at his forehead, and with her other hand, she pulled her panties back up.

"Mm?" Zach whined, looking up at her with his best puppy-dog eyes.

“I have to go see what she wants,” Kate said. She got up and walked quickly down the bell tower stairs.

Zach laid on his back at the top of the bell tower, pouting, hoping Kate might come back. Part of him wished he had mentioned to her that she was twenty five, and that she actually did *not* have to go see what her mom wanted at all. He sighed, rubbing his cock through his jeans, and he listened as Kate and her prude mom met just outside the church doors.

“Oh, there you are dear!” he heard Kate’s mom say. Her voice was small from the distance, but the shrillness carried it up to Zach in the bell tower with no problem whatsoever. “I didn’t see you inside! Come on, we’re missing the sermon.”

Zach groaned, knowing for a fact that at that point, Kate was done for the day.

He thought about if he could survive jumping off the bell tower, since it would be a faster way to get home than walking down the steps.

He leaned out over the edge, and then laughed out loud at how obvious it turned out to be that a fall from this height would kill him.

He checked off *Luzt* as he went down the stairs. Of all the sins on his arm, *Luzt* and *Rath* seemed to be the ones that he checked off pretty much every single day.

After a brief moment of thinking about Kate's mom, Zach did check off *Rath* right then and there too, and left the church giggling.

ch. 9

(Santi)

Santi laid in his bed, jacking off to a porno mag that Zach had lent him. Zach's collection was like a library, and Santi borrowed items from it often. At that moment, the porno mag Santi was paging through wasn't actually photos, but a comic from Japan, written right-to-left in Japanese. Santi had absolutely no idea what any of the words were. He made up his own story as he looked at the pictures though.

At a knock on the door, Santi put the magazine down and covered himself up with a blanket. Even though the door was always locked, he felt weird talking to people nude.

—Santi, are you coming to church? —his sister Maria asked.

—Literally haven't since I was eight —Santi called back through the door.

—Is *that* when Zach leant you your first porno? —Maria asked.

Santi reached for something to throw. His hand landed on one of his shoes, both of which were lying beside his bed. He hurled it at the door.

Maria screamed, cackled, called Santi a pervert, and ran off to go to church with her boyfriend.

Santi got back to the comic. In it, there were two women and a man. Santi suspected the two women were fighting over who would get to fuck the guy in the end.

He was *very* pleasantly surprised when the women turned out to be after each other.

ch. 10

(Zach)

Zach leaned back against the wall by the front door of city hall. Rachel had come with him, after having spent the last night at his place. She leaned against the wall right next to him, chewing cinnamon gum and holding a cigarette that she took occasional drags from.

“So what’s this city hall thing all about?” she asked, smacking.

“Me and Santi found our names on a gravestone. We’re seeing what the hell is up with that.”

“Like, on the same gravestone? On top of each other or something?”

“Same stone, but I only saw my name, and he only saw his,” Zach clarified.

“Weird,” Rachel said.

“Kyeah.”

“Think it’s ghosts or something?”

“Don’t believe in them,” Zach said.

“Pff, *what?*” Rachel asked. “You gotta believe in *some* ghosts. I told you about the ghost *I* saw in a hotel that one time.”

“Yeah, you told me—”

“I was walking to my room at midnight,” Rachel began anyways, “and at *exactly* midnight, the door I was walking by just *opened*, and inside was a ghost standing there in the room.”

“Yeah, I remember—”

“And I said I was sorry for looking in his room and I swore to him that the door opened on its own, because I didn’t *know* that he was a ghost yet obviously, and he just looked back at me without saying anything, and *then* I knew.”

Zach, trying to accept that he was going to hear Rachel’s entire story yet again, attempted to mouth along with it word-for-word as she went.

“And I said to him that I was available to talk if he needed to, to help him move on to the afterlife, since a lot of people are afraid of ghosts, but I think that ghosts are still just people who need someone to talk to more than anyone. And I think that just by saying I was there to talk, that put him at peace,

because the door closed again, and I never saw him again for the rest of the time I was at the hotel.”

“Yep. Definitely told me that one,” Zach said, having gotten the inflection of every single syllable correct in his muted mimickery.

“Could *you* explain that if there were no ghosts?” Rachel pressed.

“It’d be difficult,” Zach said. Having all seven cardinal sins tattooed on his arm had given Zach a lot of insight into the kinds of things that were *not* considered majorly sinful, such telling his friends bald-faced lies.

“I think you need to take *me* to see that gravestone,” Rachel said. “I’d see the ghost and talk to them and make everything better.”

“You have magic ghost-seeing powers now?” Zach asked.

“Yeah, *duh*,” Rachel said, making a face. “You’d *never* see a ghost if you’re going around saying you don’t believe in them.”

Zach thought to say that that was extremely convenient, but he kept this thought to himself, and instead, he shrugged.

“Why do we have to wait for Santi? He’s weird,” Rachel said.

“He’s the one who found his name on the gravestone in the first place,” Zach answered. He held back on telling Rachel off for calling Santi weird.

“I’m bored. Did he say he was going to be here at a certain time?”

“I think we agreed on one-ish. We might have said two. I don’t fuckin know.”

“You’re just gonna stand here for an hour waiting for him?”

“That *was* the plan,” Zach said, greatly overselling his not-giving-a-damn attitude as a type of planning. Zach had literally nothing ‘planned’ for the remainder of his life. There were a few things he *might* do in any given week: hit up the grocery store during the day for coffee and bread, eat Kate out at church to try to make her cum, go salvaging abandoned buildings with Santi for scraps to sell. But as far as genuine obligations went, Zach could spend the next infinity years with

nothing he ‘had’ to do at a particular time: an hour waiting for Santi was nothing.

“I’m gonna go,” Rachel said.

Zach wished her luck.

They each said goodbye, hugged, and then Zach waited alone out front of city hall.

City hall was right at the edge of downtown—Zach could almost see his apartment above the bar from where he was standing. Across the street from where Zach stood was the library, which was only open on Tuesdays and Thursdays anymore. Zach had memories of being a little kid and picking out books on Fridays to read during the weekends and return on Mondays.

But that had been a super long time ago. Zach hadn’t been inside the library in probably over a decade. He was pretty contented to keep it that way. He didn’t read much, or listen to a lot of out-there music, or look at paintings. To him, ‘the arts’ were ‘the art’ of sinning daily, and ‘the art’ of maybe beating Mario someday. Zach didn’t suppose that many poets would be curious to hear about his techniques.

When Santi showed up, Zach stopped leaning against the wall and stood upright so they could do their handshake.

Once that was done, they both stepped into city hall.

The lobby inside was square-shaped: there was the glass door that Santi and Zach came in through on one side, a closed wooden door to the left and to the right, and a woman sitting behind a desk in front of them. The ground was carpeted in a weird mesh of orange and brown. All four walls and the ceiling were painted like mural of a battlefield, with gunfire happening all around them, and a clear blue sky overhead. Zach wasn't quite confident about whether the uniforms the soldiers were wearing were from the civil war or the revolutionary.

“Hello, you!” the woman behind the desk said. She smiled at Zach. “I was wondering if you were coming in.”

Zach said hey, and let Santi take care of the rest of it.

“Can we see the registry for Spruce Valley Cemetery?” Santi asked outright.

“Can you *see* it?” the woman asked. “Do you have someone to bury, or—”

“No no no, it’s fuckin, like,” Santi began, and then paused to think about how to phrase it.

Zach stepped in, and said, “Me and my friend Santi think we’re losing our fuckin minds because we both see totally fuckin different names on this one tombstone in the boneyard and we want to see what name you guys think is on there, because we were there for like a fuckin hour and we weren’t even close to seeing the same thing.”

“Rrrright,” the woman behind the desk said. “Could I ask you two *not* to swear in here?”

“That’s not the fuckin takeaway from what he just said!” Santi shouted, and then quieted down to say, “Sorry, look, if we could just have, like, a list of names in the cemetery, that would be beautiful.”

The woman sighed, said “One second please,” and then stood up and left through one of the wooden doors.

Santi sighed too, after she left. “Fuck’s her problem?” he asked Zach.

Zach shrugged.

The two of them looked around the room at the mural painted on the walls. It looked like it was genuinely painted, and not any kind of wallpaper: squinting, Zach could see the brushstrokes.

“They fighting the civil war or the revolutionary one?” Santi asked.

“Can’t remember,” Zach said. “The uniforms all look the same to me.”

“Huh. The flags look... both? Wait yeah, look: we got the Betty Rose flag over here on these guys, which is like, the *original* American flag, and they’re fighting these guys over here who have the British flag, so that makes sense for revolutionary war. But then this one dude back here is just flying around a confederate flag proud as a motherfucker,” Santi said. He started pacing around the room, looking for any other confederate flags.

Zach looked around too, but it seemed like Santi had spotted the only one right away.

The woman came back through the wooden door.

“Did you know there’s a painting of a motherfucking time traveler on your wall?” Zach mentioned to her, pointing out the presence of the confederacy during an otherwise perfectly good revolutionary war battle.

“Hey. Lang-uage,” the woman said.

Zach grit his teeth, and gave it another try. “Kindly Miss, were you aware of the *flabbergasting* factoid that there is a man with a confederate flag running about in the midst of the *revolutionary* war?”

Apparently perfectly satisfied with this way of speaking, the woman looked to where Zach was pointing on the mural. “Oh,” she said. “Heh. I’ll have to get Claude back in here to—”

“Language,” Santi interrupted, flagging ‘clod’ as a pretty nasty thing to call someone for a lady so stuck-up about not being rude.

The woman looked at Santi, entirely perplexed, and then continued. “Claude, my painter

friend who we hired to touch up this mural, must have missed one.”

“Touch up?” Santi asked.

“Yes, yes,” the woman said. “There’s a long history to—”

“Short version?” Zach pleaded, having met his quota for the day of stories that were longer than they were interesting.

“Tch. The mural used to be of the civil war, but a few years ago we painted over parts of it to show the revolutionary war instead. *Lovely* mural, after all. Seemed a shame to just paint the walls white.”

“Ohhh,” Santi and Zach said, in unison.

“Anyways, about your... *interest*, in our records on Spruce Valley Cemetery. I *can* get you a copy by tomorrow morning, but I talked to Arthur Clemmings, and he says that what we have on the cemetery is a bit of a mess, ever since we merged offices with—”

“Who the fuck is Arthur Clemmings?” Zach asked.

“*Young man*, I will ask you to *leave* if you use that word one more time with me.”

Zach kept his lips sealed.

“Mr. Clemmings is our bookkeeper, of sorts. He handles nearly all of our records. He says that if you want to come back at five, he’ll go with you personally to the cemetery to help you identify the gravestone that you’re troubled with.”

“Ooh, thank you,” Santi said. He smiled.

“Yeah, thanks,” Zach echoed.

“You’re very welcome,” the woman said.

Santi and Zach headed back for the door.

“Fuck,” Zach mentioned over his shoulder on his way out, and Santi staggered out of city hall having a hard time walking, on account of laughing his ass off.

ch. 11

(Santi)

When Santi had gotten over his giggles, he asked Zach what they should do in the meantime, now that they had a few hours to kill.

—Lunch maybe? —Zach suggested

—I'd be good with lunch —Santi said.

The two of them walked through downtown until they came to the sandwich shop. Inside at the counter, Santi ordered a ham and cheese submarine sandwich, and Zach asked the little dude behind the counter to make him whatever.

—D'you wanna *pick* something? —the kid behind the counter asked Zach, pointing up to the menu that was on the chalkboard above his head.

Zach glanced up at the chalkboard, then down to the counter, and saw a white piece of chalk sitting in a cup on the counter along with a few pens.

—Mind if I use that for a sec? —Zach asked, pointing to the chalk.

The kid said sure.

Zach took the chalk and threw it up at the menu. The kid ducked. The chalk shattered on the bar-b-q beef.

—I'll try the barbeque beef —Zach ordered.

The kid looked up at the menu, snickered, called Zach fuckin crazy, and got to work on the sandwiches.

Santi and Zach went to go eat in the town's main square, which featured a fountain that didn't have water running in it, grass that didn't have anyone mowing it, and a statue that didn't have anyone cleaning bird shit off it. Santi and Zach sat on a bench that was a little ways into the grass, between the fountain and the statue.

—So —Zach said—, how's living with your sister and her boyfriend and their cohort of randos going?

—Ugh —Santi answered—. Still the worst. My mom'll still kill me if I leave my innocent little sister to live with them all on her own though.

—*She's* the innocent one?

—Apparently.

—Wow.

—Yeah —Santi said—, no idea how *that* works. It's rough. Anyways.

—You should get your own place. I think literally everywhere that hasn't gone out of business yet has rooms open. None of them are as cheap as Black Cedar, but still cheap as fuck.

—I'm gonna think about that —Santi said—. For real.

The two finished their sandwiches, went to throw their trash in a nearby garbage, and at some point on the walk from the bench to the garbage, Zach was dared to climb the statue and give it a new old gross baseball cap that Santi had found in the grass.

Zach, not a fan of getting bird shit on himself, declined, but offered another idea.

The rest of their time waiting was spent trying to throw a hat onto the statue downtown.

ch. 12

(Zach)

Santi and Zach arrived back at city hall just as two people, a man and a woman, were leaving. The woman—the same one from before—was locking the front door behind them.

“Mr. Clemmings?” Santi asked the man.

The man nodded, said “Nice to meet you,” and shook Santi’s hand. “Ms. Hall told me that you two are in a bit of a mix-up over the name on a headstone in Spruce Valley?”

“Yeah,” Santi said, “it’s kinda freaky. Clear as shit, I see Santiago Delgado, he sees Zachary Thomas.”

Mr. Clemmings let out one loud laugh, and repeated ‘clear as shit’ to himself once. Then he asked, “What are *your* names?”

“Santi and Zach.”

At that, the man and the woman looked at each other, but neither of them had any kind of answer to give to the other one.

Ms. Hall told Mr. Clemmings to have a nice rest of his day, and then she turned and walked off.

“Well,” Mr. Clemmings said to Santi and Zach, “like I said, I’m sure we can sort this out in no time. Can I offer you a ride there?”

Santi and Zach accepted. They rode in the back of a car that smelled like carpet cleaner. The material on the ceiling of the car was held up by a multitude of sewing needs. The car’s engine had started with no hesitation on the very first try.

Mr. Clemmings parked at the cemetery’s front gate. Santi and Zach led the way to the back of the cemetery. On the way, Mr. Clemmings went on about the papers he was holding. “Every name is listed here,” he promised. “The *order* that they’re listed in is a bit unhelpful, thanks to some poor recordkeeping from a colleague of mine, but the names *are* all accounted for at least.”

Santi and Zach nodded along.

“Right here,” Zach said, when they reached the tombstone.

Mr. Clemmings looked down at the stone, dropped all of his papers from his hands, and fell to

his knees. He reached out to touch the stone, but paused before he actually made contact, and instead pulled his hand back to his chest, where he stroked it with his other hand's thumb.

Santi asked Mr. Clemmings what name *he* thought was on the gravestone.

Mr. Clemmings confirmed that to his eye, the gravestone said Arthur.

The three of them collected the papers back up, and after a quick count, Mr. Clemmings noted that they hadn't lost any records when he'd dropped them. He began paging through everything.

He leafed through the papers three more times from start to finish before he sighed, and said, "Okay. I don't see any of us in here. New approach, if you two have some time to spare: process of elimination. We're going to walk the cemetery from here to the entrance, and you two are going to read out the names on all of the graves to me. I'll check off the ones you read. That way when we get to the end, the only one left should be this one here that's playing tricks on us."

Santi and Zach agreed to the plan.

When they had gotten back to the gates of Spruce Valley Cemetery, Mr. Clemmings shuffled through his papers once more. He shook his head. “*Apparently,*” he said, “we have a record of *almost* every headstone in this cemetery. *Except* that one at the end there.”

Santi, Zach, and Mr. Clemmings all exchanged phone numbers, and promised to keep in touch if anything more was learned.

ch. 13

(Santi)

That night, Santi locked his bedroom door before going out, to keep Trev or whoever else from sleeping in his room again. He felt like he sure as hell shouldn't have *had* to lock his bedroom door before going out, but apparently he did. He left out the window as per usual, wearing his black leather jacket and listening to his cassette player.

He had a few cassettes besides the Grateful Dead one, but he hardly played them. The Dead put Santi's head in a good place way more often than Prince or Journey.

He didn't fuck around pretending he was wandering through town aimlessly again: that night, he went straight to the graveyard. At the graveyard, he walked straight to the tombstone at the back, and got on one knee in front of it. He reached out and stroked his name.

He ran his fingertips over the year of his death.

Just as he did, he felt a hand clamp down on his shoulder.

He wheeled around, clambering away, fully expecting to see a skeleton behind him.

—Shh —came a voice, that seemed a little too amused to be Death.

Santi, heart racing, looked closely into the dark. He saw a human figure crouching by the gravestone, just behind where he had been kneeling.

—Rachel? —Santi asked.

—Bingo.

—You scared the fuck outta me —Santi breathed.

—Sorry. Was just trying to keep a kinda respectful silence thing going here, but, I guess that's over. Hiya.

Santi crawled back over. He and Rachel both sat in front of the grave.

—Rachel Smith. 1961 to 1988. Bummer — Rachel said.

—Makes me kinda wish gravestones said... more —Santi added.

Rachel agreed. She mentioned how she had tried to talk to any spirits around so that she could get more information, but it seemed that the spirits weren't up for talking at that moment.

Santi said that was too bad.

—Are you scared? —Rachel asked.

—No —Santi said—. This whole thing is weird, but it doesn't *mean* anything.

—You sure about that? —Rachel asked—. You were the first one to find it, right? Maybe it means more to you than to anyone.

—Must mean negative to everyone else then —Santi said, and rolled his eyes.

—Well *I*, for one, don't like the implication that I'm dying before New Year. *Please* tell me you see 1988 too, at least.

Santi had been trying not to think too hard about the implications of that. But he told her that yes, he saw the same year too.

She let out a sigh of relief.

—What, you want me to die too? —Santi asked.

Rachel thought for a second.

Then she looked away from the gravestone, and down at her feet.

—I just don't want to be alone —she said.

Santi put a hand on her shoulder.

She shrugged him off.

Santi got up and left after a little bit. He resolved to be done caring about the stupid gravestone for a while.

ch. 14

(Zach)

Santi and Zach walked out of the front doors of the abandoned hospital, each of them wearing a hiking backpack that was bulging with wires they had ripped out of the hospital's walls on the third floor. Piece by piece, the two of them would pick every abandoned place in town clean.

"Hey," Santi said, "you wanna come back tomorrow and clear out the rest of the wing's wires?"

Zach furrowed his brow at the prospect of doing work again so shortly after such a big haul. "You savin for something?" he asked.

"Kinda," Santi said. "Try to guess."

"Twenty-inch dildo."

Santi slapped Zach's arm, and said, "I'm moving the *fuck* out of that apartment, soon as I can. Getting my own place. Hakeem and Trev and Mark and Jacob can go share a dick to eat. Half of them basically fuckin live there now and don't even

act like they're gonna help with rent. I'm done with them."

Zach gave Santi a high-five. "Your mom gonna be cool about it?" Zach asked.

"Man I haven't seen my mom in over a year," Santi said. "I *talked* to her on the phone a little bit. She thinks I'm a bad brother. I told her that Maria can stay at my new place any time, one-hundred percent free, no questions asked, cause I *do* love her. She's my sister, y'know? Of course I'm gonna take care of her if she needs it. But those other guys, no thank you."

Santi and Zach dropped their backpacks off at Zach's place, and then went down to the grocery store, where Zach bough ice cream for both of them.

ch. 15

(Santi)

Santi sat on the edge of his bed, sorting out the different kinds of wire he'd gotten into different piles. Over the last week, he and Zack had picked the third floor of the abandoned hospital bare.

Just as Santi was noticing that he'd gotten a sliver on his pinky finger, he heard a knock on his door.

—Qué onda? —he asked. He knew from the sound of the knock that it was Maria.

—You have a phone call —Maria said.

—Who is it?

—Arthur Clemmings. He sounds like an old guy.

Santi snickered, got up, opened the door, and went to grab the phone in the kitchen.

—Hey, Mr. Clemmings? —Santi asked, leaning on his shoulder against the wall.

—Yes, Santi, hello! I was just calling to let you know that things have picked up steam quite a bit on this gravestone issue.

—Oh? —Santi asked, not quite sure what the fuck Mr. Clemmings meant by that.

—Yes, yes, I was just on the phone with the evening news. They're sending a crew out to film this phenomenon. Seems that word has really gotten out about this whole thing.

—Oh —Saint said—, I see.

—I of course let them know that you were the first one to notice the gravestone —Mr. Clemmings went on—. If you'd like to be on the news, they're *very* interested in interviewing you at Spruce Valley in an hour or so.

—Oh-ho-ho, wicked. Yeah, I'll be right over.

—Excellent! Should I call Zach too, or...

—I'll let him know —Santi said—. You gonna be there too?

—If you'd *like* me to be... —Mr. Clemmings said, trailing off in a heavily implied, *I do, just so you know, want to be on TV very badly.*

—Yeah, come on down. You're like, the expert and stuff.

—Well *thank* you very much —Mr. Clemmings said—. See you there. Take care now.

ch. 16

(Zach)

Santi walked right past Zach as he was let into Zach's apartment.

"Dude!" Santi said, practically skipping back and forth across Zach's room.

"Mm?"

"The grave thing is gonna be on the news!" Santi said. "They're gonna interview us about it!"

"Ooooh," Zach said, and rubbed his hands together. "Fuckin about time we got the chance to do this. Are you thinking country duo, metal band, nazi punks?"

"I lost my cowboy hat like forever ago," Santi said.

"Damn."

"Sorry."

"Nah, it's fine," Zach said. Pretending to be a country duo for the TV *would* have been Zach's go-to pick, if for no other reason than that his overdone southern accent was way better than his Satanist

voice and his indignant British voice combined. But it really was fine—how Santi and Zach would fuck around with the world if they got on TV had been better thought-out than pretty much any other aspect of their lives. They had backups.

“Metal band?” Santi suggested.

“Ehh, I think that’d be too obvious with the whole gravestone thing,” Zach pointed out.

“Oh, agreed. Nazi punks it is?”

“Fuckin nazi punks!” Zach shouted, skipping to the center of the room to homie-hug Santi.

The two of them went to Zach’s dresser and ripped open the bottom drawer. Inside was a treasure-trove of goofy costumes and accessories. The two of them combed through it and began putting things on, helping each other achieve the levels of fucking preposterousness that they were going for here.

By the end, Santi wore a red t-shirt with a white and black swastika in the middle like a fucked-up Thing 1 or Thing 2, and his black leather jacket on top of that. On the lapel of the jacket, he wore a small shiny SS pin. Around his neck, he

wore a necklace with a hole-punched guitar pick at the bottom. Instead of slicking his hair back, he spiked all of it up.

Zach wore a full-on nazi uniform with everything but the hat. Into his black leather belt, he tucked a pair of wooden drumsticks. Before they headed out, Santi shaved the sides of Zach's head, leaving just a short orange mohawk down the center.

As they walked to Spruce Valley Cemetery, they ran ideas for their band name by each other.

“Gas Chamber Lovelies.”

“Right Here Reich Now.”

“Eva's Double-Secret Police Commanders.”

“Or-aria... Orian's... Orarian's Belt?”

“*Really* gotta choose one that we can say, I think.”

“Yeah, true. Blondie?”

“Nah Blondie's already a band.”

“Hitler's fucking dog is a band?!”

“Crazy, dude. SS Sound Society?”

“*Done.*”

Santi and Zach shook hands.

“We’re doing British voices the whole time, right?”

“Awright of focken course we awre, mate.”

“Oh god. Zach. That’s the fucking worst British accent I’ve heard in my entire life.”

“Heh, right?”

Santi and Zach entered the gates of Spruce Valley. Parked beside the gate was Mr. Clemmings’ car, as well as two other cars and a news van. Down at the end of the cemetery, Santi and Zach could see a film crew getting set up. Zach spotted Mr. Clemmings and sieg heiled.

Mr. Clemmings dropped his forehead into both hands, and did not wave back.

Trying to keep straight faces, Santi and Zach marched forward to go meet with the news people.

ch. 17**(Santi)**

Santi and Zach, still dressed as SS Sound Society, sat on Zach's couch with a bowl of popcorn, watching the evening news. The anchor kicked off the story:

—We take you now to a town where quite a remarkable thing has been discovered: a gravestone which looks different depending on who sees it.

From this, the anchor's voice was replaced by the news woman who had been sent out to talk to Santi and Zach and Mr. Clemmings. She was filmed walking towards the camera down Spruce Valley's gravel road, saying:

—Just two weeks ago, a young man by the name of Santiago Delgado was walking through *this* cemetery, when he spotted a gravestone that had his name on it, as well as the year of his birth, and the year 1988. He showed this gravestone to his friend and bandmate, Zachary Thomas, who

reported seeing *his* name on the gravestone, and *not* Santiago's.

At this point, the camera cut to the gravestone, and the woman continued:

—Though the face of it appears blank to the camera, I can assure you that this gravestone, right here, has my name on it when I look at it directly. My camera man, my mic operator, and several townspeople have reported the same: seeing their first name, their last name, the year they were born, and the year 1988.

As she explained the details of the phenomenon, several artist's renderings faded across the screen, showing the grave with a variety of names and dates on it.

The camera cut to Santi being interviewed beside the gravestone.

On the couch in Zach's apartment, Santi and Zach cheered and pushed each other around.

—I spoke with Santiago about what he had found —the news woman continued to narrate—. He said that he had been walking at night when the

grave caught his eye. He does not believe this phenomenon to be supernatural in nature.

As soon as that had been said, the camera cut away from Santi again.

Sitting and watching on the couch, Santi and Zach both noticed that the nazi imagery in Santi's outfit had been blurred, and that Zach had been cut out of the shot entirely. Neither of their actual voices made it to air.

—Fuckin laaaame! —Santi shouted at the TV.

Zach threw a handful of popcorn at the tube in agreement.

—Fuckin censoring motherfuckin news fascists —Santi said as he punched down onto the couch cushion that he was sitting on.

The news went on to show the interview with Mr. Clemmings, whose voice they *did* actually play on the air. Mr. Clemmings spoke about the lack of any record of the gravestone or who might be buried underneath it.

After him, they cut back to the news woman walking down the cemetery path towards the camera again:

—Whether a sophisticated prank, a technologically advanced work of art, or perhaps something more than that, this gravestone is a truly chilling thing to experience —the news woman concluded—. Back to you.

Zach turned off the TV.

—Well that was a fuckin bust —Santi said, arms crossed.

—Least you got to be on TV —Zach said—. Like, getting ass-fucked by censorship aside, that was pretty cool.

—Alright yeah, it did feel pretty cool—Santi admitted—. Sorry you got cut though.

—Eh. If the people weren't going to have ze full experience, they didn't deserve any of it.

—Oh yeah I meant to thank you for switching to a German accent halfway through the interview and fucking up my whole groove —Santi mentioned, and laughed—. You was just gowin awn and awn and awn, und zen suddenly zyou ver from a goddamn different country.

—Heh. Think they would've believed it otherwise though?

—Not even a *little*. We should be whatever the opposite of actors are.

Zach agreed.

He and Santi got out of their nazi punk outfits, threw them back in the bottom drawer, and switched the TV over to Mario. Late into the night, as Zach was lying on the bed and Santi was lying on the couch, they tried to get to sleep, but had a hard time not breaking the silence every few minutes by laughing.

ch. 18

(Zach)

The next day, Santi and Zach went walking around together. Zach wore a brown-ish baseball cap to cover up his shaved head.

“I’m gonna get a pet at my new place,” Santi mentioned. He walked heel-to-toe on the curb, while Zach walked next to him on the solid street ground.

“Ooh. Dog, cat?” Zach asked.

“I’m gonna get a rat.”

“Oh fuck yeah, that’s sick.”

“Gonna take awesome care of him too. Feed him a bunch, keep his cage clean, take him with me when I go out on walks. It’s gonna be the best.”

Santi and Zach rounded a street corner. Down the street from them was the entrance to Spruce Valley Cemetery. And all the way down both sides of the street were parked cars: bunches of people walked around, and a couple of police officers stood at the cemetery gate, keeping watch.

“Woah,” Santi said.

He and Zach walked towards the cemetery.

A lot of the license plates were from out of state.

When they got to the cemetery gates and saw inside the cemetery’s valley, they saw a crowd of people down at the end, all swarming to see the gravestone.

“Jesus. It’s like Night of the Living Dead in this motherfucker,” Zach noted.

“*Thank* you,” one of the police officers said.

Santi and Zach turned to the two officers.

“Been like this all day?” Santi asked.

The officer who had spoken nodded, while the other officer continued to scan over the crowd. “They just keep coming,” the vocal officer said. “Hey, you were the one on the news about it. Santiago?”

Santi shook the officer’s hand.

“Sorry, I guess,” Santi said, looking again to the crowd that had gathered.

“Not your fault,” the officer said. “I would’ve wanted other people to see what I was seeing too.”

“Did you look?” Santi asked.

“Oh yeah. First thing after I heard the report. Spooky feeling you get from looking at that thing, isn’t it?”

Santi nodded. “Yeah.”

Santi and Zach got back to walking along.

As they walked around town, they could no longer *not* notice how many out-of-town cars were driving around the place.

ch. 19

(James)

James Gray parked his car at the end of the street, shut off his headlights, and took his keys out of the ignition.

You comin with? he asked his cat, who had ridden shotgun with him.

The cat purred, which, while nice, was not a very decisive answer. James scratched the cats head a couple of times, and then got out without it.

Though James had arrived late at night, it was clear to see that he hadnt missed the commotion. People stood by their cars all down the road, talking to each other about the gravestone. Its unholy, he heard an older woman say. I think it remembers my birthday better than I do, one man joked, and the mans friend agreed, saying, shame you cant get a picture of it. Two police officers stood near the gate. James smiled at them and nodded as he walked by.

Just inside the graveyards gates was a circle of people smoking cigarettes. Farther down at the end of the cemetery, an electric lantern illuminated the thing that everyone had come to see. The lantern was accompanied by a platoon of flashlights. James could tell the adults flashlights from the flashlights held by kids, because the ones held by kids flew all over the place, whereas the adults ones all pretty much pointed to the headstone.

James walked towards the light show, his hiking boots crunching over the gravel path.

He stood between all the others who were looking, and, following suit with them, he looked.

James Gray, 1967 – 1988.

James went back to the cemetery gates to join the circle of smokers.

I think Im gonna stay a while, he told them.

ch. 20

(Santi)

—Heh, yeah, no, they were really nice —Santi said to his mom over the phone—. No, I talked to them in English, but I think they wanted to shorten it up, which is why they summarized what I was saying. No, I don't think they were racist. Haha, yes, Zach was there. No, he wouldn't have let them. They said they blurred it because I had a bad word on my shirt. I know. *I* didn't think it was a bad word, but they said. Alright. Okay. Yeah. Love you too mom. Bye. Nooo I'm not coming to church. Nope. Not interested. Can't trick me. Uh uh. You should come by when I get the new place though. Yup. Bye.

Santi hung up the phone, turned around, and flinched when he saw his sister standing right behind him.

—Ay, pinche idiota chinga a tu madre *puta!*
—Santi said.

—Nice —Maria said, and rolled her eyes—. She doesn't actually care if you don't believe in god you know.

Santi gave his sister a look of very extreme doubt.

—Okay, she *does* care, a *lot* —Maria admitted—. But she mostly just wants to have an excuse to *see* you, cabrón. Please come with us tomorrow? I swear, as long as you don't wear your jacket, you don't even have to dress up.

Santi bit his lip, and then sighed.

—I'll think about it, alright?

Maria squeed, hugged him, and ran off down the hall back to her room.

—I knew you weren't a jackass! —she yelled back to him as she went.

Santi shuddered, and picked up the phone. He dialed, waited, and then spoke:

—Hey Zach, wanna go be jackasses?

ch. 21

(Zach)

Santi and Zach sat on the bench in the main square downtown, racking their brains. Santi listed off the things they had already accomplished while Zach counted on his fingers. Long past ten items to count, Zach had begun making up a system of finger-counting that he was having a hard time remembering as he went.

“Defacing public property,” Santi listed, staring up into the air.

“Yup,” Zach nodded, putting his right pointer- and right middle-fingers on his left pinky.

“Defacing *private* property.”

“Sure,” Zach said, and moved his right pointer- and right middle-fingers from his left pinky to his left thumb.

“Hard drugs.”

“Yeah, those gave me a hardcore stomach ache.”

“Same,” Santi agreed. “Public intoxication, public urination, theft, grand theft, disorderly conduct, inciting a riot... we did the TV thing which was like, at least an *attempt* at hate speech... yeah, I can’t think of any more ways to be a jackass around here.”

“Fuck.”

Santi and Zach shook hands.

“Quarry?” Santi asked.

“Hell yeah. I got a six pack in my fridge that’s been dying for a scenic place to be drunk.”

ch. 22

(Santi)

—If those people who are here for the gravestone end up taking over this quarry, I'm genuinely going to have words with them —Zach said.

Santi and Zach laid on their backs in the center of the pool of quarry water. Out in the middle, neither Santi nor Zach could see the bottom whatsoever. They floated over an abyss.

—Hey what's that deepest part of the ocean called? —Santi asked.

—Margarita's Trench.

—Yeah —Santi said—, feels like we're floating over Margarita's Trench right now.

—God, could you imagine? —Zach asked.

—Heh. I mean, yeah —Santi said—. I think it'd be just... this. Like, we can't see the bottom either way. *Probably* would die if we tried to swim all the way down. Out there we'd die for sure, but here, it's like, likely. I think once your only choice

is to stay on the surface, it doesn't really matter how deep it goes.

Santi and Zach floated quietly for a while as they thought about things.

—I miss Donna —Santi said.

—Your old girlfriend?

—Yeah. She's still on my mind a lot.

—Really? —Zach asked.

—Mhmm.

—Huh. I'm not calling you a liar or pretending to be a mind-reader or anything —Zach said—. I just literally haven't heard you talk about Donna in like, three years?

—I mean —Santi began, and then paused—. Yeah. No, I guess you're right. She's been on my mind *lately*. I guess I don't think about her all that much though. I think...

Santi trailed off.

—You think? —Zach prompted.

—Nevermind.

—No, tell me —Zach prodded. He floated over to Santi and poked him in the arm, again and again.

Santi held a frown, glaring up into the sky.

Zach hooked his fingers under Santi's armpit and started tickling. Santi flailed and splashed and tried to break away, but Zach held on, locking one arm over Santi's chest to keep him in place, and digging the other hand into Santi's armpit. Zach didn't let up until Santi's straight face burst apart, and he laughed.

—C'monnn —Zach said—. What's up?

Zach let Santi go. Santi went back to floating on his back, while Zach treaded water next to him.

—I think it's not *about* Donna when Donna is on my mind —Santi said—. I think I'm worried about getting old and not finding someone before I do, and getting stuck. Stuck old and ugly and weak and not as good as I used to be. Getting stuck alone. Forever.

After Santi was done speaking his mind, he glanced around the bluffs that surrounded the quarry, to make certain that no one had been around to hear him.

Zach did the same.

Then, Zach nudged Santi's shoulder.

Santi turned to look at Zach.

Zach cupped the back of Santi's head and kissed him on the lips.

Santi was surprised for about a second, before he turned in the water to face Zach full-on, and kissed him the hell back.

ch. 23

(Zach)

Santi and Zach made out in the woods beside the quarry. Santi laid on top of Zach, pinning Zach down against a bed of grass and twigs. Already naked from swimming, their bare chests pressed against each other, and Santi rubbed one of his legs up and down against the outside of Zach's leg as they tongue-kissed. Zach locked his arms around Santi, first gripping at Santi's back, then his lower back, and then his ass. When Zach's hands reached Santi's ass, Santi pulled away, hovering on his hands and knees above Zach.

"You definitely want to do this?" Santi asked.

"What's 'this'?" Zach asked.

"Us. Together. Kissing."

Zach held up one finger, and with his other hand, reached over to their six-pack that they had laid down next to, and had yet to touch. Zach grabbed a beer, popped it open, chugged all of it, thought for a second, and then nodded up at Santi.

“Yeah,” Zach said. “Zero hang-ups about this. You?”

Santi went back to kissing Zach right where they had left off.

By the time they were leaving the quarry, both of their dry-streaks had been obliterated, the six-pack had been finished, and the sun had begun to set.

That night, Santi and Zach laid together in Zach’s bed.

Under the covers, Zach poked Santi’s belly-button.

Santi snorted, and pushed Zach’s hand away.

“Hey,” Zach said, “maybe fuck getting your own place and move in with me?”

Santi scooped up even closer against Zach. “That sounds like the best.”

Zach kissed the top of Santi’s head.

ch. 24

(James)

Though James suspected very strongly that people werent driving hundreds of miles to come see his cat, it was undeniable that the cat had become an attraction at Spruce Valley Cemetery. Much like a circle had formed near the cemetery gate among the smokers, a faction of children had also formed around James feline traveling companion.

James and the children sat in a circle, all of them cross-legged, knee-to-knee to form a ring to keep the cat inside of. Some parents stood just outside the circle, while others had gone to continue looking at the grave, or to find a restroom, or to get something from one of the vendors that had shown up selling oily foods and sugary sweets.

James cat laid on its side in the grass, stretched out, being pet by the two girls who were closest to it.

Is it a boy or a girl? one of them asked.

Im not sure, James said. I havent asked it.

What?! the girl asked, and James laughed.

Mouth hanging open like James had just done some kind of magic trick, the girl shot her head back up to her mom, who was standing just behind her.

I think hes being goofy, sweetie, the mom said, smiling down at her little girl.

Does it have a boy name or a girl name? one of the boys in the circle asked.

Its name is Casey, James said.

So its a boy! the boy said.

My name is Casey! another girl in the circle interjected.

James listened as the kids argued, mostly not mean-spiritedly, about whether there was such thing as a name that was a boy name and a girl name. After a while, most of the kids came to the conclusion that there could at least be such thing as a girl name with a boy nickname. The names Alexa, Samantha, and, most relevantly, Cassandra, were brought up as good examples.

Later, in the nighttime, James sat cross-legged in front of the gravestone. He pet Casey, who

padded around on his lap, purring. He paid a little bit of attention to the cat. Mostly though, James was focused on the stone with his name on it.

ch. 25

(Santi)

Santi covered his head as a rain of glass shards fell down around him.

—Fuuuckin hell, we should step back —he said.

Zach agreed.

The two of them took a few steps back from the side of the abandoned hospital. Then Zach took his empty beer bottle and hucked it up at the hospital wall too. It shattered, and rained down glimmering glass, just like Santi's had.

—Mine was higher —Zach mentioned.

—Oh yeah? —Santi asked.

Santi reached into the shrubs that they stood back against, which were half dead, half overgrown, and mostly seemed to have been growing empty bottles and cans since the hospital shut down.

Santi found a bottle in no-time, turned back to face the building, and hurled the bottle up at it. The

hospital was three stories high. The bottle shattered between the two of the third-floor windows, and rained down to the pavement below, making a fairy-ish sound as it landed.

Zach found another bottle and threw it. It sailed right into an open third-floor window, and clattered to the ground inside.

—Ooh —Santi said—, nice.

—Heh. Thanks.

Santi chucked another bottle. It made a cracking sound against the edge of the rooftop: a couple of little pieces fell down to the pavement in front of Santi and Zach, but mostly, it seemed that the pieces all landed on the hospital's ceiling.

Zach pulled Santi in, kissed him, and then pushed him away to rummage in the shrubs for another bottle to throw.

ch. 26

(Zach)

Santi laid with his head in Zach's lap as the two of them watched the evening news. Neither of them had watched the news much at all before, but for a few weeks now, the gravestone had been devouring every station's airtime. Reruns of Hawaii Five-O had been interrupted three times for 'updates' on the gravestone, which were: somebody lying about seeing the year 3000 as their death date, somebody observing that their extremely common name of John Smith appeared on another grave in the Spruce Valley Cemetery in addition to the mysterious one, and somebody showing that the gravestone appeared blank in a mirror just like it did on camera.

Though the last one at least was a bit interesting, none of the updates on the gravestone seemed as noteworthy as Santi and Zach's favorite Hawaiian police documentary series.

On the news, the camera showed footage of a cat walking around the cemetery, while a newscaster voiced over the story.

“In the weeks since this phenomenon has been discovered,” the newscaster said, “one thing has been made disturbingly clear: *everybody* reports seeing the year 1988 as the year of their death.”

The screen cut to a woman being interviewed nearby the gravestone. The caption on the screen identified her as Maggie Holt, Accountant. “I think it’s the end of the world,” Maggie said. “Absolutely. Why else would it show a year of death at all?”

The screen cut to another person standing around in the cemetery. Touma Takahashi, Painter. “Oh, not the end of the world, no,” Touma said, shaking his head. “I suspect it’s much more likely that on the new year, the date on the gravestone will simply increment. You will feel silly for having worried so much about it,” he added with a smile and a laugh.

Next, the screen cut to a man sitting down cross-legged by the grave. James Gray,

Kindergarten Teacher. In his lap was the same cat shown earlier. “It makes me scared,” James said. His voice was gentle and light, like he was talking just to his cat, and not the world at large. “But I think that even though it’s scary, and nobody knows what’s happening yet, it’s important to remember that we’ve always made it through scary and confusing things before. There are nice people here who are sharing food with those who didn’t remember to pack enough for themselves. I think we’re going to be okay.”

During each interview, Santi had pointed at the screen and asked if Zach thought the person being interviewed was hot. Zach’s ratings for each of the three interviewees had been 8/10, 8/10, and 8/10 respectively.

“What about the cat?” Santi asked.

“One,” Zach said. “Zero. Negative numbers. What the fuck is wrong with you?”

“Just checkin,” Santi said, smirking full-force as he glanced up at Zach. “You seem really... indiscriminatory, lately.”

“Hey, ask me how cute I think *you* are right now, fucker.”

“How cute am I right now?” Santi asked.

“*Nine* outta ten,” Zach said.

Santi hooked his arms around Zach’s neck and pulled him down for a kiss.

After a bit of kissing and wrestling, Zach ended up lying on his back across the couch, with Santi lying down on top of him, head nestled against Zach’s soft shirt.

“For the record,” Santi said, “ten out of ten would’ve gotten you an immediate blowjob.”

Zach pondered this for a moment, and then stated a new policy. “Actually *anyone* blowing me at any time *becomes* a ten out of ten, no matter what they were before.”

Santi made a meowing sound.

Zach shoved Santi off of the couch. Santi landed on the floor giggling. Zach turned off the TV, much preferring the sound of Santi’s laughing to the sound of endless gravestone speculation.

Eventually, Santi’s laughing fit settled down.

“Hey, shush,” Zach mentioned, and reached down absently to put a couple of fingers over Santi’s mouth. “Hear that?”

Santi shushed. The two of them listened.

Through the wall, they could hear a squeaking mattress, and a man and a woman moaning. Zach had almost completely forgotten about his neighbors—he and Santi had been out of the apartment pretty much constantly, wreaking more havoc around town than ever before.

Santi snerked at the sounds of Zach’s neighbors banging. “Wanna return fire?” he asked.

Zach picked Santi up off of the floor, dropped him back onto the couch, and started taking clothes off him.

ch. 27

(James)

James, having finished his bar-b-q beef from the sandwich shop in town, sat on a bench in the towns main square, between a waterless water fountain and a statue covered in bird poop. Though it was clear that nobody had cleaned off the statue in a very long time, it was at least nice to see that someone had given the statue an old baseball hat to protect its head.

James sat with his head down.

He sat with his hands folded together in front of himself. Not in prayer. Just in thinking.

He sat with his feet flat against the ground.

When he stood up, he went straight to a phone booth and dialed his school back home.

Hi, Hollie, he said. Yes—heh, yes. You saw that, huh? Oh everyone there is great. No, I dont—no, I dont think anyone is there to be exploitive. I think the attention its getting is warranted. About that—yes, about that. I wont be able to come back

for the Fall semester. Im sure. It breaks my heart, believe me, but I need to—whatevers happening here, I need to see it through. Thank you. Can you tell Sadie that I got her letter about her new dog? I know, I wrote her back already, but it would mean the world if you could tell her in person that—thank you. Of course. Thank you again. Goodbye now.

ch. 28

(Santi)

Santi, dressed in a white t-shirt and his least holey jeans, stood in front of the church, smoking a cigarette with the priest, waiting for his mom to show up.

—It's good to have you back here, Mr. Delgado —the priest said.

Being called Mister, Santi felt taller somehow.

—I heard young Ms. Maria Delgado is to thank for getting on your case about it. Has she been giving you an especially hard time lately?

—Ruthless —Santi nodded—. She's been on me for nearly a month now.

The priest laughed and shook his head. He and Santi both took drags from their cigarettes. The priest waved with his non-smoking hand to a family who was walking towards the church's front doors.

—You were what, eight years old the last time I saw you here?

—Yeah. Eight exactly.

—What turned you away back then? —the priest asked—. If you don't mind me wondering.

—I just kinda started thinking about it, and realized I didn't actually believe in it anymore —Santi said—. Tooth Fairy wasn't real, Santa Clause wasn't real, Leprechauns and Dragons and Narnia weren't real. I guess I didn't really see why god should be real when none of those things were.

—You thought all of that at age eight? —the priest asked.

Santi nodded.

—All on your own?

Again, Santi nodded. He felt a *little* bit of pressure to be more polite with the priest than he would be to most people. But he reminded himself repeatedly that the priest wasn't magical or anything.

—I know that you and Zach were getting to be very good friends by the time you two were eight —the priest mentioned.

—Pff —Santi said, and broke his cigarette in half between his fingers before dropping it to the ground and stomping on it—. *I turned him.* Okay?

The priest turned and coughed into his black-garbed shoulder, and then nodded.

—I suppose I can see that now —was all the priest said on the matter.

By the time the priest finished his cigarette, a majority of the churchgoers had arrived. The Delgado family typically brought up the rear on that front, often arriving only seconds before the church bell.

—Well, I ought to head inside and make sure everyone is well —the priest said—. I really appreciate you coming back though. Whether it's just for today, or if it turns out to be every Sunday, or even if it's only on holidays. You're always welcome back here.

—Thank you —Santi said.

Santi wasn't sure why he had thanked the priest. Overall, he had very low opinions on religion and religious figures. But the town's priest in particular had always been nice, at least.

Just as the priest was disappearing through the front doors, Santi saw the Delgado family car turning into the parking lot, loaded up heavy with three generations of the faithful.

Santi walked up to meet them as they got out.

His mom was the first one out of the vehicle.

—Santi! —she screamed, and hugged him.

—hola, mami —Santi said, hugging her back with one arm—. How've you been? I haven't seen you in forever.

—Oh, mira, let me tell you about what our neighbor Tom, you remember Tom, let me tell you what he told me last week. I was walking by with...

Santi and his mom walked side-by-side towards the church doors as though it hadn't been a year since they saw each other. He hugged her again before they stepped inside.

Every minute inside the church felt like a thousand hours weighing down on Santi's brain, but, he got through.

After church, Santi pulled Maria aside. The two of them spoke behind the bell tower.

—So by the way —Santi said—, how hard was it to convince her to not make a huge scene when she saw me?

—Whaaat? *Mom* make a *scene*? —Maria asked.

Santi gave her a look, and she dropped the facade immediately.

—Oh my gosh, you have *no* idea. I told her she wasn't allowed to bring up the news or god or you moving in with Zach, and I told her that she wasn't allowed to ask you *any* questions, even what she would call little questions, and after a *lot* of negotiations, we agreed that she was only allowed to show you off to two of the other families after church, and then we would go. You owe me *big*.

—Heh. Thanks, hermana.

Maria shuddered.

—You've been too happy lately —she said.

—Yeah? I get happy sometimes —Santi said, and shrugged.

—Nooo no no, you get *manic*, and then you get angry and depressed and weird. You're actually normal-happy lately. It's good, but, why?

Santi did not mention to his sister that it was because he had fallen in love again. Seeing his mom had been enough nerve-wrackingness for one day.

Santi and Maria went to go pile into the car with the rest of their family. All together, they went and had a post-church brunch at the diner that was still open downtown.

Afterwards, Santi went up to his and Zach's apartment, collapsed onto the bed, and waited for Zach to come home so that the two of them could fucking relax for a while.

ch. 29

(Zach)

Zach laid on his tummy at the top of the church's bell tower during the eleven o'clock service, face buried between Kate's thighs. She grabbed him by the back of the head, trying to pull him even farther into her pussy.

Zach played along, happy to make her moan.

He and Santi had agreed that they really didn't give a fuck if the other one hooked up with anybody. Zach had asked specifically about Kate. Santi had said it was cool. So Zach had come to church the last few Sundays, like he usually did, and it'd been great as always.

Kate trembled, and took both hands off of Zach's head to cover her mouth, which was always a good sign that Zach was doing it right. Zach felt a little wave of satisfaction run down from his head to his toes as she repeated his name over and over, voice muffled by her hands.

Zach thought about going down on Santi too, and how nice it was to make Santi moan.

Zach liked Santi's moans especially, kinda because Santi wasn't sexually repressed like Kate was. With Kate, the fun was in unlocking something in her that she knew was naughty, but that she knew she wanted. Santi had no fucking pretenses about staying pure or innocent. When Santi moaned, it wasn't restrained. Santi didn't hold himself back from enjoyment. Whatever Zach did, Santi let himself enjoy it wholeheartedly.

Zach slowed down between Kate's legs, until he had stopped completely, and was just laying there staring at her pussy lips.

"Mm?" Kate whined, looking down at him.

Zach rolled over onto his back, and looked up at her. "I can't keep doing this," he said.

"Wh... what? Why? I thought you—"

"No, I've really had a lot of fun," Zach promised. As he looked up at her from the ground between her spread legs, he reached up with his hand and stroked along the outside of one of her

thighs, trying to be a little comforting. “It doesn’t feel right anymore though.”

“Zach. You have all seven deadly sins tattooed on your arm. I can see it right there: *Luzt*, checked off in red magic marker. Do you really care what feels right?”

Zach thought about it, but nodded. “Yeah,” he said, still stroking the outside of her thigh. “It’s not about ‘right’ in terms of god or anything. It’s fair enough to point out that I could go either way on that. It’s about ‘right’ in terms of caring about my boyfriend.”

Kate’s mouth dropped open. “*please* tell me you misspoke.”

Zach shook his head.

Kate scowled, turned away from Zach, pulled her panties up for good, and hurried down the bell tower steps.

Alone at the top, Zach sighed.

Then he left the bell tower too, to go chill in the apartment with Santi.

ch. 30

(Santi)

Zach came in the door, came across the room, and fell down into bed. Santi lifted the blanket over him, and pulled him under into a snuggle. The two of them laid on their sides face-to-face. Moreover, they laid on their sides face-on-face, as Zach rested his nose and lips on top of Santi's.

It still felt a *little* weird to Santi to be snuggling Zach. But the good feelings from it outweighed the weird no-contest.

Suddenly, a smell caught Santi's nose.

—Oh god, I forgot, you were with Kate.

—Kinda —Zach said—. We broke up. Or whatever you want to call it. Whatever that thing we had is done.

—Aw. She mad at you or something?

—I told her I have a boyfriend I care more about. So yeah. She wasn't thrilled about that.

—Oh.

Santi and Zach laid together in quiet, their bodies warm and heavy against each other.

—You end up going to see your mom today?
—Zach asked.

—Yeah —Santi said—. It wasn't as bad as I thought. I didn't literally die or anything.

—I'm glad —Zach said. He kissed Santi. Santi kissed him back.

—I love you.

—I love you too.

—Good. You promise you haven't just been fucking with me and you're going to laugh and call me gay at the end of this?

—I don't think I could remember to keep a joke going for this long.

—Heh. Yeah. Maybe. Definitely love you then.

Santi and Zach took a long, nice nap together.

ch. 31**(James)**

James woke up in the drivers seat of his car and stretched. Looking forward at the windshield, he saw—and heard—little rain droplets falling onto the glass. He got out of the car, stretched again, and closed the door behind himself, leaving Casey inside to stay dry.

Hands in his pockets, he walked to the center of the circle of cars parked in the abandoned hospital parking lot. It was a modest community of people who were staying long-term. Six cars. Himself and another guy were the only ones who had come completely alone. Three of the cars belonged to couples—two young couples, one retired couple. The last car belonged to a family, with a mom and dad, two boys, and a girl.

That morning, the dad and the girl sat out in the circle beside their car, each of them wearing a rain coat. They were both eating oranges. A pile of

orange peels gathered on the ground between their fold-out chairs.

James said good morning.

They said good morning to him too.

James walked around to his trunk, opened it, and grabbed a bag of deer jerky out of the shopping bags sitting back there. Then he shut the trunk closed again, sat down on his own fold-out chair, and talked with the father and daughter as he ate his breakfast. The girl called James silly for eating jerky for breakfast, and James called the girl silly for eating an orange when her raincoat was obviously green.

Any news break during the night? James asked the dad.

Nothing much, the dad said. You know those science-fellas who have been hovering around?

James nodded.

Yeah, it sounds like people are finally clearing out enough for them to get some work done. During the nighttime, at least. In the day its still too crowded for them.

Wonder if theyll find anything, James said.

The dad shrugged. Probably. Id almost think theyd have to.

I think youre right, James agreed.

You heading over soon? the dad asked.

Right after breakfast.

Well walk with you.

Sounds lovely.

Aw, well youre too kind.

Nah. No such thing.

Ha! Far too kind then.

James, though bashful about it, reluctantly accepted the praise. The group of them headed over to the cemetery.

ch. 32

(Santi)

—You were holding out on me with gay porno mags?!

—I didn't know you were gay!

—Yeah! Me neither! I bet I would've figured it out a lot faster if you had shown me these!

Santi pushed Zach aside, and started rummaging through Zach's secret second bin of pornography, which had been stashed deep under his bed. There were a lot of comics, and a *lot* of magazines showing solo nude models, and there were also a few mags that featured photos of actual dudes actually having sex with each other.

—Woaaaah —Santi said, and pointed at a picture for Zach to see—. Guys can *do* that? Can *we* do that??

—Well, we can definitely *try* —Zach said.

—Yesss. Ooh, what about this one?

—Oh fuck yeah.

—*This* one? —Santi asked.

—Santi —Zach said, and put a hand on Santi's shoulder—. *Pretty much* anything you can do with a girl, you can do some version of with a guy.

—What? Wait, no —Santi said—, what about...

Santi whispered the rest in Zach's ear.

Zach nodded.

Santi stared up into space in deep thought. He bunched up his eyebrows as he thought harder and harder about it.

—You might have to draw me a picture of that one —he said eventually, shuddered.

—Well, while we're on the subject, I meant to ask —Zach mentioned—, *are* you gay? I've thought of *myself* *pansexual* for a long time, which is like, not really caring one way or the other between guys and girls. But you never seemed anything but straight.

—I mean, I guess I *have* to be gay? —Santi reasoned—. Obviously I liked girls my whole life, and hell, I dated one. But I feel a *lot* happier now? But I literally *never* found a dude attractive until you fucking kissed me? But now I can't stop

thinking *more* about dudes? But also I *do* still think girls are pretty? But I also want to learn *everything* there is to know about how gay stuff works?

Santi sighed, and curled up on the floor beside the bed where he and Zach had been kneeling.

Zach pulled a blanket off of the bed, and wrapped it around Santi.

—Was just curious if you'd thought about it
—Zach said.

Santi shook his head.

—I'd kinda been trying not to, honestly.

—Sorry I was a jerk and brought it up then
—Zach said.

Santi opened up the blanket and wrapped it around Zach too. The two of them sat huddled by the bed.

—How did you find out what you were?
—Santi asked.

—Used to be flexible enough to give myself head, and it made me realize I liked dude parts too.

—Deep —Santi said, rolling his eyes.

—You asked —Zach countered.

—Yeah —Santi said, and snuggled over against Zach.

ch. 33

(Zach)

“Santi, come look at this,” Zach said.

Zach laid on the couch watching TV while Santi was in the kitchen, making food out of strange vegetables. Santi set down the vegetables he was cutting up and walked over to see what was on the news.

“It’s a story about our congressguy being a dick?” Santi asked. “Since when do *you* care that our congressguy is a dick?”

“I don’t. But this is the last story for the night, and they haven’t mentioned that dumb gravestone *once*.”

“Wait, really?”

“Hyeah.”

Santi reached down and high-fived Zach.

“Bout fuckin time they got bored of that thing,” Santi said.

“Fuuck, honestly,” Zach said.

Santi went back to the kitchen to finish making dinner.

Zach watched the news to the end, to make sure that no last-minute update on the gravestone was mentioned. In the end, all was clear. No news on the gravestone at all. There had been no *real* news on the gravestone since Santi had discovered the fuckin thing, really. It was a dead-end of a story. Interesting enough, but not something that actually went anywhere.

Zach got up to take a piss. The bathroom, nearby the front door, was technically the only other ‘room’ in Zach’s and Santi’s apartment. It looked about like the architect who’d built the apartment had just dropped an outhouse into the corner and ran actual plumbing into it, which was an A-okay design choice as far as Zach was concerned.

On his way to the toilet, Zach caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror. In particular, the tattoo on the inside of his forearm, with the seven deadly sins, had caught his eye. The boxes were blank. All day, he’d forgotten to check any off.

He took the red marker out of his pocket and looked the boxes over.

Luzt, Gluttony, Greed, Slothe, Rath, Envy, and Pryde.

For the first time in a *very* long time, there actually was nothing that Zach could check off at the end of the day.

Zach left the bathroom and grabbed Santi so that they could knock a couple out.

By the time the sun was rising, Zach and Santi laid in a pile on top of each other on the abandoned hospital's rooftop, on the center of the helicopter landing pad. They were drunk enough that getting up all the flights of hospital stairs had been endeavor all on its own. Lying on the landing pad and giggling, Santi tried to crawl underneath Zach's shirt, to little success. Zach hugged Santi, cradling him under the moon and stars.

All seven sins were checked off on his arm. Some had been checked off by Santi during the act.

Zach kissed the top of Santi's head.

The two of them passed out on the rooftop.

ch. 34

(James)

James sat in his fold-out chair, which he had moved to the outside of the ring of cars in the abandoned hospitals parking lot after hearing a group of drunks go by the night before. Though drunks existing in the world was not new or noteworthy, the fact that there were children sleeping in the car next to James car was cause to be a little more alert.

Unable to sleep for fear of the childrens safety, James had decided to keep watch through the night. Hed sat until morning. Eventually others in the ring of cars woke up for the day, and at that point, James could have gone back to sleep easily enough. But instead, James continued to watch the hospital, holding a cup of instant coffee on his knee. He mostly just wanted to see the group of drunks when they came back out of the hospital. He didnt have anything to say to them. Seeing things had just become his whole schtick as of late. Come to watch a gravestone, stay to see everything else.

In the afternoon, two men came creeping out of the hospitals front doors. On their way back to wherever it was they had come from, the two began walking across the parking lot, back to the road.

One of them, taller, had shaggy red hair that came down to his eyebrows but not quite his eyes. He had stubble and looked very sunburnt, and he also looked like the sort of person who might have had stubble and a sunburn fairly consistently in life. He was dressed in a bluish-brown t-shirt that had once had some sort of graphic on the front, but was too faded and scratched off to see. The knees of his jeans were ripped nearly the entire way around.

The other drunk, smaller than his friend, had his black hair combed back a bit, though it was not difficult to spot a tuft or two that had refused to cooperate with that. The smaller drunk wore a black leather jacket and a ripped orange shirt underneath, that showed his chest in several places. The smaller drunks jeans were frayed, but not quite as dramatically ripped as his friends.

James was very sure that he recognized the smaller drunk from the news, as the person who

had discovered the gravestone in the first place. The TV had been a lot more flattering than the image of the guy in real life.

The two walked by James without a nod or a wave.

James waited for the rest of the group of drunks for about an hour before it dawned on him that it had been just them.

ch. 35

(Santi)

Santi sat in the sandwich shop with his sister Maria. It was fall outside, though in their part of the world, the difference wasn't all that visible.

—Has Hakeem still not figured out that the radio keeps working below full volume? —Santi asked.

—I don't mind it —Maria answered—. He listens in the living room, so by the time it gets to me and Jacob's room, it's *pretty much* normal volume. Have you gotten sick of living with Zach yet?

—I couldn't get sick of living with Zach if I lived with like, fifty Zachs.

—Oh god. That might actually be my worst nightmare. Thanks for that.

—Can't believe you dislike him that much —Santi said smiling, and then bit into his sandwich.

—Pfff. I love *you*, and if there were *two* of you, I would murder whichever one talked louder, puto.

Santi flinched.

Maria paused mid-bite, and raised an eyebrow. She set her sandwich back down.

—You don't hear swear words —Maria said, staring dead into Santi's eyes.

Santi glanced away, and mumbled an excuse for why he'd reacted.

—Puto —Maria repeated.

Santi flinched again, and cursed at himself under his breath.

—Oh my god you and Zach are fucking —Maria said.

Santi's face boiled red as the older men eating at the next table over turned to look.

—You and Zach are fucking! —Maria said louder. She sat forward on the edge of her seat, beaming at her discovery—. No *wonder* you've been hiding from church!

—Wanna quiet the fuck down about it?
—Santi shouted under his breath at her—. And *don't* tell mom.

—I might tell mom.

—Don't tell mom!

—Can I give her a hint at least?

—Maria!

—Fine! —Maria said, and stopped leaning over the table—. I'm *so* right though.

—Yeah. Dios *fuckin* mio, just be right and fuckin *quiet* about it.

Santi got up and walked out. Maria came with him, holding both of their sandwiches. They stood just outside the sandwich shop. Santi ran his hands back through his hair over and over, pacing back and forth a little.

—Ay, mira —Maria told him—, it's *fine*, okay? It's *super* weird and random and unexpected. But... he's not forcing you into it, is he?

—What? No —Santi said.

—Sure?

—*Yes*.

—Okay, okay, just checking —Maria said, backing off—. Just please *never* kiss him in front of me or call him cute names when I can hear?

—Done —Santi said.

—Hug? —Maria asked.

—What about a hug? —Santi asked back.

—Can I *hug* you, idiot.

—Since when do you *ask*? —Santi questioned.

Maria tried to punch him, but was still holding their sandwiches in each hand. She handed him his, punched him in the chest, and then hugged him.

He hugged her back.

—*Really* don't tell mom though? —Santi begged.

—Secret's safe with me, hermano —Maria said, and then zipped her lips.

Santi wasn't sure if he and his sister had just gotten closer or further apart.

ch. 36**(Santi)**

Santi had already finished picking out all of his food at the grocery store by the time he realized that Rachel was running the only checkout lane. He walked around the grains aisle for a little longer, planning where he could hide his basket in the store to come back for it later when someone else was working. He figured he could probably stick it in one of the freezers and it wouldn't be noticed for at least a few hours. Plenty of time to hope for another checkout person.

He was on his way to the back of the store to do that, when he remembered that Zach was waiting back at the apartment for him. They were planning on watching the Top Gun VHS they'd found in the abandoned church, using the VHS player that they'd also found in the abandoned church. Neither of them had seen Top Gun yet. Santi was itching to.

Santi went up to the checkout lane, and put his basket on the counter in front of Rachel.

—Woah —she said—. Are you back visiting family or something?

—Hm?

—I thought you left town —Rachel said—. I haven't seen you since like, near the start of summer. That night in the graveyard when we had just discovered the gravestone?

—Yeah. I remember —Santi said, blowing straight past her implication that they had both discovered the gravestone together somehow—. Guess we just haven't run into each other much. I've been in town.

—What is *up* with that gravestone anyways? Any ideas?

Santi shook his head.

—Well —Rachel said—, I don't know either. Just another weird thing in the world I guess.

—Yeah —Santi agreed—. How's working here been?

—Sucks —Rachel said—. It's boring.
Santi was relieved to hear it.

Back at the start of summer, Rachel and Zach had both applied for the position. Looking back, Santi really couldn't picture Zach putting on an apron and acting nice to people every day.

—Do you hate me? —Rachel asked.

She was still halfway through checking out Santi's groceries.

Santi didn't suppose he would be able to just leave at that point.

—I just don't think we think the same on a lot of stuff —Santi said.

—Like what? Give me examples.

—Taste in music. You read a lot, and I don't think I've finished a book since *Charlotte's Web*. You seem really into politics, and to me it's kinda meh. Ghost stuff.

—Hm —Rachel said.

Santi had tried really hard not to call her a bitch for her taste in annoying music, or her habit of only reading trite and extremely uninteresting books and then talking about them a *lot*, or her undying support of politicians who were assholes, or her fucking childish belief in ghosts that she

should've gotten over when she was ten at the latest.

In hindsight, he worried that although he hadn't said these things *exactly*, the words might have accidentally come across anyways.

Rachel gave him his total.

Santi paid and left with his groceries.

ch. 37**(Santi)**

Out walking alone at night, Santi ended up passing by Donna's parents' house. He hadn't sought the place out deliberately. There *were* only so many places to walk in town.

He glanced over at the big living room window. The curtains were open and the lights were on inside, which made it pretty hard *not* to glance in when the rest of the night was dark.

Inside he saw Donna with her parents. The three of them were sitting on the big cushy chairs in the room, talking to one another.

She looked like she was doing alright.

Santi felt himself nod. Then he turned his head away and hurried along.

ch. 38

(Santi)

Santi laid in bed as flat as possible, with a thick blanket covering every body part from head to toe. He had his head to the side, and a little pocket of air to breath under the blanket. The air was hot, since he'd been breathing the same pocket in and out for maybe half an hour.

He heard Zach come in.

Santi stayed under the blanket, not announcing himself as home. He heard Zach lock the door behind himself, walk over to the kitchen counter, put a pot of coffee on, and come over to the bed. Lastly, he felt Zach fall over into bed, then shoot up like a cat when he felt Santi hiding underneath the blankets.

Zach came back at the bed in a flying leap, threw the blanket aside, and started grappling with Santi. Santi played dead.

Zach stopped wrestling.

—Sorry—Zach said—. You surprised me.

—I could tell.

—You alright? —Zach asked.

Santi shrugged.

Zach grabbed the thick blanket that he'd thrown, pulled it back to the two of them, and tucked Santi in. Zach laid on his side, facing Santi, who laid on his back, wrapped alone in a blanket like a mummy, staring up at the ceiling.

—I feel weird —Santi said.

—Weird like you want to put your underwear on your head and do jumping jacks?

—No —Santi said. He tried not to snicker, and at least half-succeeded, because Zach's joke *had* been fuckin dumb—. Weird like I feel broken and stupid. Weird like I'm making a lot of mistakes, but I don't ever know anymore what the right thing to do would have been.

Zach rested his forehead on Santi's shoulder, quietly listening for more.

—Just so you know, if you ever want to stop dating me, I get it —Santi said.

—Hm? —Zach asked—. Why would I want to stop dating you? I love you, weird or not.

—But that doesn't make *sense* —Santi said.

—Say something mean about me —Zach asked.

Santi was not hard-pressed to come up with something:

—Your breath stinks right now because you've had nothing but coffee all day again.

—Okay —Zach said—. But you love me?

—Yeah.

—You love me even when my breath stinks?

—Of course.

—I love you even when you're weird —Zach said.

—Yeah but why would you love *me*?! —Santi asked—. It's easy for me to love *you*, since you're so perfect all the time!

—We *just* established I'm *not* perfect. You could think for two seconds and come up with worse examples than bad breath.

—Well you're a *fuck* of a lot closer than *me* —Santi said.

Zach pushed the blanket off of Santi again. Then he dug one arm under him, wrapped the other arm over him, and hugged him.

The blanket had been exceedingly warm. Especially the longer Santi laid under it, feeding it his body heat.

But Zach was a whole different kind of warmth.

Santi hugged Zach back as he teared up. Zach cradled him. He stroked Santi's back as Santi let it all out.

ch. 39

(Zach)

Late that night, Santi and Zach went out to see the gravestone again. They hadn't in a long time. Remarkably, they had all of Spruce Valley Cemetery to themselves. No news crews, no spectators, no budding scientists hoping to unveil the mystery. The scientists, once they'd had sufficient alone-time to look at the gravestone properly, had actually been the first to dismiss it and leave town. The news crews and a majority of the spectators had left together a short time later.

Santi and Zach sat in front of the gravestone, leaning against one another shoulder-on-shoulder.

"What do you think would happen if we tried to steal it?" Zach asked.

Santi shook his head. "Please don't. I don't wanna be a grave robber."

"All I'm saying is that there's been no *record* of the grave *belonging* to anyone, and you *were* the

first one to find it. Hey look, it's even got your name on it!"

Santi snorted in a laugh, and called Zach a fucking idiot in Spanish. Zach didn't know a word of Spanish. He just knew that basically everything Santi said in Spanish was supposed to be mean, and that additionally, Santi *probably* hadn't needed to get another language involved just to form some kind of elevated compliment to Zach's sense of humor.

"I kind of wish I hadn't found this thing," Santi said, not able to remember if he had mentioned it before.

Zach put an arm around Santi, and rubbed his shoulder. "*I* feel good about the way things have been since you did. Us, and stuff. Sorry if it's been bad for your head though."

Santi turned and kissed Zach's cheek. "Eh. It's not like my head was great before, I guess," Santi conceded.

Before Santi and Zach got a chance to kiss on the lips, they each heard the crunching of footsteps on the gravel path that lead down the cemetery.

Zach took his arm off of Santi's back. Santi shuffled away. The two of them stopped talking feelings.

Zach recognized the person who was coming towards them. It was one of the people who had come to observe the gravestone long-term, like some sort of impromptu cult. James something. School teacher. He was a favorite to the news crews, since he usually came to the graveyard with his pet cat.

That night, apparently, James had left his cat to sleep.

James called hello to Santi and Zach, when he was close enough to them to not *quite* have to yell, but definitely far enough to have to raise his voice.

Santi and Zach both said hi back.

James sat down beside the two of them. All three looked at the stone together. Zach heard James, and then Santiago, and then himself all read out their names and years, half-consciously under their breaths.

James Gray, 1967 – 1988.

Santiago Delgado, 1962 – 1988.

Zachary Thomas, 1962 – 1988.

Allegedly, anyways. Zach had no *proof* that Santi, James, and the entire rest of the world weren't still fucking with him. It was *possible* that there was some sleight of hand happening with the pictures and videos showing the gravestone blank. By that point though—by that night, months after the initial hype—it probably would have revealed itself as a joke if it had been one.

Zach stuck his leg out and kicked the gravestone.

James and Santi flinched.

“Ha,” Zach said to them, and then tucked his leg back towards himself.

“I'd hoped somebody would have figured it out by now,” James mentioned. “But now, looking at it when the rest of the world has stopped caring, it's a little... lonely. Daunting. Bleak.”

Santi shrugged. “What does figuring it out matter anyways?”

James deflected the shrug back at Santi. “Gravestone starts saying the name of everyone in

the world who looks at it, I guess I think of it as a little bit worth examining.”

“What if it had been an ice-cream truck?” Santi asked.

James laughed.

Santi went on, a little bit pissy with James for laughing. “No really,” Santi said, “What if? What if there was an ice-cream truck parked on the main street downtown, and painted on the back was anyone’s favorite snow-cone color? What if it was a movie poster at a theater, showing the first movie anyone saw? What if it was a billboard that just showed ads for the model of car you were already inside of? Who the fuck *really* cares? Who the fuck cares about the dates? Showing names and dates is what a gravestone *does*. This one isn’t *that* unusual.”

James thought about it.

“I guess if it *was* an ice-cream truck,” James said, “it might not have exactly the same sense of impending doom tied to it.”

“It’s a fair point,” Zach told Santi. “I disagree that it means shit either, but...”

Santi sighed. “Fine. It *is* unnerving. Okay? *Obviously* it’s unnerving. I just don’t get what the point of actually caring about it is though.”

“Yeah. Exactly,” Zach agreed, pointed a little bit more towards James than Santi.

James pressed his lips together, like another counter-argument might escape against his will if he wasn’t mindful not to make it.

The three of them sat looking at the gravestone.

“Nineteen sixty two, you guys said?” James asked.

Santi and Zach nodded.

“You guys each got five more years than me, at least,” James mentioned.

Zach thought about what had changed in the last five years of his life.

He and Santi had started dating instead of just being best friends. A few more places in town had been abandoned.

Zach couldn’t think of a third thing.

He was glad for the two at least though.

“Sorry I said that,” James said. “It was rude.”

Zach told him not to worry about it.

ch. 40

(James)

James still didnt know what to think of these two.

Did I hear you say your names were Santiago and Zachary? James asked.

Santi, Zachary corrected.

At the same time, Santiago corrected Zacharys name to Zach.

Sorry again, James said. Santi and Zach. Very cool names.

Yeah. Thanks, Santi said, seeming not to mean it.

I sometimes wished I had a nickname, James mentioned. Not really a lot of room to shorten down James though.

Jame, Zach said immediately.

Santi high-fived Zach.

Heh. Alright then. Jame it is.

ch. 41

(Jame)

So what do you think happens on the new year?
Jame asked.

Dont care. Probably wont look, Santi
answered.

Cmon, Jame prodded. I think youre just mad
at me now.

Hey fuckhead, Zach chimed in. Maybe hes
allowed to be mad at you.

True, true, Jame said. If you want me to leave,
tell me. I know I crashed your party. You two were
here first.

Santi and Zach glanced at each other. Neither
of them told Jame to leave, and neither of them left
either.

The three continued to look at the gravestone.

Zach reached into his pocket, took out a
marker, made a line on his forearm, and then put
the marker back in his pocket.

The wind blew the trees in the valley they sat in.

There were no birds chirping.

Zach got up, knelt down in front of the gravestone, and put his arm on it.

Birds continued not to chirp.

The wind died down, then a second later, came back.

Zach sat back down.

That wouldve been cool, Santi said.

Yeah. Even have all seven right now. Thought it was worth a try, Zach said.

Jame felt out of the loop, but in no position to ask what had just happened.

Santi and Zach reminded Jame a lot of the students who he taught. Five year olds. But Santi and Zach were five years older than Jame was, which gave them a kind of upper-hand, socially. It made talking to them a bizarre mind-game.

Jame thought about leaving, and coming back the next night. But there was a part of him that just had a hard time leaving people with a bad

impression. Leaving them worse-off than they'd been when he met them.

You two lived here for a long time? Jame asked.

Whole lives, Zach answered.

Like it?

A bunch, Zach answered again.

Whats the best part of living here? Jame asked.

That no one else wants to, Zach said.

Oh. Grim.

Just like being alone with my boyfriend, Zach said.

James interest was suddenly piqued. You're homosexual? Jame asked.

Yup.

Hey, that's great. I've never met someone like that before. I wouldn't have guessed. How long have you two been—

Us two?! Santi asked. Motherfucker, are you calling me queer?

Sorry, Jame said, which felt like about the thousandth time hed said it that night. I just assumed that...

Jame stopped talking as Santi and Zach broke into laughter and then kissing. His brain hurt a lot.

ch. 42

(Santi)

—Hey, c'mon —Santi said, nudging their new friend Jame—. We're just joking. Yeah, we're dating. It's confusing to me too honestly.

Jame laughed a little bit at that.

—Man —Zach said—, I wish this gravestone was a magic campfire that crackled the tune of your favorite gameshow jingle so we could make s'mores over it.

Jame laughed *a lot* at that.

The three continued to look at the gravestone.

—Did you ever hear anything about them showing this gravestone to an amnesiac? —Jame asked.

—No —Santi said.

—Yeah, don't think so —Zach confirmed.

—Me neither —Jame said—. Heh. Actually seriously, why the fuck didn't they do that?

—For real —Santi nodded—. Or like, what about showing it to a really old guy who didn't

even know what year he had been born in? Does it just take whatever they think it is, or does it *actually* show the fucking year?

—Maybe it grows an arm and uses it to flip a coin —Jame said.

Zach snickered.

—Maybe it just fuckin explodes at that point —Zach theorized—. Maybe *that's* what happens on the new year. Confetti, followed by it just literally exploding and going away forever.

—Good —Santi said—. If that's what happens, I actually *will* watch it.

Zach sat with one arm around Santi's shoulder. Idly, Santi stroked Zach's hand. Zach's arm felt a lot weightier around Santi's shoulder now that there was someone else sitting right nearby, watching them. But since he and Zach dating had been revealed as a joke to begin with, Santi actually felt a hell of a lot more comfortable with showing affection to Zach than he might have otherwise. It was dead serious that they were in love, but it was taking the piss at the same time now.

Santi decided that that was how he was going to come out to anybody in the future, when he had to. *Joke* about fucking Zach, then actual unabashed frenching.

—Hey, sorry I called you an asshole —Santi told Jame.

—I think you called me a motherfucker — Jame said, offering a little laugh to go along with the correction.

—Oh. Sorry I called you a motherfucker then.

—Appreciate it.

The three continued to look at the gravestone. Santi stared at the dates. 1962 – 1988. Only twenty-six years.

Only.

Santi felt young.

Then Santi thought about what twenty-six years *meant*. It meant that seasons had changed. Bears had slept for a hundred months in the winters. Decades of leaves on trees had grown, died, rotted, been absorbed through the soil, and grown back again. Santi, too, had grown, but there was no cyclical comfort for him: he didn't get to rot

and be reabsorbed and come back. He would spend half or more of the rest of his life fighting *against* getting older.

Santi suddenly felt jealous of Jame for his youth at only twenty-one.

Santi himself suddenly felt very, very old.

ch. 98

(Zach)

Zach let go of Santi as Santi got up.

Santi walked away, towards the fence surrounding the cemetery, and took a knee beside it. Zach heard the sound of grass being pulled.

Santi returned with a handful of dirt.

“If you two really don’t mind,” Santi began, but didn’t finish saying it. Instead he knelt down in front of the gravestone with the handful of dirt, and smeared the dirt across the face of it, covering up everything: the birth year, the death year, and the name.

Santi took a big breath after he was done.

Zach grabbed Santi, guided him a little ways away, and had him sit down facing away from the stone.

Zach sat next to Santi, hand scratching softly at Santi’s back.

Santi looked down at the ground.

“Would you love me if I was a hundred?”
Santi asked.

“Heh. Of course. Why wouldn’t I?”

“Because I’d be gross and ugly and brittle and senile,” Santi answered, head down still.

They sat in the quiet for a little bit.

Then Zach asked, “Remember when we drank beer and coffee mixed together and I threw up?”

Santi nodded.

“Yeah. I thought your beer-and-coffee idea was really gross. Doesn’t mean I didn’t love you. Remember when you got a perm that one time?”

Santi shuddered, which Zach took as a yes.

“It was *not* a good look on you. Fuckin eighteen-year-old Santi, just got out of high school, thought he’d show everyone how cool he was.”

Santi turned his head farther and farther downwards as Zach went on.

“For the week you had that perm, I thought it was the coolest hairstyle in the world.”

“Fuck off.”

“I did!” Zach promised. “If you *really* need proof... I used to keep a journal—”

“You *did* have a diary?!” Santi asked, his head shooting back up.

Zach pursed his lips.

“Can I read it?” Santi asked.

Zach took a deep breath in and out, and then told Santi he would dig it up—literally dig it up from behind the abandoned factory—tomorrow. “But back to the point about you having a perm,” Zach said. “It was ass-ugly. Like, asshair-on-the-head ugly. But I liked it because you had it. Didn’t make me not love you.”

“Thaaanks,” Santi said.

“You said you’re gonna be gross and ugly and what else?” Zach asked.

“Brittle and senile.”

“Oh. Pff. Easy. Remember when you broke your shin and were all crippled and we still hung out?”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah, it was because I still loved you. Remember when we dressed up as SS Sound Society and tried to tell the world why the holocaust had been a good idea?”

Santi snickered. “Yeah.”

“That was *way* crazier than anything I’ve ever seen an old guy do. I love Santi. *Especially* when you’re gross and ugly and brittle and senile. You’re not any of those things *very often* yet. But I bet you’ll be awesome when you’re a hundred.”

ch. 99

(Santi)

Santi, for the first time in his life, felt like he actually did want to live to be a hundred years old after all.

—Thanks —Santi told Zach, nuzzling the side of Zach's head.

Zach patted Santi's back.

When they turned back to Jame, Jame was staring at the face of the gravestone, even as it was covered in dirt.

—Is it weird that I want to see it even more now? —Jame asked—. I mean, that *is* why I stuck around all this time, I guess. Once I left and couldn't see it anymore, I knew I would wonder about it too much. I knew that not being able to see it would bother me.

Santi understood, and knelt down in front of the gravestone. He wiped the dirt off by hand, feeling the carved grooves of his name, and the year he was born, and the year he could die. He

wiped the dirt off it as best he could, trying to make it look nice again.

Then, when he was done, he sat back down.

The three continued to look at the gravestone.

For the first time, Santi looked at it with *genuine* uncaring: whether he did die that year or whether he didn't, Santi felt good about his life.

ch. 100

(You)

You approached the gates of Spruce Valley Cemetery then, in the dead of night, cold wind digging under your too-thin clothes. You had been one of those who were staying to watch the gravestone, long-term, with James. You had stayed in the car across from his in the abandoned hospital parking lot since arriving, three months ago. You had seen Santi and Zach around town. Gotten to know the place a little, and some of the people in it, but mostly, you had thought about the gravestone, and what it meant. What it could mean for the world. What it could mean for you.

Your footsteps were loud gravel-churning crunches as you walked down the cemetery valley, towards the gravestone at the end, where three figures sat.

Their heads turned up and looked at you as you approached.

When you reached them, you sat down with them. Together, you all had a good, long think about life, and time, and caring.

The world did not end that year. In 1989, the death year on the gravestone incremented: where it had once said the modern year of 1988, it instead said the modern year of 1989. In 1990, the grave read 1990. In 2000, 2000.

In Spruce Valley Cemetery, at the end of the gravel cemetery road, there is a gravestone with your name on it.

And there always will be.

And it's okay that there is.

Everyone else shares this with you.